The killing of History: why relativism is wrong

by Roger Kimball

On The Killing of History by Keith Windschuttle.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Keith Windschuttle
The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past
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Accustom your children constantly to this; if a thing happened at one window, and they, when relating it, say that it happened at another, do not let it pass, but instantly check them; you do not know where deviation from truth will end.
—Boswell’s Life of Johnson

There are no facts, only interpretations.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Where is Dr. Johnson when we need him? How well could we profit from his scruples when it comes to the question of truth. For we live at a time when truth is everywhere under attack. I am not talking about anything arcane or polysyllabic: just plain, factual truth, as in “The battle of Agincourt took place in October 1415” or (more generally) “The documents support my claim and do not support his.”
It is perhaps easy enough to discount some of the more florid examples of the assault on truth. I daresay that few sensible people take seriously the claims of Holocaust deniers. What is significant, however, is the way in which such extreme doctrines tend to be dismissed. Increasingly, they are repudiated not as pernicious falsehoods—the response that Dr. Johnson would have insisted upon—but as more or less unfortunate “perspectives” or “points of view,” the gospel being that everyone is “entitled” to his own such hobbyhorse, no matter how flagrantly at odds with the truth it might be. Never mind that such an attitude not only disparages truth, but also erodes the legitimacy of serious opinion.

Or take the recent movies directed by Oliver Stone. Anyone who looks into the matter knows that Mr. Stone’s portrayals of Presidents Kennedy and Nixon are exercises in (left-wing) political fantasy. Yet the popularity of such movies testifies not—or not only—to the political commitments of those who patronize his movies. It also testifies to the public’s capacious appetite for historical “reconstruction”; that is, its appetite for history glamorized and minus the burdensome requirement to tell the truth—history, to put it in a word, “lite.” Dr. Johnson would not have liked history lite.

There are no doubt many reasons for this development. One important reason is the degree to which Western intellectual elites—in the media, the world of culture, and above all in the academy—have reneged on their commitment to truth. This abdication has a long and complex heritage. And it comes in many forms and degrees of finality, from various modes of trial separation to, in extreme cases, irrevocable divorce. As always in the world of ideas, what matters is not so much the existence but the influence and prevalence of such commitments. In the present case, the cavalier attitude toward truth has reached epidemic proportions. It has, indeed, become part of the intellectual furniture of our age, presupposed rather than argued for.

One depressing sign of this situation is the absolute horror with which the idea of “objective truth” is regarded in chic academic circles today. Another is the widespread tendency to downgrade facts to matters of opinion—a tendency that follows naturally from the rejection of objective truth. This shows itself in the amazingly prevalent assumption that truth is “relative,” i.e., that the truth of what is said depends crucially upon the interests, prejudices, even the sex or ethnic origin of the speaker rather than—well, than the truth or falsity of what the speaker says. The basic idea is that truth is somehow invented rather than discovered. Typical of this position is the feminist complaint about “male-centered” epistemologies that make false claims to universality (another word that inspires panic) or objectivity.

circumscribed, mind you—“by the character and prejudices of its narrator.” In other words, the limitations of the historian make the achievement of historical truth impossible. How many college-educated people today would dare to dissent from this assertion? Mr. Schama was at pains to deny that his was a “naïvely relativist position”; yet at bottom, his claim is little more than a chummy periphrasis for Nietzsche’s famous declaration of nihilism: “There are no facts, only interpretations.” It is unfortunate that we lack a squadron of Dr. Johnsons: they might remedy the situation considerably by applying a series of refutations like that delivered against Bishop Berkeley’s idealist philosophy. Except in the case of the Michel Foucault, who might have grown overly fond of Johnson’s method of refutation, the results would almost certainly be salutary.

Not surprisingly, the flight from truth has had especially devastating consequences in the academy. Among other things, it has undermined the integrity of many academic disciplines—has, in fact, done much to undermine the very idea of an academic “discipline,” that is to say, a field of study with a generally agreed upon subject matter and shared tools of inquiry.

