

# Response to a postmodernist: Or, a historian's critique of postmodernist critiques of history

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"Thus my current argument," writes Keith Jenkins in his "Postmodern Reply" reply to Perez Zagorin's critique of postmodernism that appeared in a recent issue of *History and Theory*, "is that we might now begin to forget historical discourses of the past and begin to live amid the ample and agreeable imaginaries provided by postmodern-type theorists ..."<sup>1</sup> Then Jenkins, who in this article and in recent books stridently positions himself as an advocate of the new way, fires off a dazzling barrage from the postmodernist canon: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and others. These thinkers can, he believes, "generate enough emancipatory rhetorics to eliminate any further kind of foundational or non-foundational past."<sup>2</sup> This "Reply" to Zagorin –

1. Keith Jenkins, "A Postmodern Reply to Perez Zagorin," *History and Theory* 39 (2000), 181-200. Quotation, 199. This is a response to Perez Zagorin, "History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now," *History and Theory* 38 (1999), 1-24.

2. "Postmodern Reply," 199. Jenkin's book, *Why History?: Ethics and Postmodernity* (London, 1999), is a much-expanded version of the arguments he makes in "Postmodern Reply." In the present "Response" I generally confine myself to Jenkin's essay, but occasionally comment upon the book too. He has also edited *The Postmodernist History Reader* (London, 1997)

Jenkin's adulation of the postmodernist canon of great thinkers is especially striking in *Why History*. He unreflexively utilizes modernist assumptions to inform us that in the last two and a half thousand years "The Western tradition ... produced in that time some fifteen to twenty intellectual giants ..." However, the last few decades of our own century alone, the group of postmodern intellectuals ("the phenomenon of publicly available intellectual brilliance") has "undermined, reworked and gone beyond the whole of that Western ta-

“overtly positioned,” in Jenkins’s own words; “polemical” in mine – is always powerful. And, even to a fairly traditional narrative historian such as myself, it is at times eye-opening and instructive.<sup>3</sup> Jenkins argues, firstly, that Zagorin – and by implication “traditional” modernist historians in general – badly misinterprets crucial postmodernist ideas. And that, secondly, had he understood postmodernism “correctly,” Zagorin would have even been more shocked by its implications for history as a discipline which assumes a real past independent of language, a past that historians can at least partly reconstruct through empirical research.

In his “Rejoinder” to Jenkins’s “Reply,” Zagorin ably defends his position, and needs little help from me.<sup>4</sup> However, I want to use Jenkins’s polemic, different perhaps only in degree of zeal from similar attacks on traditional academic history, as an opportunity to constructively critique such attempts by postmodernists to undermine the epistemological assumptions of my discipline. I openly concede that, as believers in the use of clear, “simple” language and of “common sense” explanations, many of us academic historians do need to re-examine our assumptions. Yet I will argue that Jenkins and similar postmodernist proselytisers too often subvert their own arguments. Presenting examples from, especially, American historical studies, I will show that traditional academic history is by no means as static or as “unemancipated” as these postmodernists appear to believe.

Although broadly in agreement with much of Zagorin’s “Rejoinder” to Jenkins, I do not accept it all. Zagorin appears to believe more than I in the possibility of historians achieving some degree of truthful reconstruction of the past. I believe only in historical truth as a worthy but unattainable goal; all we can hope for are tentative but demonstrably *credible* constructions. And I feel that even “traditional” historians can and indeed

dition.” We “are lucky, we late twentieth-century lesser mortals [emphasis added], to be alive in this culture to witness this,” *Why History*, 31-32 ... For an excellent critique (review) of this book see Robert Anchor, “On How to Kick the History Habit and Discover That Every Day in Every Way, Things are Getting Meta and Meta and Meta ...” *History and Theory* 40:1 (Feb. 2001): 104-16.

3. In case I appear biased in my use of the term “polemical,” it is worth quoting Jenkins’s description of his book: “This book is written as an extended polemic; it is overly positioned. It may be impossible to write today in any other way. The idea of writing an objective, neutral, disinterested text, where explaining, describing and ‘introducing’ something is done from a position that isn’t ostensibly a position at all, is a naive one ... The text is thus polemical and partisan ...,” *Why History*, 1. On both counts – that his book is a polemic, and that all writing is “positioned” – I agree with Jenkins. And I think that his article is equally polemical.

