

Historical Revisionism as Trauma Revisited: And, Why Historical Revisionism Is Necessary Anyway

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Abstract:

Historical revisionism is a feature of much history writing, because much history writing is done by members of dominant social groups or by historians unaware of, or consciously working to uphold, dominant historiographical (or social, cultural, religious, or political) paradigms. “Historical revisionism,” in this usage, means the occlusion of parts of the past, often traumas by which dominant historiographical paradigms are constructed and maintained. But this first act of historical revisionism necessitates a corrective, a second historical revisionism that overcomes the first, falsifying revision of historical truth. This second act of historical revisionism often entails revisiting occluded traumas. However, this is necessary, because history is a moral act, and historians are, ideally, moral actors.

Keywords: historical revisionism; historical trauma; moral philosophy of history

Introduction

The first act of much historiography is the trauma of erasure. Historians past and present who work within dominant paradigms tend to erase the histories, and often the memories, of peoples whom central powerholders have conquered or subjugated. Historians also often erase the violence which brings central authorities to power. Historians working outside the bounds of, or against, dominant-paradigm historiography must therefore make *their* first act of historiography reading archives against the grain (Spivak 1988, Trouillot 1995). Dominant-paradigm historiography in the nation-state era involves not only erasing, but also the additional trauma of totalizing that erasure. Nation-states are built upon shared historiographical framings. Peoples who are erased from nation-state histories are not just historiographically de-presented. They are also politically, culturally, ethnically, and socially de-presented. The trauma of their historiographical erasure is as totalized as are the nation-states which come into being through that erasure.

In the nation-state era, then, reading against the grain becomes much more difficult to do. Dissident historians who are alert to the trauma hidden beneath national histories must work against both historiography and entire epistemes. Sometimes, therefore, those who read archives against the nation-state grain write against historiographical erasures by attempting to read the erased back into

the historiography of the nation-state. This kind of revisionism revisits the original trauma without finally healing it. In recent years, for example, scholars with the 1619 Project have offered sharp critiques of mainstream national American historiography, but as an alternative to what might be called the 1620 Project, or the mythos of a white American founding. The 1619 Project, and other interventions into nation-state triumphalist history-writing, may thus replicate the trauma of nation-state historiography even while working against a particular iteration of it.

In this essay, I argue for an historical revisionism that takes into account, while fundamentally aiming to overcome, the trauma of history-writing done in the service of centralized power. Historical trauma is not best left undisturbed because history writing is not an act of power, but an act of moral agency, a core act of humanity by which the past, and the dignity of those who suffered there, can be at least partly restored.

What Is Historical Trauma?

The trauma of history can take at least two forms. First, there is the trauma of events in the past, the trauma that inheres in human life and which carries forward into futures after those events are declared matters of history, over. Second, there is the trauma of historiography, of erasure from written records of, and shared discourse about, the past, and of the enforcement of information regimes in which disputed and erased histories and events are elided. Oftentimes the trauma of historiography compounds the trauma of history, such that denial of past trauma exacerbates the experience of that trauma in the present.

The voices and traumas erased in the service of dominant-paradigm history never really go away, of course. Gayatri Spivak has asked whether the subaltern, who might be described as the historiographically and politically de-presenced, can speak, that is, whether those whom history writers and political powerbrokers have erased from past and present significance may find a voice with which to articulate an existence unacknowledged in dominant social milieux (Spivak 2010). This rhetorical question is itself a re-presencing of the subaltern, however, and so even the lacunae in historical records remind us that what is missing are not words in texts but human voices, often voices speaking of human pain. As with much of Spivak's work, Michel-Rolph Trouillot has taken up this question archivally, seeking a reading of archives as not so much records of past events as already curated distortions of events, ink-and-paper renderings of the world as it appeared to those who were already in positions of power (Trouillot 1995). These inquiries of how history is written and who and what gets left out in the writing find ready affinities in traumas of the past and present (Duran et al. 2023).

However, it is important to remember that many of the historically de-presenced do not have strong written histories with which to displace dominant historiographical paradigms. Enari Tsuneo's historiographic photography brings into the present the faces of the forgotten, people who had been left behind as young children on the Asian continent when the Japanese Empire collapsed in 1945 (Enari 2021). Yang Haiying works in a similar vein but without the geographical dislocation of Asian

continent and Japanese archipelago. Yang uses extensive archival and oral history work to piece together the crimes that the People's Republic of China carried out against Mongolians during the throes of the Cultural Revolution (Yang 2014). Wang Youqin brings bringing forth painful personal memories of Cultural Revolution-era China while contextualizing those recollections within the conflicting historiographies about that time and place (Wang 2023). It is not just that centralized powers have caused trauma and then erased those traumas in later historiographies. It is also that the traumas and traumatized are themselves in search of a first, strong narrative which can then work into, correct, and in some cases overcome the historiographical erasure on which dominant-paradigm historians relied and continue to rely.

