H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald R. Kelley. *Frontiers of History: Historical Inquiry in the Twentieth Century.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. xii + 298 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-12062-2.

Reviewed by Bertram Troeger (University of Jena, Germany)

Published on H-Ideas (July, 2007)

Combating Clio??s Amnesia

With the publication of *Frontiers of History*, Donald R. Kelley, Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University, has completed his three-volume survey of the history of Western historiography. In the other two works that belong to this tremendous project, *Faces of History* (1998) and *Fortunes of History* (2003), the author gives an account of the writing of history from antiquity to the early twentieth century.[1] The last volume presents his readers not only with a description of the historiographical tendencies, ideas, methods, and debates that marked the twentieth century, but also with original comments on the most recent trends in historical studies.

Kelley's main focus is on the writings of professional historians in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, but he occasionally includes other nationalities as well. His definition of the historical field that underlies this work is similarly wide. Given the late twentieth-century discussions on the linguistic turn and the textuality of history, it is maybe not surprising that he takes in various scholars of literature studies; however, Kelley also includes "prophets of decline" (p. 82) like Oswald Spengler, and other writers who are generally located in the field of philosophy of history.

The plot of Kelley's work is as complex as its *dramatis personae* are numerous, and any short summary of this multifaceted narrative can only give a limited account of its various topics. The "anxieties of modernism" (p. 7) that characterized the years before the Great War form the subject of the author's first foray through the thicket of twentieth-century historiography. As far as the writing of history is concerned, these anxieties were felt particularly in Germany, whereas British historians, despite some adjustments like T. F. Tout's turn towards administrative history, self-confidently adhered to their Victorian historiographical legacy. Kelley's second chapter can serve as an illustration of the wide range of his work. On the one hand, he describes the effects of the Great War on history, and summarizes the battles historians fought over the value of their respective national traditions. On the other hand, he also provides an insight into the transformations of ancient history and the rise of prehistory, caused in particular by new archaeological discoveries.

What is perhaps surprising for the reader of the next three chapters is the fact that the direct effects of the two World Wars on the way in which history was written were rather limited. Maybe the most immediate impact of the World Wars on historiography was the emigration of scholars to America, which strengthened the European influence on U.S. history in the face of occasional "American Exceptionalism" (p. 117). As far as greater reorientations and the establishment of new paradigms are concerned, however, one can gather from Kelley's work that peaceful times seem to have been more fruitful. This applies even to Germany, whose historians remained largely faithful to their historiographical traditions after the first World War as much as after the second. New views and approaches like those of Ernst Kantorowicz and Eckhart Kehr formed an exception after 1918, and the influence of scholars like Friedrich Meinecke and Gerhard Ritter provided for continuity after 1945. It took another twenty years until a "New German Paradigm" (p. 170) firmly established itself, a process that was linked to the names of Werner Conze, Jürgen Kocka, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler.

In Britain it was "mostly business as usual after the trauma of the Great War" (p. 100), but the voices of Marxists and social reformers started to make themselves distinctly heard and heavily source-based approaches

like that of Lewis Namier were soon to challenge the Whig narrative. All in all, British historiography became increasingly characterized by conflicts between proponents of different ideologies and methodologies. Namier was opposed in particular by A. J. P. Taylor, and the polarisation reached a climax after the Second World War when controversies over ideology and revisionist approaches led to historical "Civil Wars in England" (p. 176), with Christopher Haigh, Geoffrey Elton, Christopher Hill, and Lawrence Stone forming the main combatants.

The impression of French historiography which can be gathered from Kelley's pages is more peaceful, which is of course due to the long-term hegemony of the Annales school: as Kelley shows, French historians were among the first to shift the historical focus to economic and social history, and when Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch joined forces in 1929, they started to establish a paradigm whose strong influence was felt "for the rest of the century" (p. 112). According to Kelley, one of the outstanding qualities of the Annales school was its ability to face the challenge of the social sciences without "undermining the autonomy and authority of history" (p. 113). Its other strength lay in its integrative breadth, which permitted the keeping of economic history, the study of mentalities, and Fernand Braudel's concepts of *histoire totale* and *longue durée* under the same roof.

Dealing with these (and many more) topics, Kelley does his best to guide the reader through a jungle of celebrated figures, historical methods, and ideas. Nevertheless the reader is at times in danger of getting lost, left with the feeling that he has to be another Donald Kelley in the field in order to be able to follow and fully enjoy the author's tightly-woven text. Sheer numbers can illustrate the dilemma: whithin twenty pages, the reader is introduced, on average, to 80 people, and reads about 140 others who have already been mentioned earlier in the book. Certainly this complexity is in the nature of this work, and complaining about it would be like criticizing a bird for having wings. But it is obvious that, despite Kelley's excellent prose, the book reaches the limits of what can be done in this format.

While some may find Kelley's work a challenging read, experts on some of his various themes might feel inspired to correct him on minor issues. No matter how much Kelley has tried to widen his focus, it would surely not be too difficult to name influential historians of the period who Kelley does not mention, or to point out relevant issues which he has ignored. For example, when discussing German debates on historicism, should he not have mentioned Otto Gerhard Oexle's comments on the matter? [2] Others may wonder whether it would not have been worth the effort to make a few more inroads into East German historiography. But one feels that such pettifogging criticism is not really to the point, since the only way to avoid it would have been not to write this erudite work.