4. Perez Zagorin, “Rejoinder to a Postmodernist,” *History and Theory* 39 (2000), 201-209.

have learnt from many of the sub-streams within the broad river of so-called "postmodernism." We especially need to be more reflexive and self-critical in our epistemology, methodologies, and language. We need to jettison what remains of our claim to possess a dispassionate and neutral gaze upon the past, when we are, to use the postmodernist term, always "located" in gendered, cultural, and ideological positions. Our perspectives are always to some degree political. Historians, especially, should develop greater awareness that the supposedly neutral scientific methodology we espouse is itself, as Jenkins validly notes, *historical*; that our "scholarly" approach to evidence and explanation is itself the product of certain modern (perhaps fifteenth to twenty-first century) assumptions about reality. We have no right to assume that this is the only way of achieving knowledge about the past. And as Hayden White, most famously, and others have argued, the very stories we construct may unknowingly call upon or fall into narrative structures and patterns deeply engrained in the Western psyche; rather than being "inherent in the evidence," our supposedly original and neutral narratives may actually be "in our minds" first, and then imposed upon that evidence. As historian Karen Halttunen concedes, a major problem "is that we craft our narratives without acknowledging that we do so – *masking the representational as referential* " (emphasis added). The simplest solution, she believes, "is to practice self-reflexivity, acknowledging the fictive quality of our work and openly revealing our chosen tropes and metanarrative that shape it." Yet simple self-reflexivity may not be enough, she fears. Perhaps the deepest problem is "our unvarying adoption of nineteenth-century realism for all our historical accounts." Only a willingness to experiment with new narrative forms may save us from this stasis.<sup>5</sup>

5. Karen Halttunen, "Cultural History and the Challenge of Narrativity," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, eds. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1999), 166-67. Many of the essays in this excellent collection bear on the issues I discuss here. For conflicting views on these issues, see also: Geoffrey Roberts, ed., *The History and Narrative Reader* (London, 2001). Major studies critical of so-called traditional history: Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, 1999); and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Princeton, 1987); Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995); Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Historical Time* (Princeton, 1992). For a sense of how practitioners of United States History have incorporated or resisted postmodernist thinking, see many of the essays in Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Woods, eds., *Imagined Histories: American Historians and the Past* (Princeton, 1998). For example, Linda Kerber, "Gender," esp. 46-53.

Yet Jenkins and other critics of more traditional history often violate a cardinal value of their own postmodernism, the need to dissolve binary and polarized thinking. They appear to assume that, *because history cannot objectively reconstruct the past* (how many contemporary historians would claim it does?) *then history is merely one story among many, with no greater claim to credibility than any other kind of story*. I argue here that academic history can – *should* – renounce all claims to objective truth, yet retain its claim to providing us with varying degrees of *credibility* in its constructions of the past. For example, could any scholar or non-scholar seriously claim that the following two “stories” are equally credible or incredible? 1) From the late fifteenth century Europeans began to colonize the Americas. 2) From the late fifteenth century, Aztecs and other peoples of the Americas began to colonize Europe. Analysis of surviving evidence allows traditional historians to draw always-tentative conclusions not about the objective truth but *about the credibility* of such and other stories. By 2001 CE few of us claim much beyond this. In other words, it is not, as Jenkins and such postmodernist advocates would have us believe, an either/or situation. There are infinitely numerous possibilities between (unattainable) objectively true reconstructions of the past and – at the other extreme – the claim that *all stories are equally credible or incredible*. The academic historian’s self-assumed task is to help us tentatively decide between conflicting credibility claims in viewing the past.<sup>6</sup>

6. Other historians have noted such resort to dichotomising: for example, Noel Carroll, “Interpretation, History, and Narrative,” in Roberts, ed., *History and Narrative Reader*, 254ff. Postmodernist critiques of academic history are, of course, only part of a broader attack on the whole empirical tradition of the Enlightenment – indeed on all forms of Western science, “soft” and “hard.” For a careful but powerful epistemological defence of Western science against extreme social constructionist views, see Christopher Norris, *Against Relativity: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (1997). And for a defense of the scientific method in anthropology, see Marvin Harris, *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times* (Walnut Creek, California, 1999); and see Patricia M. Greenfield, “What Psychology Can do for Anthropology, or Why Anthropology Took Postmodernism on the Chin,” *American Anthropologist*, 102:3 (2000), especially 564: “I hope to convince my readers that the babies of Empiricism and Generalization have not been thrown out with the bathwaters of Objectivity, Cultural Homogeneity, Fact, Truth, Otherness, and Science as Apolitical Enterprise. In short, *to accept these latter six assumptions as valid targets of the postmodern critique does not necessarily entail a turning away from empirical methodology; it does not necessarily entail the redefinition of anthropology as literature rather than science*” (emphasis in the original).

Jenkins's attempt to sweep history out of serious discourse is, I believe, yet another example of such polarized thinking. There is a further fundamental self-subversion in Jenkins's approach, one not ignored by Zagorin, but demanding more attention – one I have also noticed in the arguments of other self-conscious postmodernists such as Elizabeth Deeds Ermath and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. This is Jenkins's generally unreflexive and highly *traditional* use of history, in an essay that triumphantly declares an end to the modernist discourse of academic history as we have known it for at least two centuries. Jenkins certainly does not pass for an academic historian; Zagorin rightly criticizes him for attacking history while demonstrating little knowledge of how historians actually work.<sup>7</sup> I mean that Jenkins bases his whole argument on an unexamined sense of postmodernism as a complex of ideas developing, indeed coming to luxuriant fruition, in time as understood and periodized by modernist historians.

