

**‘No perfect crime’**: Review of K. Jenkins, *Refiguring History. New Thoughts on an old Discipline* (London and New York 2003)

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Keith Jenkins’ (J.) latest comes as a thin paperback, not even a hundred pages thick. It is covered by a detail of a painting of Eric Boulatov, showing two people leisurely strolling down a park way in quiet conversation, so-to-speak *en passant* an increasingly grey looking statue of Lenin, still clinging on to the Manifesto. But don’t let yourself be confused by this innocent wrapping. J. is provocative and disturbing as ever, and, to use the term introduced by himself early on in the opening pages, critically disobedient. *Refiguring History. New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* is the sequel to J.’s 1991 *Rethinking History*, but need not be read in conjunction with it. It thrives equally, as J. readily admits, on the works of other great postmodernist historians, theorists and philosophers of history and language, most of all Jacques Derrida, Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit. *Refiguring History*, thus, is the most recent arrival in the steadily growing family of (self-)critical and (self-)reflexive postmodern and deconstructionist historical literature. But once more, this is not to imply that one needs to have read any of the great amongst these to be able to make sense of J.’s cause, and this not only because one of the points to be driven home in it is the illusionary nature of all linearity, most of all within history and its textual re/presentations. In fact, the book is set out to be a student reader, a kind of textbook for those about to become engaged in the ‘doing of history’. A modest claim, one may think, but then again if the young and uninitiated can’t think disobedient ideas – who can?

And it is an appeal for the writing of history. Yet, not in the (now and still) traditional modernist way, but in a spirit of

critical disobedience to the norms of mainstream professional historical theory and practice for "...if history is to continue for a while despite its somewhat moribund state, then what life it may have still *ought* to be articulated through the reflexive foregrounding of a postmodern discourse wedded to the idea of emancipation." (2) The norms to be disobeyed are those linked with empirically and evidentially based historical enquiry, which J. presents as interpretative *closures*. This is essentially a political statement, not so much because professional, academic orthodoxy is interpreted as a dead weight that forbids "...radical otherness to come, new imaginations to emerge." (5) Rather, for once historical closure is unachievable (the truth, after all, is *not* out there), and secondly, because the resulting unavoidable openness is not only welcome, but utterly needed. For only such openness allows for a politics of emancipation. This is no news to those familiar with postmodern approaches; but it must come as a shock again and again to those members of the history tribe who did not choose their profession as a stage for political action, but possibly as a hide-away from it. After all, the occupation with things past is by and large not and has not been used by those pursuing it professionally as a form of politics.

The dangers of interpretative closures are directly linked by J. to the world we live in. Any social formation (in itself a necessity of any society) sets out "... to reproduce itself in as stable a condition as possible so that all potentially destabilising and thus dangerous excesses are either absorbed or rigorously excluded", a process which J., following Jean Baudrillard, calls 'the perfect crime', "...which, were it to be achieved, would be so perfect that no-one would ever know that it was taking place as it quietly folds unwanted phenomena such as difference, otherness and the excess – all that cannot be digested by current social and political formations – into the old and familiar without remainder, without any 'loose ends'." (17) Consequently, any profession needs to make clear who's in and who's out; needs to make clear how the profession is exercised and practised in order to ensure the desired continuity; most of all, needs to demonstrate a "controllable flow from the past through the present into the future", (17) thus creating a

linearity between these. And it is precisely for this reason that the past cannot possibly be allowed to be read by anyone.

“For the past, if it is to help ensure the reproduction of the status quo within acceptable limits (within those famous ‘liberal tolerances’) cannot be totally open so as to allow innumerable inheritances, abnormal genealogies, interminable idiosyncratic figurings and refigurings and ‘lessons’ to suit all and every occasion – this is far too risky. No, what is required are proper, responsible, academic histories (historians) operating within acceptable limits and armed with all the usual gate-keeping paraphernalia: academic standards, publication controls, peer reviews, benchmarks, responsible and efficient methods and, in the wings, latent, ostracising power. That most academic historians do not think of things this way is due precisely to the silent and hidden mechanisms of ideological power in our current social formations that simultaneously permit us to operate within such limits whilst hiding them from us; the complicity is all so beautifully innocent – ideologically speaking.” (18)

It should surprise that in a world so science oriented as ours, the historical sciences should have missed what is still held a – dare I say – ‘fact’ or ‘law’ in the natural sciences, namely that inbreeding causes decay rather than excellence in a species. I can, then, only but agree with J.’s demand for generous and open histories (and I would want to add: historians) so that

“...in the name of the future which will hopefully not be a reproduction of the same, that will run out of control; in the name of a future that is open to strange, wondrous, disrespectful and disobedient workings, [one hopes] that the umbilical cord that intravenously feeds the past, present and future with the sustaining power of the status quo, can be cut in order to allow for new births.” (18)

Naturally, this entails "...the necessity to imagine new ways rather than just rethink the old." (23) And here may be the only criticism I have of J.'s proposal: his restriction to exemplify the workings of this postmodern consciousness primarily on the 'writing' of history, and not so much on the 'doing' – despite its claimed target audience. For to write history, a history that can be seen, read and commented on by others, that can upset, disturb and provoke, and thus inaugurate change, one needs to be 'allowed' to do history. The politics of the history tribe, however, is largely closed.