The dizzy proliferation of “studies” programs is an important sign of this decay. Women’s studies, gay studies, Afro-American studies, Chicano studies, peace studies, textual studies: the metastasis of these and other such pseudo-subjects in the academy betokens not the extension but the breakdown of academic disciplines. It is worth stressing that such programs, though advertised as “cross-disciplinary,” are in reality anti-disciplinary; they require not the mastery of multiple disciplines but the abandonment of disciplinary rigor for the sake of fostering a prescribed ideology. The paradigm of all such efforts is “cultural studies,” an alarmingly popular intellectual solvent that is characterized not by its subject—which can be anything at all—but its attitude. The two mandatory ingredients for cultural studies are (1) political animus and (2) a hostility to factual truth; “content” is entirely discretionairy.

To date, the assault on truth in the academy seems to have been most damaging to the study of literature—partly because departures from factual truth are not always so readily detectable when the subject is literature, partly because departments of literature were among the first to capitulate to such trendy and destructive fads as deconstruction, structuralism, and cultural studies in all its unlovely allotropes. But few if any subjects have escaped unscathed. Philosophy, law, art history, psychology, anthropology, sociology: all have been playing an aggressive game of catch-up with literature departments in this regard. Even history, whose raison d’être, one might have thought, was a commitment to factual truth, has suffered. So, too, the natural sciences: the theory and philosophy of science—if not yet the actual practice of science—have increasingly become hostage to sundry forms of epistemological incontinence, as the logic and substance of science is deliberately confused with the sociology of science. According to some observers, such ideas have even begun making headway in schools of business management and accounting—though regrettably not, it seems, among those accountants employed by the Internal Revenue Service. A splendid chap called Nicholas Fox, who lectures in English medical schools, may have provided this week’s ne plus ultra of social constructivism. In his book Postmodernism, Sociology and Health
(1993), Mr. Fox assures readers that such terms as “patient” and “illness” are “sociological fictions” that can be cleared up by “elements of feminist theory and Derridean concepts of *différance* and intertextuality.”

Many of these developments have been duly noted and criticized. Indeed, beginning in 1987, with Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, a small but steady stream of books and articles have appeared to take issue with one or another dimension of the academic assault on truth. My own book, *Tenured Radicals* (1990), belongs on this list, as do David Lehman’s *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (1991) and Paul Gross and Norman Levitt’s superlative anatomy of the so-called “science wars” in *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (1994). The latest contribution to this genre of dissent is also among the most devastating, intellectually sophisticated, and wide-ranging in its indictment. Written by an Australian historian called Keith Windschuttle, the book is titled *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered By Literary Critics and Social Theorists*. If the title seems a tad lurid, rest assured that the evidence that Mr. Windschuttle assembles to make his case amply justifies the strong rhetoric. Although published by an obscure house (a fact that tells us a great deal about the priorities of academic publishing today), this is the most important work of cultural criticism to have appeared all year—indeed, in many a year.

In form, *The Killing of History* is a kind of intellectual Baedeker. It provides readers with a lively tour of the exotica that has come to predominate in the humanities and social-science departments of most English-speaking colleges and universities. Having lived among the natives, Mr. Windschuttle has sampled much local fare; he knows all about curiosities like semiotics, and how they got to be that way; he understands the chief local dialects, and can discriminate nicely between structuralism and post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-colonialism, and social-constructivism; he knows the best way across the desert of Michel Foucault’s “anti-humanism” and is adept at extricating himself from the swamp of postmodern literary theory; above all, he arms his readers against the cranks, charlatans, and intellectual shysters that populate these environs: he has sage advice for dealing with purveyors of radical skepticism and scientific relativism, as well as commonsense tips for avoiding those who pretend that history is merely a species of fiction.