Most of Jenkins's "Reply" concentrates on issues of language, epistemology, and on his analysis of antirepresentationalism. But towards the end Jenkins openly reveals a breathtaking faith in his own ability to know what happened over vast swathes of Western and even World history. Jenkins believes that Zagorin fails "to comprehend that we are living in a culture wherein it is now too late still to be modern, and where the future is no more containable within the discourses of modernity than the 'modern epoch' was containable within the discourses of 'the medieval'." Although he admits to stating this argument "baldly," I am still awed at such unreflexive use of old-fashioned, discredited (by Jenkins's standards) history as he effortlessly generalizes across 1,500 years of Western development.<sup>8</sup> And, also noted by Zagorin, such appeal to assumed major historical "truths" to justify a political/ideological argument is surely a classic use of *metanarrative*, supposedly a cardinal

7. The same is true of *Why History*. Jenkins examines the work of very few *historians*, apart from Hayden White, David Harlan, Frank Ankersmit, and – Jenkin's special target, supposedly representative of "lower case" academic historians – Richard Evans. Although in his book Jenkins also effortlessly generalizes across supposed *past* developments in Western history, at no time does he analyse how historians have examined a major problem, such as racial slavery in the Americas. I'd like to suggest a thought experiment: imagine if a historian wrote a polemic against literary critics or philosophers, and hardly touched on the actual work done by such scholars.

8. Jenkins, "Postmodern Reply," 196.

sin of modernist historians.<sup>9</sup> This is not the first time I have pointed to such gross inconsistency by evangelists of the new postmodernist/anti-history order.<sup>10</sup> But my criticism goes beyond academic pedantry. A vast metanarrative *is central to their whole triumphalist view of postmodernism*. According to this view, explicit in Jenkins, we in the West passed from “the medieval,” to modernity (now almost totally discredited), to postmodernity with its unimagined imageries and emancipatory, non-historical rhetoric. Indeed the very term “postmodern” is inherently *historical*.

Nor am I picking one of Jenkins’s phrases out of context. Postmodernists, he claims, are much less worried about the future than Zagorin and other espousers of modernity, “given that we have come to an end of *their* ‘representationalist’ modernity and the end of elements constituting it – like *their* history.” One era ends, another emerges: eloquent metanarrative, and not a citation in sight to show how its author came to his grandiose historical conclusion.<sup>11</sup> Suggesting that “we can wave goodbye to history without any nostalgia,” Jenkins follows up with history and yet more history. “So strong have (modernist) histories been in the formation of our culture,” he continues, “so central their place in the bourgeois and proletarian imagination, that it appears that history *per se* is a natural phenomenon ...” This, admittedly, is a perceptive historiographical comment; one that historians, steeped in assumptions about the very “normality” of our views about recovering the past, would do well to contemplate. Jenkins follows with another valid criticism that again nicely skewers historians because – inexcusably! – we often forget that our dis-

9. Zagorin, “Rejoinder,” 203-4. Zagorin wonders too at Jenkins confident knowledge about *the future*. Zagorin also refers to such postmodernist self-subversions in “History, the Referent, and Narrative,” especially 14-15. For an examination of metanarrative, see Margaret R. Somer, “The Privatization of Citizenship: How to Rethink the Knowledge Culture,” in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, Bonnell and Hunt, eds., esp. 130-32. Somers see metanarrative as a combination of narrative structure and a positive/negative binary code of social naturalness. Such a combination can establish a metanarrative as a powerful, often unquestioned – indeed *unquestionable* – “gatekeeper of conceptual authority.”

10. Michael C. Coleman, “Gut Reactions of a Historian to a Missionary Tract,” *American Quarterly* 50 (June 1998), 340-48. This was part of a forum on Berkhofer’s *Beyond the Great Story*. I noted nine major ways in which Berkhofer subverted his own argument. I feel that in his forum reply (to me and two other scholars), Berkhofer ignored most of my criticisms: “Self-reflections on *Beyond the Great Story*: The Ambivalent Author as Ironic Interlocutor,” *ibid.*, 365-75.

11. Jenkins, “Postmodern Reply,” 187.

cipline too is situated in history. "It is tautological to say so, but it needs stressing," he writes, "that we have obviously never seen anything like nineteenth- and twentieth-century, Western upper and lower-case genres ('histories as we have known them') at any other time or place. There have never been, on any other part of the earth, at any other time, ways of historicizing *like that*." Although I am far more modest in my pronouncements on World history and indeed on the history of every other human culture – "there never have been" – I suspect that Jenkins is right. But this is history in the grandest of modernist modes – all in the crusade to invalidate modernist history.<sup>12</sup>

And there is more to come: he wonders whether "the possibility of emancipation could be rethought after the Enlightenment projects of modernity (projects to try to create in bourgeois and proletarian forms 'human rights communities') could be held to have failed on their own terms ..."<sup>13</sup> Beyond, again, the issue of gross historical generalizing, how can you ever consider the success or failure of Enlightenment experiments (how can you even mention such historical categorizations – meta-narratives – as the Enlightenment, bourgeois, and proletarian, which Jenkins does not surround by quotation marks?) while rejecting the very discipline which gave us the concepts through the exercise of empirical analysis of sources? Historians of the Enlightenment and class relations may all have been misled, but that is not the issue. The issue here and throughout his "Reply" is that, while rejecting their very discourse, Jenkins so effortlessly builds his "new" construction upon their construction of that past.