The author starts his book with a quotation from Jorge Luis Borges, which describes how someone "sets out to draw the world" in all its complexity and finally discovers "that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his face" (p. vi). Indeed Kelley's book becomes increasingly personal as his narrative approaches the present, and considering that the author has been an active scholar during half the time which he covers in this volume, this is only too understandable. For the most part of his work Kelley prefers a careful and largely neutral tone, but in its last third he starts making his own opinion distinctly heard, and his sixth (and last) chapter ("Circumspect and Prospect") is even introduced with a biographical account of his intellectual development.

He goes on to comment on the Linguistic Turn, and claims that the influence of literary theory on historiography to a great degree amounted to an "effort to reduce history to its narrative incarnations" (p. 216). Dealing with Hayden White's influential contribution to the matter, he argues that any interpretation of the works of historians like Michelet or Ranke has to take into account their "heuristic practice", something which Hayden White's "neo-scholastic scheme" (p. 216) fails to do. But Kelley's most important leitmotif, running through the pages of the whole work and becoming particularly visible towards its end, is his contention that historiography tends to be forgetful of previous methods, approaches, and ideas: "The wheel must always be reinvented, the fire restarted, the book rewritten; (...) novelties are announced so frequently that one is tempted to take innovationism ? " the 'fetish of the new' as a permanent condition of the life of professional historians." (p. 189) In other words, historians prefer getting excited at supposedly new approaches rather than looking back and discovering that they are following trodden paths.

The polemical reaction to the fascinating irony of ascribing amnesia to the historian would be to ask Kelley how he managed to fill three volumes on historical ideas from antiquity to the present when there was really nothing new taking place. But Kelley does not deny that historiography underwent intellectual transforma-

tions, paradigmatic changes, and reorientations. What he tries to show is that all these new ideas were rooted in a tradition, something which many self-declared innovators failed to acknowledge. This "curious lack of historical sense" (p. 24) can be found, for instance, with the early twentieth-century French "old guard" (Charles Seignobos and C. V. Langlois), with Eileen Power, who was not conscious of the Victorian roots of her attempt to introduce her readers "to the invisible persons of past times" (p. 104), or with the American "New History" as proclaimed by James Harvey Robinson in 1912.

In some sense, Kelley's argument is an advertisement for his own work, which provides the reader with an excellent survey of the very traditions that, as Kelley maintains, the historian should not ignore. In addition, he has made excellent argumentative preparations for his point: throughout his three volumes, he styled Thukydides and Herodotus as complementary personifications of ways of writing history; he thus established reference points to which anything that followed could be related. Therefore he can present the German *Methodenstreit* as "the reverse of the ancient contrast between the old cultural history of Herodotus and the new political history of Thucydides" (p. 29); C.V. Wedgwood "was content to pursue the classical ? " vulgar Herodotean or vulgar Rankean ? " line of historiographical inquiry" (p. 87); and Marc Bloch remained faithful to the "Herodotean quest" (p. 138). But when he attacks the rhetoric of novelty that comes with the concept of postmodernity and the idea of an end to history, one understands that there is more to his point than a strategy for keeping his three volumes together. For Kelley postmodernism is "a product of the excesses of modernism" (p. 232), and " 'posthistory' (...) seems little more than a topos fashioned to evoke the special quality of the present age and perhaps the irrelevance of old historical perspectives and the old historicism" (p. 234). One feels that his descriptions of these concepts are accurate ? " even though doubts remain whether they are exhaustive. This review could have ended here if it was not for some formal issues. It would maybe have been possible to ignore the occasional misspellings in Kelley's text and bagatelles like his version of Ranke's "unmittelbar zum [sic] Gott." (p. 218). But with regard to the German titles in his notes, the number of mistakes is simply too high. I also wonder whether the reader could not have been spared the déjà vu of having to read a whole paragraph of twenty lines twice. (pp. 194 and 234f) I am surprised that this book has not been produced with more care, especially considering the fact that Kelley presents it as a synthesis of his academic life and career. Since nobody interested in the history of historiography can afford to ignore this truly excellent work, I am sure that it will soon be reedited; this will be a chance to remove these formal dissonances.

Notes

[1]. *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). See also the reviews of these works for H-Ideas: Wayne M. Bledsoe. "Review of Donald R. Kelley, *Faces of History: Historical Inquiry from Herodotus to Herder*," H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews, September, 1999. URL: `http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=12632937950790` ; and Eric Carlsson. "Review of Donald R. Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga*," H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews, URL: `http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=99061155224247.`

[2]. See for example Otto Gerhard Oexle. "Die Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus: Bemerkungen zum Standort der Geschichtsforschung," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 238, 1984, pp. 17? "55.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas

Citation: Bertram Troeger. Review of Kelley, Donald R., *Frontiers of History: Historical Inquiry in the Twentieth Century*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13427

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.