For all this, however, Mr. Windschuttle is right that *The Killing of History* is not “yet another boring book about theory.” His focus throughout is firmly on the discipline of history: on what it should be and how those who deny the claims of empirical truth undermine the core of historical analysis. “For most of the last 2400 years,” Mr. Windschuttle writes in his preface, the essence of history has continued to be that it should try to tell the truth, to describe as best as possible what really happened. Over this time, of course, many historians have been exposed as mistaken, opinionated and often completely wrong, but their critics have usually felt obliged to show they were wrong about real things, that their claims about the past were different from the things that actually happened. In other words, the critics still operated on the assumption that the truth was in the
historian’s grasp.

Today, these assumptions are widely rejected, even among some people employed as historians themselves. In the 1990s, the newly dominant theorists within the humanities and social sciences assert that it is impossible to tell the truth about the past or to use history to produce knowledge in any objective sense at all. They claim that we can only see the past through the perspective of our own culture and, hence, what we see in history are our own interests and concerns reflected back at us. The central point upon which history was founded no longer holds: there is no fundamental distinction any more between history and myth.

As Mr. Windschuttle acknowledges, this attack on historical knowledge is not new; in essence, it goes back at least to Nietzsche (“no facts, only interpretations”). What is new is the prestige and currency that such ideas now enjoy. Over the last decade or two, highly contentious ideas that once subsisted at the fringe of academic speculation (where they belong and can even do some good as a kind of intellectual irritant) have been embraced by the heart of the profession. No longer is the attack on factual knowledge confined to a handful of disgruntled metaphysicians: it has become common coin among mainstream historians and their academic publishers. And if there are still plenty of historians who quietly uphold traditional standards of historical inquiry in their own work, precious few are willing forthrightly to criticize the assault mounted against their discipline. This is due partly to the vice, endemic among academics, of pusillanimity; but it is also due partly to the fact that many historians whose basic outlook is traditional have themselves begun dabbling in the stew of anti-empiricism, blithely unaware, as Windschuttle notes, that they are “embracing assumptions that have the capacity to demolish everything they stand for.” This is not hyperbole. The idea that observation and inductive reasoning provide no legitimate grounds for historical knowledge; that truth is relative; that language is a kind of “prison house” referring always to itself, not reality: Mr. Windschuttle is right that “if historians allow themselves to be prodded all the way into this theoretical abyss, they will be rendering themselves and their discipline extinct.”

As is the case in literary studies, a common feint is to say that the whole controversy is merely evidence of “generational conflict,” that objections to “new methods” are just the bleatings of old fogies resisting the “innovations” of Young Turks. As Windschuttle points out, however, most of the so-called “new ideas” were put into circulation by scholars in their forties and fifties; “the movers and shakers of this movement,” he notes, “are the old New Left crowd from the 1960s … obviously not so new these days but just as addicted to the latest fashions as they were in the days of hippy beads and flared trousers.” The difference, of course, is that in the 1960s such figures occupied the periphery of academia. Now they dominate it: “Since 1985, the dissidents have expanded their territory enormously. Although they still like to portray themselves as embattled outsiders, they are today the ones making all the running—devising new
courses, contracting the publishers, filling the new jobs, attracting the postgraduate students.” Those professors whose intellectual and moral convictions might lead them to fight against these developments are generally “too busy, too tired or too bemused” to object; their inaction has conferred unwonted legitimacy upon their opponents, allowing them to consolidate their authority and perquisites.

Mr. Windschuttle’s ambitious aim in The Killing of History is twofold: first, to describe the assault on factual truth in all its fuliginous variety; second, “to show that, despite all the present claims to the contrary, history can be studied in an objective way and that there are no philosophical obstacles to the pursuit of truth and knowledge about the human world.”