The unreflexive use by Jenkins, Berkhofer, Ermath, and others of such historical "knowledge" suggests an insoluble problem in the postmodernist crusade against metanarrative. To even accuse modernist history of

12. *Ibid.*, 197-98. Note that all these quotations come from two consecutive paragraphs. Jenkins may be right in his bold claim that, in a century or two, the modernist history discourse may appear as "local, temporary phenomena that postmodernists started taking apart in the late twentieth century." But this statement too assumes a great deal of traditional historical "knowledge." While reading *Why History* I was similarly struck by Jenkins's broadly modernist assumptions about recent trends in Western history, and I quickly tired of noting particular instances (similar to those from his article quoted in my text above) of his sublimely confident uses of modernist history. See, for example, *Why History*, 15, 25, 203-4. I feel that Hayden White also uses traditional history unreflexively in his recently published essay collection, *Figural Realism*.

13. Jenkins, "Postmodern Reply," 196-97. I have to admit that at times I found Jenkin's argument in this paragraph difficult to follow.

establishing metanarratives (which it obviously does: the Enlightenment, Progress, the Rise of Science; or, even less flattering to Westerners: Imperialism, the Rise of Race, Fascism, etc), *is in itself to establish yet new metanarratives*.<sup>14</sup> These are just as sweeping, and contain their own ideological agendas (not to speak of personal agendas, such as the drive for academic status); they are no more neutral than the metanarratives spawned by us supposedly less reflexive traditional historians. Further if “emancipatory” (a favourite term of Jenkins) means liberation from any kind of oppression, surely it too is nested in its own metanarrative of negative and positive developments and values. I do not argue here for the unthinking perpetuation of historical metanarratives about Progress, or “the Rise of the West,” (with their insidious ideological baggage and exclusion of counter-narratives). Postmodernists are right in arguing for highly critical stances towards all such generalizations. Yet if we are to attempt any understanding of the past and present, even the most modest and tentative understanding, we have to generalize, to employ narrative, and indeed metanarratives – as the writing of Jenkins, Berkhofer, Ermath, and indeed Hayden White himself have shown. To reject extreme postmodernist attacks on “traditional” history is not, therefore, to ignore the insight of postmodernists that the unthinking building of metanarratives is dangerous; it is to point to the necessity of such generalizing when we contemplate the past, while accepting the need for always self-critical use of all meta- and indeed micronarratives.<sup>15</sup>

Although Jenkins has thus built much of his argument around historical categories and periodizations (metanarratives) supplied by modernist history, he explicitly and derisively rejects this whole academic dis-

14. In his review of Ermath's *Sequel to History*, David Carr made a similar criticism, *History and Theory* 32:2 (1993), especially 182-87. Berkhofer also acknowledges the problem, “Self-Reflections,” 368-69.

15. On a smaller scale Jenkins also does good old modernist history. He retrospectively examines his mental processes as he began his book, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (1999). This whole fascinating passage (no irony intended) is *also history* – autobiography, of course, but history no less, as the author contemplates past developments in his own life. It could be classed as New Social History of an ordinary – non-elite – person. Indeed, one could argue that Jenkins's analysis of Derrida's thinking on language and knowledge is also history – the history of ideas, as the Derrida texts that Jenkins examines appeared in the past, if the recent past. And when he accepts Derrida's claim that “history doesn't repeat itself” (190) I again have to ask: how can we know if we can know nothing about the past? The same reliance on historical narrative is true of Jenkin's extended analysis of the writings of other postmodernists; I enjoyed his instructive analysis (again no irony intended) of Hayden White's work over a number of decades, *Why History*, chap. 5.



course. "I see no reason why we cannot now gather the strength to rid ourselves of 'the burden of history'," he writes, "and construct measures of radical emancipation from *current* imaginaries *sans histoire* and especially postmodern ones ..."16 Disdaining the need to show us what a postmodernist history might look like, and indeed disdaining the very need for any postmodernist history, he arrives at a denunciation that, I have to admit, I savoured despite its contemptuous dismissal of my craft. "From the point of view of emancipatory discourse," he asks, "why hitch your future-oriented wagon to a knackered old horse that answers to the name of history?"17

