

The Journal of Theory and Practice (Hrsg.): *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice*. New York, London: Routledge 1997. ISBN: 1364-2529; 395 S.

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#### RETHINKING HISTORY

I have been looking very much forward to reading the first volume of this journal, because it has dedicated itself to theoretical and methodological discussions about history and historical writing. I find the title of the journal very interesting. The combination of theory and practice in rethinking history is very important, since a lot of historical thinking is limited to pure theoretical reflexions. In spite of my expectations to this journal, I have not been disappointed after starting to read the first volume of *Rethinking History*.

The initiative to *Rethinking History* has been taken, because the Routledge History Commissioning Editor, Heather McCallum, invited Alun Munslow together with Keith Jenkins and Patrick Joyce "... to think about the possibilities for a new history journal that would review the nature of history and the challenges it faces today" (Munslow pp.1). Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone are the editors of *Rethinking History*. It is interesting to find that the list of editors, editorial and advisory board contains very few names not affiliated with institutions in USA and England. There are only two from France, two from Northern Ireland, one from Canada and one from Australia. I find the Anglo-American dominance of the journal interesting, because I am under the impression, that especially among American historians there is a more sensitive awareness towards theoretical and methodological debates about history and historical writing.

So far I have read the editorials and other descriptions of the intentions of the journal, the review essays and review articles. I have decided to begin writing my review before finishing reading the first volume. Hereby I will enlighten my process of reviewing, which I think is in the spirit of this particular journal.

Editorials

*Rethinking History* dedicates itself to different experiments in the way historians write history and think about history. In the editorials the editors develop the journal as an open space for free reflexion about history in theory and practice, which is also expressed in the subtitle of the journal. The policy of the journal will be "... to open up as fully as possible what we do and how we do it, *Rethinking History* will be overtly self-reflexive by establishing a balance of distinctive features not usually found in academic history journals" (Munslow pp.16). In the third issue Robert A. Rosenstone stretches the ambitions of the journal further on by stating, that the editors "... believe that the writing of History can be an art, and that innovation in any art calls for boldness, audacity, and the courage to try things that can seem strange, even to the author" (Rosenstone pp.233).

In the first two editorials Alun Munslow argues in favour of a balanced reflexion between the postmodern critique of the so called traditional historical writing and the suborned rejection by mainstream historians of any kind of discussion of their scientific practice (Munslow pp.115-16). His argument is, that it is "... perhaps the great mistake of postmodernist criticism - that it criticizes a form of historical method that has never really existed" (Munslow pp.1). This exaggeration claims that history still is influenced by positivism, whereas most historians in fact have detached themselves from positivist philosophy. „These indictments are usually met with the reply that much of the critique has long been well known and the measured exercise of proper historical method meet those criticisms“ (Munslow pp.1). I think that a more sober critique would be to discuss the inherent realism in the scientific foundation of history. According to the argument of Alun Munslow this does not make the postmodern critique irrelevant, since part of the critique is accurate, but some of the postmodern conclusions lack precision. On the other hand historians must adopt the relevant part of the critique instead of rejecting all criticism of their practice. As a Scandinavian historian I find this discussion interesting, because I often wonder, if European historiography is especially traditionalized. Reading

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the editorials in *Rethinking History* has convinced me, that it has a broader relevance. In his two editorials Alun Munslow makes a diagnosis of present day historiography. In another editorial Robert A. Rosenstone draws equal attention to a reformation of the analytical practice and to a theoretical rethinking of history (Rosenstone pp.231). Especially the emphasis on the practical aspects of writing history I find very promising for the future prospects of the journal. It is my general experience that many theoretical discussions have a tendency to restrict themselves to an abstract level. To me it is obvious that epistemological insights must have analytical consequences, whereas in many cases such knowledge is disconnected on the analytical level.

The journal is very open towards the practical challenges of historical writing. This shows already in the writing of the editorials. They are composed with a lot of subordinate clauses, which may seem quite annoying in the beginning. You are forced to slow down your reading speed. After a while you forget about it and suddenly realize, that the complex structure plays an important role in the contents of the text. This is for example the case on pp.12, where Alun Munslow discusses Michel Foucault. I think, that the subordinate clauses create a reflexive space within the text. Perceived as such they are not at all irrelevant noise in the reading process. Another way of creating an openminded and reflexive academic space is the structure of the journal. *Rethinking History* simulates a traditional academic journal by having the same structure.

There is a section of articles and another section with reviews, but it also has sections with titles, which rarely appear in journals (Munslow pp.117, pp.120-121). Most of these sections do not exist in the first volume, but they are suggested to the potential contributors. For the present these sections exist only in the form of a call for papers. In September 1998 one of these calls for papers was published in *H-Soz-u-Kult* as „Historical Miniatures“. This section is devoted to a new kind of historical writing. As examples of the Miniature is mentioned „Historical moments, precis of planned projects, abstracts for arti-

cles yet to be written, vest pocket biographies, poetic reflections, personal encounters, outrageous reinterpretations the subject matter and approach of a Miniature need only limited by the imagination and inventiveness of the historian“ (CFP: *Rethinking History*. *H-Soz-u-Kult* (H-Net). Wed, 30 Sep. 1998). It can be understood as an extended version of a section of notes and comments.