There are also those whose histories are overlain by dominant histories, sub-histories, which are often main histories, which interrogate and challenge historiographical paradigms, acting not as complement to those paradigms but as beliers of it. Nakamura Eri reminds us of the memories of the overlain, the persistence in time and society of the people who bear the traumas of the past. This division between what occurred and what continues to unfold, a division that runs through the memories of some of the living and acts also as a kind of partition of the present from the past while re-presenting the past in the present as trauma, is a human one, Nakamura's work reminds us (Nakamura 2018). Likewise, Timothy E. Nelson traces the history, almost entirely forgotten and erased, of a site of Black belonging in the midst of the de-privileging of Black Americans in wider American life (Nelson 2023). Imani Perry, for her part, takes a broader, regional view of trauma and remembering. Perry notes how the gaps in memory between the traumatized and their progeny, on the one hand, and the dominant social class then and now, on the other, are reproduced in American culture and also reproduce that culture in turn. Perry's views of the American South as both unique to, and representative of, America, demonstrates how trauma is encapsulated as history and also covered up by that history at the same time (Perry 2022).

Nahum Dimitri Chandler takes an even broader, even more philosophical view, understanding the work of W.E.B. Du Bois as a meditation on history and time, and re-interpreting Du Bois' ideas within the wider historical scope gained in the intervening century and more since the time of Du Bois' first writings. Chandler's concept of "renarrativization" is germane to what I mean by "historical revisionism" in this essay. Chandler sees Du Bois as having invested his famous dictum on the "global 'problem of the color line'" with two "turns" of discourse (Chandler 2022, 214). "*In the first turn of this discourse*," Chandler writes,

[the "problem of the color line"] is simply a certain fiction that makes possible a narrative. This narrative, both geographic and temporal, in the instance, is a performative gesture. It introduces an object for inquiry, a dimension of historicity, by a progressive act of naming the eventualities of the past according to a specific order of attention. This whole operation can thus be understood as a theoretical practice of *renarrativization*. What has been ostensibly given as the terms of historiographical understanding is remarked in this reelaboration. This yields a specific order of thematization, which amounts to hyperthematization, of a dimension of historicity, which may well have remained

sedimented or suppressed according to the previously given orders of thought and understanding and which would have thus been obscure or unsusceptible to a critical reflection. It can thus be understood, in *the second turn* of this discourse, that the object in question is not a simply given thing—a punctual point, perhaps—but an objectivity adduced by way of a certain theoretical attention. Therein this attention can remark and thus render into phenomenal relief a historical organization of relation according to which the order of thing can be named. And the theoretical discourse is itself part of that relation. [...] Du Bois’s discourse is not oriented toward a thing as a finality—that is the hypostasization of an absolute. Rather, his practice as thought is solicited by the difficulty of naming for itself an always temporal organization of relation that would predetermine and even foreclose its announcement of historical possibility (Chandler 2022, 214; emphases in original).

The historian and his or her work are always carried out within history, but some work carries the power to transform historical understanding going forward and backward in time. Chandler’s intervention into Du Bois’ thinking and historical explication transfers to historical revisionism as I mean it here. The past is not something separate from us in the present. It is a trauma we bear, some much more than others, and we must plunge back into it, recovering it from (intentional) oblivion, as a moral act, a recovery of our humanity and of a truer, more complete historical narrative simultaneously.

The recovery I mean here is of the highest importance, not least because the task is daunting and will require us to rethink, even abandon, much of what we think we know about the past. In the context of the United States, for example, Pekka Hämäläinen returns us to a standpoint that the entirety of dominant American historical paradigms has tried to dispense with, namely that of the Native American. Reading Hämäläinen’s books on Native American history brings one in contact with a grounded current, which jolts one back to a place in time and a place in history radically uncontingent on European invaders and their prerogatives, historiographical and otherwise (Hämäläinen 2008; Hämäläinen 2019; Hämäläinen 2022). *A fortiori* for the work of Ned Blackhawk, who challenges readers to follow along in the “unmaking of U.S. history” by placing Native Americans at the center of the history of North America (Blackhawk 2023). But such “unmakings” are hardly limited to North America. Tim Harper’s book *Underground Asia*, for example, does the same kind of work on a global scale, showing how revolutionaries from various places in Asia worked with and against one another, and with and against the occupying European, American, and trans-Asian powers, to effect a future autonomy which remains largely unacknowledged in Western writing about Asia (Harper 2021).

Historical trauma, as the above-cited works make clearer, is therefore both a burden from the past and the burden of the past, and is also the burden of living in a present that is both inseparable from that past, and separated from it, simultaneously.