Why indeed? Why does Jenkins himself, along with others such as Ermath and Berkhofer, hitch his triumphalist, visionary postmodernist discourses to such an exhausted old animal? Do these evangelical postmodernists not subvert their own arguments by doing so? To be fair, Jenkins acknowledges the issue of inconsistency or self-subversion. Noting how critics try to use a "trump card" against postmodernists – that their epistemological scepticism undermines their own claims to valid knowledge – Jenkins notes nonchalantly that they are aware of the inconsistency. Yet "they don't care. Because it doesn't matter ... Postmodernists are not weak because they have no foundations because nobody has foundations; we are all relativists now, all postmodern now."18 A wise person once said that if you ever achieve a logically consistent argument you've left something out. So we should not hold postmodernists to a standard of consistency unattainable by the rest of the human race. But surely we can demand greater consistency of thinkers like Jenkins and

16. Jenkins, *Postmodern Reply*, 197.

17. *Ibid.*, 199.

18. *Ibid.*, 195. Hayden White briefly – and in my view inadequately – discusses the issue of self-subversion, *Figural Realism*, 16-18. White also fails to apply his literary critical theories of troping and plot types to his own narratives. Although he too continually resorts to "traditional" history, he can nevertheless be scathingly dismissive of the discipline: "Indeed – at least from a culturalist perspective – history is, if anything, even more constructivist and even more naively so than the versions of reality constructed by the social sciences. No other discipline is more informed by the illusion that 'facts' are found in research rather than constructed by modes of representation and techniques of discoursivization than is history. No other discipline is more oblivious to the 'fictionality' of what it takes to be its 'data.' That is why no other discipline of the human sciences is so resistant to the challenge posed by culturalism to the social sciences. *History is the last refuge of that faith in common sense that culturalism in its postmodernist incarnation seeks to deconstruct.*" (emphasis added), "Afterword," *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, Bonnell and Hunt, eds., 322.

other postmodernists, whose books are systematically organized and argued and replete with the formal paraphernalia of academic discourse? History is crucial to the whole postmodernist argument, yet Jenkins heaps contempt upon a discipline/discourse which is actually far more varied, and indeed today more influenced by postmodernist ideas than he is aware. He ends with a near-millennial vision of a world *sans histoire*: “the old upper-case metanarratives of yesteryear are now too decrepit and discredited to be wheeled out again even as farce, while the lower case – which once had limited emancipatory ambitions as expressed in Whig and progressive forms – has long been politically conservative ...”<sup>19</sup> And he relishes a future “at the end of the experiment of the modern” – history to the last word almost! – a future full of “new imageries – of surprising things to come – [that] may well not include in their number ‘histories as we have known them’ or, even, histories at all.”<sup>20</sup>

As historians have been the butt of much similar postmodernist contempt in recent years, I have sometimes wondered what we (especially the foot-soldiers of the discipline, slogging away in the archival trenches) did to deserve it all. Or perhaps I could reverse the denunciation. Postmodernists validly insist that historians and indeed all scholars need to reflect upon and openly declare their location (as male, white, Western, privileged, or whatever). Of course historians have hardly been ignorant of such issues. For much of the twentieth century they have been aware that “each generation writes its own history” and that, in the famous phrase of Carl Becker, “each man is his own historian.” Yet we should concede that, more radically than ever before, postmodernists have exploded the scholarly claim to dispassionate neutrality, the classic Western presumption that the scientist/scholar can somehow remain “outside the experiment.” This is surely one of the most valuable of postmodernist contributions: away with fake, omniscient anonymity, with passive constructions and the disguising or erasing of *the scholar as active, located agent!* Therefore I can validly ask postmodernists like

19. Jenkins, *Postmodern Reply*, 198-99. By “Upper case” history, Jenkins means the discredited metanarratives of modernist consciousness – the Renaissance, Enlightenment, the Rise of the West, Progress. By “lower case” history he means the more carefully-focused contemporary academic practices of the profession, see *Why History?*, 15. Both are deeply discredited in his eyes.

20. Jenkins, *Postmodern Reply*, 200.

Jenkins and Berkhofer to examine *their location* too. Why the animus against a discipline which is itself continually changing; and which, from my reading of historical literature in many fields, is becoming far more aware of the need for self-questioning? Because of academic history's roots in the Enlightenment? But how can postmodernists know of such roots? As far as I am aware, historians do not refer to other disciplines – literary criticism, for example, or sociology or anthropology or philosophy – as “knackered old horses.” We are not shouting at them to change their ways and certainly not attempting to banish them from academic discourse, nor are we aggressively evangelizing to turn postmodernists into modernist historians. So, what is it about *you* that makes you so upset by *us*? Turn self-criticism upon yourselves, as you preach at us to do. Most of this resentment against postmodernists like Jenkins is, I admit, defensive. It is the defensiveness of the supposedly deficient “savage” in face of the overweening hubris of the missionary in possession of “the Truth”. Because – irony of ironies for those who so publicly denounce believers in modernist “Truths” – Jenkins and other postmodernist advocates radiate conviction that they possess a superior “Truth.”<sup>21</sup>