Whatever the practice, the theory of such new births is seen as a question of decision-making. This is a term J. borrows from Derrida, and the other that is linked to this, the *aporia*, defined as the moment when one realises that all decisions are necessarily arbitrary as they cannot be based on any sure foundations. Thus one cannot repeat a decision. Any disregard of this principle is understood as an act of injustice:

"For if one refers back to, say, a previously worked out decision (or ethical system or law code) and merely applies it to a different situation; that is, if the decision that is made is merely the reapplication of a previous rule or formula, then no decision has been made at all, only an administrative act, which in turn means that justice cannot be done to the new situation in all its radical singularity; its uniqueness." (23)

If, let's say, an appointments committee 'decided' to use previously employed criteria in their 'decision-making'; if the individual members of the committee were to happily draw back on criteria that may have become accepted practice within that profession for the selection process; if they were in other words not prepared to take a fresh look themselves, then no decision was made at all, and those who may have been under the illusion to be decision-makers, in fact, turned themselves into administrators. They also committed an act of injustice. It is notable that J. makes it very clear that "...it is the 'other' ... the one who is affected in all his/her singularity by the decision

– who will be the judge as to whether justice has been done to them and their unique circumstances.” (24)

There is another issue that will not be liked by chiefs and Indians, chefs and sous chefs, worker bees and queens alike in the profession. And one that is intrinsically challenging the processes installed to recruit new professionals; as, most of all, it is not very charming towards a large group of the current practitioners and becoming practitioners: J's acceptance of Edward Said's definition of the intellectual for the historical profession:

“...the intellectual is a particular kind of person. A person endowed with the capacity for representing and articulating a hopeful, uncompromising, emancipatory message. A person whose works have a radical, sustained cutting-edge. A person happy to raise embarrassing questions, not to take ‘no’ for an answer, relentlessly confront dogma and orthodoxy and keep in focus ‘those people and issues that are continually forgotten or swept under the rug’. This is a person who enjoys never being fully adjusted, of existing beyond the chatty, inconsequential ‘reality’ inhabited by the natives, of remaining immune to accommodation; an unco-optable, *disobedient* person. And this is a person who not only accepts the fate invariably meted out by various establishments to this thorn in the flesh – the status of the relative *exile* – but who also welcomes it. Who likes being marginal. Who accepts that his or her awkwardness, ‘eccentric angles of vision’ and unwillingness to follow established paths, gives a freedom and integrity that makes him or her beholden to no one and is ready to accept the consequences of that position: that one can never be settled, never fully accepted, never be entirely comfortable, never ‘be at home in one’s home’; that one actually relishes being, as Rilke put it, ‘a perpetual beginner in your circumstances’. (61-62)

Since J. views the majority of historians outside this definition, it follows that intellectualism is not seen as a characteristic of the profession. In itself, this definition, however, whilst wanting to mark a beginning, also marks an end. For whenever the marginalized, the 'other', the minority became accepted, it would logically lose its status of exile, and with it face the risk of becoming a position of convention as opposed to invention as a form of decision-making. But this is, like history, a matter of the future.

Those who are used to well proportioned reviews may dislike the fact that I have ruthlessly chosen to quote and paraphrase at large some small sections of *Refiguring History*, whilst wilfully ignoring others. I fully admit to the vice of the historian of having picked the things I find most interesting and challenging at this moment in time, instead of providing a balanced summary of its 'main' points; to me the latter is not the purpose of a review, and for that matter, not of history. I have, amongst others, missed out on mentioning J.'s concept of 'the before now', on his insistence that there is no such thing as historical skills, or on his criticism of history in Britain (his place of work) as a locution specific to this island, that thinks and lives "... proper history [as] the kind of thing that is done by the right people at the right time at the right place..." (37) Then again, there is nothing worse than being told the end of a good story in advance anyhow... For this you will have to turn to the book itself, which is in any case a rewarding, because highly demanding and upsetting read. It is also an extremely positive read, for as long as individuals like Jenkins, Ankersmit, White and, I am delighted to say, many others, think, write and live their histories as disobediently as they do, there is no such thing as the perfect crime.