What Is Historical Revisionism?

The fact of conflicting histories, and the reality of trauma of historical erasure and of the pasts and presents of lived traumas logically prior to history-writing, call forth a response: historical revisionism. But here an important distinction must be made. “Historical revisionism” is often used

to mean the erasure of events from historiography, the re-writing of history books for the purpose, most often, of hiding trauma from public view in the present. The most glaring examples of historical revisionism of this kind are books that minimize or even deny atrocities committed by the National Socialists in Europe in the middle of the twentieth century. This kind of historical revisionism is a fresh trauma visited upon those who survived such assaults, upon the families and acquaintances of the victims, and also upon the consciences of those in the present who struggle to understand the historical, theological, and political consequences of past atrocities. Such historical revisionism does no historical work in the moral sense. It is, conversely, deeply immoral, retraumatizing cruelly, simply for the sake of the trauma, thereby deepening, not lessening, historiographical darkness. This kind of historical revisionism is not what I advocate.

What I mean by “historical revisionism” here is a rewriting of history to bring into historiographical focus, either better or perhaps for the first time, past traumas that have been insufficiently examined in historical records and writing. The historical revisionism I mean is precisely the opposite of the historical revisionism that would downplay or deny events of the past. Dominant historiographical paradigms tend to erase and otherwise devalue women, for instance, as the works of Donna Haraway show, but there are many other ways in which dominant historiographical paradigms, especially ones produced in strongly ideological milieus (communist, socialist, liberal, and so forth), overshadow complicating histories as well (Haraway 1991). Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, for example, have produced works of scholarship that challenge prevailing historiographies in the United States by showing the extent to which the American government and American institutions, such as academia, were infiltrated by Communist and Soviet sympathizers and agents during the middle of the twentieth century (Haynes and Klehr 1999). Huanani-Kay Trask, who faced discrimination for her views and, perhaps, because of her identity, devoted her career to writing into dominant American historiography the stories of the colonized peoples and land of Hawai’i and Polynesia, and not only writing into American historiography but against it, through it, and around it, seeking to refashion, radically, the way in which the stories of Hawai’i were taught and told in the present (Trask 1993).

A similar initiative is underway at the hands of Timothy Brook, Michael van Walt van Praag, and Miek Boltjes, who have found a historiographical voice for Tibet separate from, and yet in interplay with, the dynastic histories often connected in history writing with the current regime in Beijing. Like Hawai’i to Washington, Tibet to Beijing is a separate entity, a history unto itself, but it is also, as Brook, van Walt van Praag, and Boltjes explain, interlaced with Han peoples as well as with Mongolians, Indians, and other Asian neighbors (as well as, via the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, the cosmos as a whole) (Brook, van Walt van Praag, and Boltjes 2018; see also van Walt van Praag and Boltjes 2020). The work of Evelyn Rawski and other so-called New Qing historians does similar work for Manchuria and Manchus (Rawski 1996).

As a site of centuries of colonial exploitation, Asia is a particularly rich field for confronting and overcoming historical trauma, writing historical wrongs in order to right those wrongs, at least historiographically. On that score, Park Yuha’s scholarship on the relationship between people from

the Japanese archipelago and the Korean peninsula during the Greater East Asia War is among the most exciting and promising works of historical revisionism in Asian historiography today. Park, a literature professor, insists on going beyond the usual archival record to include reminiscences of personal interactions between Koreans and Japanese, finding tremendous complexity and human emotion in the often cut-and-dry military and social histories about East Asia in the middle of the twentieth century (Park 2022). Hirai Kazuko's work on postwar women in Japan is similar to Park's, in that it follows intimacy, both bodily and emotional, between Japanese women and the American occupiers (Hirai 2023). Nakamura Eri, mentioned above, adopts similar positions in examining women in Manchuria, a site of fraught negotiations of social position and political power among Japanese, Korean, Manchurian, and other women during the war years.

The history of postwar Japan, where Americans directly controlled, or attempted to control, an entire linguistic sphere in Asia, is currently being rewritten to take into account local agency during a time of Western domination. Takahashi Shirō has shown how American Occupation authorities rewrote much of the Greater East Asia War and subsequent Occupation in a way preferential to Washington and prejudicial to Tokyo (Takahashi 2019). Nishio Kanji's work on *funsho*, or "burned books," sheds further light on the Occupation, revealing Washington's programmatic erasure of the Japanese past and even of part of the Japanese identity (Nishio 2008). Etō Jun, by a similar token, shows how Occupation-era censorship distorted understandings of history and also of the present by means of what Etō called a "closed-off discursive space" (Etō 1994). Itō Shichiji, the author of several books "burned," that is, banned by the Occupation in the postwar, brings into stark relief the contrast between the prewar and postwar discursive spaces about which Etō theorized (Itō 2023). And Annō Yutaka has gone deeper into the history of the Greater East Asia War to reveal the goal of colonial liberation that lay at the heart of Japan's involvement in that conflict (Annō 2017).