Regarding the former, Windschuttle provides an intelligent and well-informed trip through the major theories now contending for dominance in the humanities and social sciences; much of this material will be familiar to anyone who has been following recent debates about the fate of higher education. But even here Windschuttle has much to offer. For one thing, as his subtitle suggests, he shows, in more detail than has been attempted hitherto, how the attack on history has proceeded largely by the application to history of hermetic, French-inspired literary theories such as deconstruction and (via the anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss) structuralism. Along the way, he shows how the barbarous jargon and obscure writing that characterize so much contemporary academic prose is often pursued not out of any intellectual scrupulousness or profundity but as a kind of stratagem. “Obscurity,” he notes, is “a clever way to generate a following”—not least because many people mistakenly assume that obscure writing is indicative of deep thinking. Then, too, there is something self-perpetuating about an addiction to obscurity: students who have labored to master a difficult argot will naturally be reluctant to acknowledge that the jargon they have expended so much effort to learn is intellectually bankrupt. Moreover, those who are seduced by obscurity often exhibit the correlative vice of assuming that what is clear is superficial—or worse. A follower of Derrida called Mas’ds Zavarzadeh gave the show away when he dismissed a critic of the master because of his “unproblematic prose and the clarity of his presentation”—features, we read, that are “the conceptual tools of conservatism.” Horrors!

The really significant contribution that Windschuttle makes in this book, however, is his defense of objectivity and factual truth. He speaks, it should be said, primarily as a working historian, not as a philosopher. That is to say, although Windschuttle’s discussion is philosophically sophisticated (especially compared to the work of most of his opponents), his chief concern is not with the abstract possibility of objective truth, but rather with its achievement—or failure—in specific works of history. This, in fact, is the greatest strength of The Killing of History. Windschuttle makes his case concretely by using “the work of real historians to combat their theoretical opponents.”

Proceeding through a series of specific historical case studies, Windschuttle subjects the new historical theories to a kind of “road test” to see how they handle on “the rougher terrain of actual historical subject matter.” The events in question include the European discovery of America and Spanish conquest of Mexico; the British discovery and exploration of the Pacific islands; the
foundation of the European settlement in Australia; the history of mental asylums, hospitals, and penal policy in Europe; and the fall of Communism in 1989. The events that Windschuttle adduces are appropriate because they have attracted the attention of many of the trendiest and most influential representatives of the theories he wishes to criticize. His procedure is to present the account of a given historical event from the perspective of “theory,” and then to show up the deficiencies of that account using the work of more traditional historians. Given Windschuttle’s aim of recuperating historical truth, it is hardly surprising that in every case the traditionalists come out on top. What is noteworthy, however, is the care and thoughtfulness with which he proceeds. He takes great pains to present the rival accounts fully and fairly; and the aim of his rebuttals is not to make debater’s points but to articulate common-sense objections to “theory” and cultural relativism that have application well beyond the specific cases he discusses.

Consider, for example, the way that Columbus’s discovery of the New World and the Spanish conquest of Mexico have been discussed by bien pensants academics over the course of the last decade. It has not only been inveterate, politically-correct historical romancers like Kirkpatrick Sale who have taken the opportunity to portray Columbus as an evil marauder and the Indians as pacific, environmentally sensitive creatures who lived in blissful harmony with each other and the earth. In 1992, Oxford University Press published American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World by the historian David Stannard in which, as Windschuttle reports, we read that “The road to Auschwitz led straight through the heart of the Americas”—a comparison that Mr. Windschuttle rightly dismisses as “not only wildly anachronistic but conceptually odious.” Occurring at a moment when political correctness and theory-inebriation were both at high tide, the quincentenary of Columbus’s discovery of America called forth all manner of dubious pontification among literary critics, historians, anthropologists, and other academics eager to outdo each other disparaging the legacy of Europe (and, by extension, the United States) and celebrating the virtues of victimized indigenous peoples.

The eminent semiotician and literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov had already produced one of the most depressing foretastes of what was to come in The Conquest of America (1982). Todorov had a little of everything. Language-besotted academics could savor his assurance that it was “by his mastery of signs [that] Cortés ensure[d] his control over the ancient Mexican empire.” (Never mind that Spanish military technology was vastly superior to that of the Aztecs.) The politically correct were soothed by his condemnation of European imperialism and such assertions as “The sixteenth century perpetrated the greatest genocide in human history.” There was the added bonus of Todorov’s palaver about Columbus, and European culture generally, being unable to deal appropriately with “The Other”—i.e., with “the existence of a human substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself.”