Another section is entitled „Invitation to historians“, which can be compared to the poetics of fiction authors. The idea is to ask historians to discuss their way of writing. The editors also suggest theoretical and historiographical sections. Investigations of historical concepts, examinations of ideas of the past and the thoughts of present day historians. These sections have yet to be developed, and they can be important contributions to the rethinking of history. At this point I would like to support the effort of the editors by urging historians to take up the challenge to experiment inside and outside these sections. The exploitation of the potential in these sections is vital to the value of *Rethinking History*.

#### Traditional sections

The more traditional sections in the journal, by which I refer to the sections of articles and book reviews, are as important contributions to the journal as the sections mentioned above. The articles and book reviews help *Rethinking History* to be regarded as a professional academic journal, since articles and reviews are an important part of the image of an academic journal. In this way *Rethinking History* does not scare the historical establishment - a prerequisite for the rethinking of history. After all only historians can change the historical practice. At the same time it is obvious, that the articles and reviews can not solely copy tradition, if the journal's intention to rethink history shall stay alert. It is interesting to see, how the journal manages this balance between keeping the structure of traditional academic presentation while using different approaches in dealing with new issues.

I have been browsing through the articles and book reviews in the first volume of *Rethinking History*. From this immediate point of view the book reviews seem very traditional. They could probably have been published in many other historical journals,

though the titles of the reviewed works perhaps ring a slightly more theoretical bell in Rethinking History. I am referring to Raphael Samuels book „Theatre of Memory“ (pp.90-92). Also Christopher Norris „Reclaiming Truth: Contributing to Critique of Cultural Relativism“ (pp.381-83) and Whitney Davis „Replications: Archaeology, Art History and Psychoanalysis“ (pp.384-86) are examples of such titles.

The articles seem to deal with theoretical and methodological questions, which follows the outline for the journal perfectly. Although they speak about elements, which may contribute to the rethinking of history, they do not as articles rethink history. This impression is however the result of browsing through the journal and viewing the style of the articles. I will not draw a final conclusion, without studying the articles and book reviews more thoroughly. Before doing so I would like to point out the challenge for a journal like Rethinking History. The editors try to develop something, which does not yet exist, and this might confront them with the problem of finding adequate publishing material. Off course there are a lot of texts discussing the need of changing the writing of history but not necessarily good examples of changed historical writing. This does not make the ambitions of the journal impossible, just more tricky.

### Book reviews

After reading the book reviews I find my previous conclusions partly justified. The reviews are written in a traditional academic way, but the contents of the reviewed work is more exciting, than I had expected.

I emphasize the reviewing, because I think it is important to reflect upon. It is a challenge to think about how the reviewing practice should change. Also it is valuable to maintain a practice of presenting different kinds of historical work. There is no obvious argument for changing the manner of reviewing, but new forms of historical writing and research must somehow have consequences also on the reviews.

There are a few of the reviewed works, which I would like to point out as examples of historical work which indeed does contribute to changing the practice of history, and which is creative and theoretically ambitious. I am

referring to Raphael Samuel's „Theatres of Memory“, because it seems to take us beyond postmodern titles, although the reviewer concludes, that Samuel lacks a manifesto for the practical implementation (Belchem pp.91). Another one is Neal Ascherson's „Black Sea“. The reviewer describes it as snapshot history (Armour pp.95). This signifies a photographic way of doing history. Many different expressions are being used in order to describe the discourse in the book. Ascherson is also described as a traveller-historian. Unfortunately the review does not give a very clear image of how the snapshot and travelling materialize in the reviewed book. Gregory H. Nobles' „American Frontiers“ is introduced with a recollection by the author of himself as a child (Stoney pp.211). I find this use of own memories very interesting, but in the review it is difficult to see, how this influences the rest of Nobles' book, although the reviewer describes the author as very self aware and reflective. Finally I will direct attention to Whitney Davis' „Replications“. It is presented as a book, which does what it says. The reviewer points out, that the book itself produces multiple replications (Brewster pp.384). The focus is interdisciplinary. Different perspectives are presented as supplement to each other. Theoretically Davis has a materialist point of view on the origin of art, since „... the material mark brings replication into being ....“. Contrary to the intentions. Though this does not mean, that „... mark is necessarily deliberate or sign with a referent ...“, because „... representation emerges historically...“ (Brewster pp.385). I think, that this non-essentialist materialism contains an important aspect, which is very relevant for historical practice. This kind of materialism disconnects the material from the objective. Instead the material is just as historically dependent as all other substances.