Even if they claim that I have misread them on the issue of reliance upon history and on their own metanarratives (*can* an antirepresentational postmodernist claim to have been misread?) it would be difficult indeed to misread Jenkins's contempt for our form of academic discourse and his joyous anticipation of a future *sans histoire*. Indeed, he is as sweepingly confident in his knowledge of the future as about the past. Even if he is right about that future – back in the 1960s and 1970s, I recall, there were times when the Western capitalist order did appear to be the receding wave of the past and socialism in some form the advancing wave of the future – will the world really be a better place without careful academic history? Would we really be more “emancipated” if historians had never attempted to study – and from now on cease to study – the institution of racial slavery in the United States, for

21. See, for example, Jenkins's contemptuous reference in *Why History*, 199: “For there is more at stake in life than the hegemonic continuation of an ideologically positioned set of guild practices reified by their professional beneficiaries into tablets of stone.” Having subjected myself to his article and book in short order, I claim – at the risk of “speaking for the Other” – to sense what it felt like to be an American Indian or other “heathen savage” facing endless denunciation by unreflexively assured missionaries. (And see note 25, below).

example, and the events leading to the actual emancipation of slaves? If by “emancipation” Jenkins means liberation from all kinds of oppression, why can attempting to learn more about the oppression of African Americans in the near or distant past not be emancipatory in his postmodernist sense of the term? This is not to claim that historians have given us *one objectively true account* of such developments. Any scholar who attempts to publish or even reads historical literature knows just how contentious all theories and narratives are; anonymous referees and public reviewers for even fairly traditional history journals endlessly criticise and contest and revise. That, and not complacent stasis, is the way many historians work. But would it be a better, more emancipated world if our knowledge of American slavery came from Hollywood’s version of “Gone With the Wind” or from “The Patriot” – or if we just forgot about slavery altogether?<sup>22</sup>

Will the world be better, in other words, without a discipline dedicated to the careful sifting of always problematic evidence and the concomitant questioning of all kinds of popular and hegemonic national/cultural mythology? To take an example from the history of my own country, Ireland: will the future of Northern Ireland be more “emancipated” if academic historians quit the field and leave “history” to postmodernist imaginaries or to the myth-mongers on all sides of a divided community? (I’m tempted to admit here that, in Ireland’s case, forgetting history might just be a good thing).<sup>23</sup> Of course, many non-academic Irish men and women are quite capable of getting beyond the myths which fuel ethnic bitterness there. But we can surely claim that over the past half century or so, the careful work of academic historians on all sides, many not Irish, *has to*

22. Not all scholars accept the inherently emancipatory implications of postmodernism. Gerald Holton points to possibly fascist tendencies in postmodernist anti-rationalism, “The Rise of Postmodernisms and the ‘End of Science’,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61:2 (April 2000): 327–41; also, Ramón Flecha, “Modern and Postmodern Racism: Dialogic Approach and Anti-Racist Pedagogies,” *Harvard Educational Review* 69:2 (Summer 1999): 150–71.

23. Since first writing this somewhat facetious – but despairing – comment, I came upon the following conclusion by Stephen Howe, whose study is generally critical of postcolonial/postmodernist arguments: “... the main lesson for modern Ireland may be the need, in searching for solutions, simply to dismiss arguments purporting to derive from historical origins and settlement patterns, ancestries and ancestral claims ...,” *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (New York, 2000), 237. On the problematic relationships between Irish people and history/myth, see also Brian Walker, *Dancing to History’s Tune: History, Myth and Politics in Ireland* (Belfast 1996).

*some extent broken down the myths and stereotypes and slogans of Irish history* ("England used the Great Famine to exterminate the Irish," etc). I may not agree with all the arguments of these various revisionist schools, but one thing is certain to me: academic history problematizes, asks "how do we know this?" and similar questions which deflate myths of "Other" and "them." It suggests, above all, the *complexity* of historical developments, to the extent that we can know anything about them. Even an occurrence as horrendously evil as the Holocaust calls for more than condemnation from historians; it calls for attempts to understand how it could happen – to seek for complexity again. Will the world be better if academics no longer systematically concern themselves with such things? How can we better learn about them – and Jenkins et al. are no help here – except through careful, but always epistemologically humble, empirical research into their origins, development, and later influences? For another thing is also clear to me: people will use history; they will keep telling innocent and/or ideologically loaded stories about the past, irrespective of postmodernist protest. What the world needs, then, is not necessarily more history, but more *good* (myth- and metanarrative-questioning) history.