From inside these Asian re-examinings have come more, and even more extensive, revisitations of the too-pat past. Onishi Yūichirō brings to light the anti-racist nature of some trans-Pacific interactions, especially between Japan and the United States, while Takizawa Ichirō reminds us that the Soviet Union was a powerful, if often unacknowledged, player in Japanese political and military affairs before, during, and after the Greater East Asia War (Onishi 2013; Takizawa 1993). Rhee Younghoon views Japanese annexation of the Korean peninsula and the interweaving of Japanese and Korean culture, education, politics, agriculture, and industry, as matters of record, and laments the interpolating use of Korean history as political tool by postwar forces seeking to sanitize the past by erasing, or exaggerating, Japan's role in it (Rhee 2019; Rhee 2024). Inoue Yoshikazu looks back at Japan's own wartime trauma and its effects on the present, asking how future Japanese should face the trauma of a future war, whenever and wherever it might happen (Inoue 2019). In American historiography, Charles Beard took a critical view of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration's entry into the Second World War. Beard's skepticism came with a personal price, as his refusal to adopt pat, patriotic narratives led to his virtual exile from American academia as simplistic versions of World War II history became dominant in the United States (Beard 1948).

Challenges to the United States' dominant historiographies are often traumatic for those who write those challenges as well as for those who read them. The aforementioned W.E.B Du Bois, for example, wrote powerful interrogations of such mainstays of American historiographical hagiography as Reconstruction, finding that—by a great irony—the role of Black Americans in that series of events had been minimized in white-centric histories. Benjamin Madley presents, in many ways, an even sharper challenge to American historiography than does Du Bois, as Madley charges some Americans with having committed a “genocide” in California (Madley 2017; see also Dunbar-Ortiz 2016). If charges of genocide hold, then it would seem that most, if not all, of the triumphalist mode of American historiography would fall. At the very least, Madley's work has the effect of de-exceptionalizing America in American historiography, something certain to cause trauma among those today who accept American exceptionalism as fact. Ilan Pappé, for his part, subjects his native Israel to intense historiographical scrutiny, finding that the project of Zionism, by which the current nation-state of Israel was constructed, works to erase the histories of those already in Palestine, while also setting up dangerously distorting histories of Israel itself (Pappé 2014).

Why endure trauma twice by revising history?

The revision of history to bring to the historiographical surface events that have been overwritten by historians working for and within a dominant group is a task fraught with danger. Challenging entrenched political and social forces invites counter-resistance, to include violence. Even in an irenic research environment, though, bringing past trauma into the circle of more widely shared memory can mean retraumatizing those who already bear historical wounds. So, then, why do it?

The answer lies in the ideal of history-writing. The writing of history should be a moral act. To tell a story should be to tell the truth. Historians have a particular remit and mission in this regard, as their work should be responsible, that is, should be able to stand up to scrutiny by being rooted in and reflective of the full range of known information about the past. No historian is omniscient, of course, but all historians must tell the full truth as best they know it. What has been hidden, whether through ignorance, cowardice, or malice, must be brought back into the flow of knowledge in the present. What has been exaggerated must be re-evaluated. What has been minimized must be given room to grow, in the writing of historiography, to its full proportions, both as historical fact and as accumulated social force.

This is not to say that historical revisionism must be a sub-set of moral philosophy. The revisiting of the past can, and should, be empirical. Empiricist revisionism can even be a method in its own right, with new moral force flowing from the writing of history as grounded in the complex truth (Chen 2010; Mizoguchi 2016). To tell the truth is itself a moral act, and works of historical revisionism are, on that definition, works of moral uplift (Mishra 2012). The texts of such works speak for themselves, in moral parallel to the facts presented in those texts (Polanyi 1944; Morton 2017). But to confront the past is often to confront one's own limitations as a human being, one's own prejudices, one's own gaps in knowledge. It is also, possibly, to be called to explain to others why

one does not hew to the narrative that a particular group holds to be true (Finkelstein 2005; Horne 2004; Horne 2018; Horne 2019).

In any event, the work of re-traumatizing those who carry the traumas of the past is imperative because history-writing is the moral appraisal of human conduct. To speak the truth about the present, we must speak the truth, however painful, about the past. Once thus morally aligned, historiography becomes a collective act of moral striving, an act of solidarity across the very lines that those who have written dominant-paradigm historiographies have created and enforced. Historical revisionism is trauma re-visited, but that revisitation is a matter of great urgency.

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