### Articles

Having now read the entire volume of Rethinking History I will conclude my review by discussing some of the articles. Overall the articles fall in two categories. One type deals with central theoretical debates relevant for history. One example is William Pencak's article „Foucault Stoned“ in the first issue (pp.34-55), which investigates a debate

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between Lawrence Stone and Michel Foucault in „The New York Review of Books“. His article is a balanced presentation of important questions about Foucault's contributions to the theoretical development of history. Often discussions of Foucault turn black and white, which can lead to little reflected use of Foucault or to easy rejections. In this case we are given an openminded elaboration of the potentials and weaknesses in a Foucauldian perspective. Unfortunately the conclusion made by Pencak is very vague. He suggests a combination of Stone and Foucault, since he thinks that they can complement each other (Pencak pp.50). I think, that he hereby neutralizes Foucault.

Another type of articles are methodological experiments, which through their own performance as written texts try to do history in a different way. A good example of this is Chris Ward's article „Impressions of the Somme“ in the third issue (pp.275-309). I am not able to judge the success of this experiment, since I am not sure, that I understand the article, but I feel that something important takes place. It is an irrational sentiment. I believe that this must be taken seriously, I therefore feel obliged to recommend Chris Ward's article.

My prediction of the characteristics of the articles did not come through as correct, because they turned out to be more experimental than I had anticipated. Also the theoretical articles showed that purely theoretical reflexions can be extremely valuable for the rethinking of history. My intellectual arrogance sometimes has a tendency to overlook this, because I often have seen theoretical reflexions, which are of no consequence to historical practice. I am glad to have had my arrogance questioned, though there are articles which confirm the relevance of my prejudice.

Always when I read Keith Jenkins, I experience disappointments. It is partly due to my own expectations and demands, but Keith Jenkins also has a tendency to write forward promises for new concepts, which he never reveals. This also goes for his article in the first issue: „Why Bother with the Past“ (Jenkins pp.56-66). As usual he asks very good questions, but the answers float around and remain airy. This level of abstraction in the

answers makes it difficult to discuss the article, because the arguments can be reduced to word games. This does not make Keith Jenkins' article irrelevant with different expectations. Maybe mine are wrong. After reading Keith Jenkins' „Re-Thinking History“ from 1991, I have often been thinking, that this book was an excellent introduction to the postmodern challenge to history. This also goes for his article in the first issue of the journal *Rethinking History*.

I will mention a good historiographical article from the second issue. In „The New and Newer Histories“ Dorothy Ross discusses the role of social theory in history (pp.125-50). It is a journey through the 20th century from the transformation of history into an objective science, where methodologies from the social sciences were an important tool, to the attempt in the 1960s and 1970s of moving „... beyond a narrow positivism and import hermeneutic understanding ...“ (Ross pp.133). The differences between European and American historiography are described. Concluding she discusses the latest developments, where she argues that postmodern theory has helped catalyze an explosion of new historical energies. She points out as interesting that these new histories connect rather to the humanities than the social sciences (Ross pp.139). It is an important shift in terms of investigating the directions of present historiography. This is precisely the potential of her article. Not only is it an interesting presentation of historiographical questions in a certain period of time, but it also analyses the newest historiographical developments, how we got here and the future prospects.

Another historiographical article „The Two Histories“ is by Ann Curthoys and John Docker (pp.259-73). They compare the male view of the female with the historians view of the past. From this perspective they develop interesting metaphors to describe the practice of the historian. It is noticeable that they find this view in very different historiographical perspectives. This tells us that the practice of the historian has not changed very much. A gender perspective on the practice of scientific research risks to draw the attention away from science, but in this article the attention remains on the subject - historiographical

writing.

Laura Mason discusses the use of film as medium for historical presentation in „Looking at a Life“ (pp.27-41). She argues that film has an „... ability to complicate the relationships of knowledge and uncertainty ...“ (Mason pp.330). This connects to Alan Munslow’s editorial, where film was suggested as material for presenting history (Munslow pp.118). One of Laura Mason’s examples are „Crumb“, which is a biographical film about cartoonist R. Crumb, which mixes interviews with old girlfriends with suggested interpretations of his cartoons. Laura Mason points out that film as a medium „... brings his drawings more vividly to life than would either still photographs or words alone ...“ (Mason pp.333-34). This characterizes film as a medium by the movements rather than by the visuality. This distinction is vital, because still pictures and written words fix elements in time, while movements create a context of simultaneous unsteadiness, which questions truth and the lineary narrative.

Marjorie Becker tells in „When I was a Child ...“ about an anthropological study she made in Mexico (pp.343-55). Through her presentation she demonstrates the difficulties in drawing clear lines between the past and the present. I get the impression that the concepts dissolve, which maybe is more clear, because of the anthropological methodology.

The two last articles are interesting attempts in experimenting with the content of history, where Chris Wards article tries to experiment with the writing of history.

### Conclusion

It has been a pleasure reading and reviewing this first volume of Rethinking History, though I still hope that the editors succeed in developing the new and more experimental sections of the journal. I think Rethinking History lives and dies with the degree of this success. Also I hope that these sections and the more traditional sections will become integrated. During the reviewing process I have experienced a progress in my reviewing judgement towards more positive conclusions. This is due to my expectations, because it is rare, that theoretical and methodological questions are taken seriously not only on an abstract and philosophical level but also as a

specific and analytical attempt to do things differently in the research practice.

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