If Jenkins demonstrates little awareness of how historians work, he demonstrates even less about the explosion of *potentially emancipatory* history that academics have produced during the last three or four decades of the twentieth century. The New Social History – leavened, I concede, by postmodernist/poststructuralist/postcolonial concerns with issues such as power and "empowerment." – has attempted to bring the "outs" into historical discourse. By the "outs" I mean ordinary individuals and groups till then ignored by academic historians: colonized peoples, women, slaves, and other such non-Dead White Males. Ironically, Jenkins misses a major issue here: until a few decades ago it appeared that *these groups had no history!* They were *sans histoire* in his sense, of being absent from academic discourse. Through the systematic efforts of male and female, white and non-white historians, the "outs" at last have come into history – only to be threatened with expulsion from it again by supposedly emancipated postmodernists! *Will forgetting history be more or less emancipatory for women, African Americans, and other such previously "invisible" groups, whose present struggles are at least partly justified through constructed histories of oppression (generally justified*

*constructions, I believe?* Of course this is a complex and potentially dangerous issue, and seeking a “usable past” can easily involve the abuse of history and, in some cases, a self-serving cultivation of “victimhood.” Yet, if postmodernists oppose racism, patriarchy and all forms of oppression, can they advocate a wilful amnesia about the past in which, even they appear to believe, such oppression occurred?

My own major field, American Indian history, has gone through a veritable revolution in consciousness in these decades. No longer content to see Indian peoples as merely passive victims (or, in older discourses, as “primitive savages,”) male and female historians, some of them (regrettably few) Native Americans, have produced a growing body of work in which Indian individuals and groups emerge as active participants in their own histories. These studies show Indians interacting with white Americans and often *influencing historical developments*, rather than passively being influenced by them. In my sub-field of Indian education, historians have attempted to get beyond “top down” studies of assimilationist policy and staff practices at United States government and missionary schools, and to examine from the “bottom up” how Indian children, parents, and communities reacted to and sometimes forced changes in white-imposed schooling. Through the use of correspondence, official records, oral and published interviews, autobiography and other such sources, these historians have sought the voices of Indians young and old.<sup>24</sup> Of course, non-Indian historians must avoid the temptation to “speak for the Other” – I admit to having been culpably ignorant of this whole controversy until, less than a decade ago, I became belatedly aware that postmodernists, postcolonialists, and American Indian people themselves had begun to confront scholars claiming to interpret “them” to us.<sup>25</sup> Many of the conclu-

24. See, for example, Michael C. Coleman, *American Indian Children and the School, 1850-1930* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1993). Recently I have added a comparative perspective: “The Responses of American Indian Children and Irish Children to the School, 1850s-1920s,” *American Indian Quarterly* 23 (Summer & Fall 1999), 83-112. This article contains references to recent related scholarship. For a study by a Native American scholar that utilizes the correspondence of Indian parents, school pupils, and white educators to build a powerful sense of the Bureau of Indian Affairs school as a *family* concern, see Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1998). Child is a Minnesota Ojibwe.

25. I have attempted to address this issue in Michael C. Coleman, “To Speak For/About the Other: Or to Contemplate One’s Own (Decentered) Navel?”, *In Search of a Continent: A North American Studies Odyssey*. Festschrift in Honor of Professor Markku Henriksson’s 50th Anniversary, Edited by Mikko Saikku, Maarika Toivonen & Mikko Toivonen (Helsinki, Finland, 1999), 14-28.

sions of the New Social History may be overturned by later historians. And some of the initially emancipatory perspectives outlined above may too easily solidify into hegemonic orthodoxies – but is this not true of all emancipatory discourses, including those produced by postmodernist? Also, I have elsewhere argued that New Social History approaches can over-emphasize the creative power of the “outs” and thus underplay the formidably oppressive power of the “ins.” Who, during the nineteenth century, held the preponderance of *power* in North America: scattered Indian peoples or the United States government and the expanding white population?<sup>26</sup>

Even if traditional historians cope with such potential problems to their own satisfaction and to that of referees and reviewers, postmodernists may still fault them for the supposedly inherent failings of the whole enterprise. Beyond the issue of “speaking for the Other,” historians may essentialize Native American peoples, replacing their kaleidoscopic variety with an ideologically constructed Eurocentric representation of “The Indian.” Such studies are still obviously undertaken in the Enlightenment (Eurocentric, hegemonic) tradition of rational empirical research, argued in generally clear and unproblematic language that supposedly mediates directly between reality and researcher or reader. Although Michel Foucault and Hayden White may receive the odd nod of recognition, the above studies, my own included, are generally little influenced by the famous postmodernist “linguistic turn.”