As Windschuttle notes, one of the many problems for Todorov and others who champion the indigenous peoples of the Americas against their European conquerors is “the widespread practice of human sacrifice which prevailed at the time of the Spanish conquest.” The Aztecs, the
Mayans, the Incas, the Caytes, the natives of Guyana, and the Pawnees and Huron tribes of North America: all practiced human sacrifice, often on a huge scale (the Aztecs alone murdered several thousands a year), sometimes accompanied by cannibalism. The Caytes, for example, ate the crew of every wrecked Portuguese ship they found. “At one meal,” reports an anthropologist cited by Mr. Windschuttle, “they ate the first Bishop of Bahia, two Canons, the Procurator of the Royal Portuguese Treasury, two pregnant women and several children.” Todorov, Mr. Windschuttle concludes,

wants to impose a moral judgement on the Spanish conquest, and yet he also wishes to play down the issue of human sacrifice so that his readers will still see the Aztecs as victims who have the greater virtue and who deserve greater sympathy. To do this he is forced to argue that all human societies are guilty of systematic mass murder, only some are more guilty than others. But once the distinction between sacrifice/massacre societies evaporates, he is left with nothing but a common human nature to explain the murderous proclivity of the species. And the idea of a common human nature is something that his whole book was designed to deny.

The amalgam of an anti-European bias, political correctness, and a resistance to empirical evidence is a conspicuous feature of many of the writers that Mr. Windschuttle discusses in The Killing of History. In his chapter on the founding of Australia, for example, Mr. Windschuttle introduces readers to a book by Paul Carter called The Road to Botany Bay (1987). George Orwell, writing about Mahatma Gandhi, made the observation that saints ought to be considered guilty until proven innocent. Be that as it may, it is certainly a good principle to employ when dealing with books, like The Road to Botany Bay, that come with endorsements from Edward Said (“Astonishingly original methods of cultural research … a compelling work of great intellectual power”) or Susan Sontag (“A brilliant book for many appetites”). Writing about the early history of the British in Australia, Carter proposes a new sort of historical analysis, “spatial history,” to take the place of the “linear, narrative history” (which he also castigates as “imperial history”) furnished by other writers. Festooning his text with quotations from Derrida, Giles Deluze, and (not incidentally) Edward Said, among others, Carter seeks to explore how “space is transformed symbolically into place, that is, a space with a history.” Among many other things, Carter wants to recapture the experience of the British convicts who early on populated Australia and who, according to Carter, were model subversives in that they rejected Enlightenment empiricism and imperialism. His difficulty is that the world view of the convicts can only be viewed through the “distorting mirror” of those in authority because, Carter says, the narratives and journals recording firsthand the convicts’ experiences have been lost. His solution is to apply “spatial history” to the accounts of “ruling-class chroniclers” in order to “recover from the Enlightenment logic of cause and effect something of what that logic suppressed. In particular, we may be able to recover that dimension of the convict’s existence which imprisonment and transportation were specifically designed to exclude: his occupation of historical space.” There is, of course, a lot that might be said about this sort of hermeneutical legerdemain. But the fact is, Carter needn’t have been nearly so ingenious. He claims that an act of imaginative reconstruction is necessary to recover the convict’s experience. But, as Mr. Windschuttle points out,
the Australian convicts produced more documents recording, in their own words, their observations and activities, their dreams, hates and loves, than almost any other underclass in history. Moreover, there have been more history PhDs, lectureships and chairs in Australia earned from this source material than from almost any other single topic. The convicts have provided Australian academics with one of their major industries.

In other words, the “arrogance of Carter’s claim to rescue the convicts from oblivion is equalled only by his total ignorance of what Australian historians have been writing for the last forty years.”

Mr. Windschuttle performs similar services for many other academic stars, including one of the shiniest, Michel Foucault. Part of what made Foucault such an enormous academic hit was his posture of anti-bourgeois radicalism combined with his insistence that the truth is always and everywhere a coefficient of power. It is worth noting, however, that Foucault first made his reputation as an historian of such institutions as mental asylums, hospitals, and prisons. In every case, Foucault’s basic tack was to argue that Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment efforts to reform these institutions were really alibis for the extension of state power.