But why should that fundamentally invalidate them or their findings, in the sense of ruling their very effort futile? If, as postmodernists preach, there are no final truths or standards, no canons of any sort, why are such traditional approaches not equally valid or invalid even to postmodernists? The writers of the New Social History or its New Indian History variant claim no final truths, they merely present and contest tentative findings. Further, at least a number of the studies

26. Michael C. Coleman, “The Symbiotic Embrace: American Indians, White Educators and the School, 1850-1930,” *History of Education* 25 (1996), 1-18. For a more recent expression of this problem, see Susan Pedersen, “The Future of Feminist History,” *Perspectives: American Historical Association Newsletter* 38:7 (October 2000): 22-25.

in my own field are produced by Native American men and women, some of whom are major contributors to the new Indian history. They and non-Indian historians powerfully depict both the variety and the changing nature of Indian experiences; even studies focused on particular Indian groups or individual schools leave little doubt as to the great diversity of Indian experiences – and the experiences of white officials and teachers working with them. Also, despite broad agreement on the outlines of United States government educational practices and Indian responses, there is contestation within the field: for example, scholars do not agree on whether theories of biological racism become more prevalent among government officials from around 1900; and even if they did, to what extent was this reflected in the everyday experiences of Indian pupils? Despite the general use of relatively simple and jargon-free language, these studies do not suggest that the cross-cultural educational experience was itself simple; in one way or another they all convey the complexity, anguish, and sometimes the achievements of those placed in schools constructed by an outside ethnic authority.<sup>27</sup> As regards our unsophisticated, “undeconstructed” use of language – are we really any different from postmodernists? Although they sometimes resort to frightfully difficult language (from the perspective of this plain-speaking historian); and although Jenkins, in particular, delights in proclaiming his commitment to antirepresentationalism, he and they continue to write and to publish with the assumption that at least some other scholars will understand their words and ideas. And (I am not the first to point this out) they all put their own names on their works. When Keith Jenkins allows “Keith Jenkins” to appear under the title of his “Postmodern Reply,” he is hardly being antirepresentational.

None of this is to deny the real importance of postmodernist criticisms

27. On this issue I concur with Henry Ashby Turner, III: “Some advocates of what are now fashionably regarded as more sophisticated modes of scholarship seem to believe that producing an accurate narrative of past events that accounts for their causes is child’s play, a simple task unsuitable for great minds. But anyone who has ever undertaken the taxing task of reconstructing a complex chapter of past happenings knows how naïve that notion is,” “Human Agency and Impersonal Determinants in historical Causation: A Response to David Lindenfield,” *History and Theory* 38:3 (1999): 302. I quibble only with the word “reconstruct”; we “construct,” I feel.



of traditional history. We have to concede that in the last few decades postmodernists have pushed some of us to ask deeper questions than heretofore about our assumptions and methods and about the very nature of knowledge. Nor have we the right to claim that academic history – broadly understood – is the only valid way to come to grips with the past. But, along with postmodernists, we too have acted under the assumption that “emancipation” involves the opening of the mind, the recognition of previously “invisible” groups, and opposition to racial and other forms of oppression. So surely it is not too much to claim that, at least in some of its concerns and production, the New Social History was and still is a wonderfully *emancipatory* discourse, and the world would have been worse off without it?

To the extent that Jenkins and other postmodernist proselytisers call for reflexivity and self-criticism from historians; to the extent that they decry “radical positivist” claims that historians can objectively *reconstruct* the past (rather than carefully *construct* a tentative account of it); to the extent that they oppose all forms of academic, scientific arrogance and Western claims to epistemological superiority over “primitive” and non-Western peoples – to the extent that postmodernists like Jenkins call for such things I’ll certainly shake his and their hands (if they’ll lower themselves to shaking mine). Unfortunately, the world we have inherited throbs with racial, ethnic, national, gender, class, and other contentions. Will we really be better off without men and women from many nations who search for and carefully analyse the surviving evidence relating to such divisions, destined never to get beyond fragile, tentative, complex, but *always contested* understandings of them?

Jenkins, ironically, has answered my question. Sneer as he may at the old horse, he has still hitched his “new” vision to it. And, even more important, he and other postmodernist critics of history *still need that old horse* to pull along the argument that the horse itself is dead. But why “horse” in the singular? I suggest that this further betrays Jenkin’s simplistic understanding – and he is not alone in that – of academic history as *a discourse* rather than as multiple, changing, contending *discourses*. To extend the equine metaphor: some of the horses of history, such as radical positivism, may well be ready for the knacker’s yard, and I’ll help him lead that one there. Others are alive and well, thank you – look at the book reviews, advertisements for new publications,

and new article and dissertation listings in history journals every quarter. And still others are beautiful, rearing wild horses, emancipated and emancipating!<sup>28</sup>

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28. From my own research and from reading/perusing/skimming over twenty history journals each quarter and from reading *thousands* of academic book reviews each year, including many of works far beyond my own fields, my impression is this: historians have continued to do highly varied history in modernist senses of the term; and most, though by no means all, resist postmodernism in their approaches to the past. Along with *History and Theory*, these history journals include among others: the *American Historical Review* (five times a year), the *Journal of American History*, the *English Historical Review*, *Ethnohistory*, the *Journal of Social History*, the *Journal of Modern History*, the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *History of Education*, the *Journal of Social History*, *Church History*, and *Irish Historical Studies*.