In his first book, *Madness and Civilization* (1961), for example, Foucault contrasts the happy time of the Middle Ages when the insane wandered freely from town to town or traveled on a literal Ship of Fools up and down the Rhine. The birth of the asylum, according to Foucault, was a dark day for the insane, for not only were they now incarcerated, but also they were denied the status of human beings. Foucault makes similar claims about hospitals and penal policy. As Mr. Windschuttle shows in devastating detail, in every case Foucault’s account is wildly inaccurate. For example, there was no Ship of Fools as Foucault describes; his dates are often wrong by a century or more; and as for the treatment of the insane, the historian Andrew Scull sets the record straight: “Where the mad proved troublesome, they could expect to be beaten or locked up; otherwise they might roam or rot. Either way, the facile contrast between psychiatric oppression and an earlier, almost anarchic toleration is surely illusory.” Mr. Windschuttle makes the more general case: “Madness became an issue of public policy with the rise of democratic, egalitarian societies, primarily because these societies accepted the madman not as the other, or as someone outside humanity, but as another human being, as an individual with the same basic status as everyone else.”

Although most of the examples that Mr. Windschuttle cites in *The Killing of History* come from the academic Left, it is worth noting that the Left has no monopoly on anti-empiricism. Consider, for example, the celebrated “end of history” thesis put forward by Francis Fukuyama in the late 1980s to explain the fall of Communism. Fukuyama’s major philosophical inspiration for his thesis about the end of history came from the German philosopher Georg Hegel. But Mr. Windschuttle shows how “end of …” theories (art, philosophy, history, whatever) have been catnip to anti-empirical thinkers from Communists like Alexandre Kojève to Arnold Ghelen, a social psychologist for the Third Reich who, writing about art in 1961, assured his readers that “the process of development
has been completed, and what comes now is already in existence: the confused syncretism of all styles and possibilities—posthistory.” Mr. Windschuttle demolishes the “end of history” thesis, noting that

One of the important consequences of an empirical approach … is that history cannot be determined. The historical process is not moving inexorably in one direction or towards any goal or end; it has no hidden pattern or itinerary waiting to be discovered. The job of the historian is not to search for some theory that will reveal all, nor some teleology that will explain the purpose of things. Rather, it is to reconstruct the events of the past in their own terms.

The detail and historical specificity that Mr. Windschuttle brings to his analysis make his criticisms especially devastating. But in the end his task is not to discredit particular historians or theorists, but to rehabilitate a view of history that links it firmly to the possession of factual knowledge. As Mr. Windschuttle puts it, “The study of history is essentially a search for the truth.” This is not to say that history cannot exhibit literary distinction, as works by (for example) Gibbon, Macaulay, and Tocqueville surely do. But it is to say that history is not the same as literature and that “those who insist that all historic evidence is inherently subjective are wrong.” Mr. Windschuttle is quick to acknowledge that historians, like the rest of us, start from a particular point of view and bring with them their own biases and preconceptions. But so what? The fact that “one of the most common experiences of historians is that the evidence they find forces them, often reluctantly, to change the position they originally intended to take” shows that historians need not be imprisoned by subjectivity. And this brings him to the important insight that those who deny the claims of empirical truth in the name of cultural relativism and of overcoming “Eurocentricism” merely replace one European perspective—traditional empirical historiography—with another: cultural relativism. “Those who accept cultural relativism,” Mr. Windschuttle points out, “argue that Western ways of knowing do not deserve any privileged status.” But at a time when what Mr. Windschuttle calls “the return of tribalism” threatens many parts of the world with a descent into barbarism, to embrace cultural relativism is also to embrace the “charnel house politics” that have brought such misery and destruction to Sri Lanka, the Sudan, Central Africa, the Balkans, and elsewhere. This indeed is where the arcane theories of Derrida, Foucault, and their epigoni collide with the real world. They abandon the constraints of empirical truth in the name of liberation. But what they wind up with is not freedom but a new and more terrible servitude.

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