

## **Keith Jenkins and the heroic age of British postmodern theory**

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### **Draft Version**

**Published in *Rethinking History*, 17 (2), 2013, 172-191**

### **Abstract**

This piece offers a critical appraisal of Keith Jenkins' work over the last two decades, through the prism of my own personal engagement with his writing. It assesses how *Rethinking History* and his other works of the 1990s helped precipitate wide-ranging and tempestuous debates about the nature of historical knowledge which were unprecedented in the modern discipline of history in Britain (and beyond). It then traces how these debates developed into the 2000s, as Jenkins' own position hardened and the discipline absorbed the 'postmodern' challenge through partial incorporation, as evidenced *inter alia* by the emergence of new forms of theoretically-inflected cultural history. The impact of Jenkins' work on my own writing and teaching is discussed in an attempt to illuminate the broader collective experience of (parts of) a particular scholarly generation for which these titanic debates were a formative experience.

### **Keywords**

Keith Jenkins; postmodernism; cultural history; theory; generation; collective memory

The paperback copy of *Re-thinking History* (Jenkins 1991) which I bought in late 1992 still sits on a shelf close by the desk in my departmental office. Creased, torn and dog-eared from multiple re-readings, copiously annotated, and faded on the spine by the sun, it inspires Proustian reveries about now faraway places, people and circumstances. Although the broad cultural impact of particular texts is obviously difficult to assess, *Re-thinking History* was a key precipitant of the 1990s debates about historical theory and the claims of postmodernism that reshaped the intellectual agenda of the discipline in Britain (and beyond). I can assert with greater confidence that it was an important influence on my own cultural and theoretical turn. It was, moreover, part of my professional life for almost ten years as a core text for teaching historical theory to undergraduate students (whose responses in turn informed my ongoing engagement with its core arguments).

This piece offers some personal reflections on my encounters with Jenkins and his work over the two decades since that seminal publication which will, I hope, also pass muster as a critical appraisal of his intellectual contribution. There is obviously a risk that this might lapse into self-indulgent autobiography, and the sin will probably only be compounded when I suggest that the story also illuminates some larger truths about the recent development of the discipline *per se*. Yet there may be something of wider interest in the reminiscences of someone from my own particular professional generation – that which emerged from graduate school in Britain and secured first jobs in the earlier part of the 1990s. Even though the theoretical orientations of individuals within this cohort naturally varied enormously, the passionate theoretical debates of that decade nonetheless constituted – intellectually and professionally - a formative collective experience.

Nothing quite like *Re-thinking History* had ever been published before. Jenkins opened the book with a lament about the paucity of the literature on historical theory and, by extension, the ‘theoretically backward’ state of the discipline of history in comparison to its neighbours (Jenkins 1991, 1). Re-read now, this claim sounds a little curious, given the massive accumulation of writing on theory in both abstruse and popular registers over the last twenty years, and the discipline’s enormously heightened theoretical self-consciousness. While it was then perfectly possible – indeed, the norm – to obtain a degree in history in the UK without ever explicitly broaching epistemological issues, today even A-Level students commonly debate the chimerical nature of objectivity and the politics of historiography in sophisticated and distinctly ‘postmodern’ ways (Laffin 2010). Of course, there are grounds to question the real depth or extent of any putative transformation: Jenkins himself has insisted somewhat ruefully that the project of ‘modernist’ academic history which was his chief target ‘remains in business’, merely ‘limping somewhat’ (Jenkins 2002, 7). Yet underplaying the extent to which an awful lot has changed in terms of engagement with theory diminishes the significance of Jenkins’ achievement with his first book. The publication of any sort of history and theory book was something of an unusual event at the beginning of the 1990s. The appearance of one which not only took ‘postmodernism’ seriously but ran a brisk and wholehearted polemic on its behalf was remarkable. (Compare, for example, the single mention of the term in the 1991 edition of John Tosh’s primer, then generally regarded as being pretty cutting edge (Tosh 1991, 178).) That this argument was expounded in a succinct and accessible manner, making the text potentially useful for teaching undergraduates, rendered it a breathtaking novelty.

The core ideas of *Re-thinking History* were, of course, drawn from the ‘postmodern’ and poststructuralist philosophers and literary theorists with whom Jenkins had been engaging

through the 1980s, as the cultural and linguistic turns took hold in academia. But he distilled these into an incisive and limpid account that specifically laid out the ‘postmodern’ challenge to conventional historical practice and explored its significance and implications. With deft and economical strokes he presented a vision of history as a theory-laden discourse ‘about, but categorically different from, the past’ (Jenkins 1991, 6) and itemised its epistemological frailties. He discussed the many different forces shaping historical texts, ranging from the ideological requirements of particular social formations, through the investments and preconceptions of individual historians, to the dictates of a publisher’s house style. He provided fresh answers to familiar primer questions about truth and objectivity, sources and evidence, and facts and interpretation. Finally, he spelled out the emancipatory possibilities – both political and intellectual – of his ‘positive reflexive scepticism’ (Jenkins 1991, 57). ‘Between the Scylla and Charybdis of, on the one hand, authorised history and, on the other, post-modern pastlessness, a space exists for the desirable outcome of as many people(s) as possible to make their own histories such that they can have real effects (a real say) in the world’ (Jenkins 1991, 67). The precision and crispness of Jenkins’ prose was formidable, and the book was littered with quotable phrases. For Jenkins, history was ‘a contested discourse, an embattled terrain wherein people(s), classes and groups autobiographically construct interpretations of the past literally to please themselves’ (Jenkins 1991, 19). This short work, brimming with ideas, promised to liberate readers from stifling orthodoxies and to redimension their understanding of the nature and purpose of historical inquiry.

It is not inconceivable that with this enthusiastic characterisation I am generalising illicitly from my own experience, for the book’s contents were emphatically a revelation to me. I had never been exposed to ‘postmodern’ theory during my undergraduate and postgraduate study of international history – indeed, while my training was both generous and rigorous

it embodied precisely the kind of robustly 'empiricist' disdain for theorising which Jenkins was seeking to undermine. A diffuse sense of dissatisfaction with this state of affairs – of a disconnect between my work and my temperamental convictions – had been building for some time, and it was sharpened by my translation to a first lecturing job in the sleepy West Wales remoteness of Lampeter. Here I became part of an interdisciplinary circle of young lecturers and PhD students, animated by enthusiasm for diverse critical theoretical ideas, and it was through this intellectual and social support network that I was first introduced to *Rethinking History*. It took a little while to get to grips with its unfamiliar terminology and conceptual infrastructure, and I was initially slightly sceptical about its broad intellectual and political thrust. Yet ultimately the vision Jenkins offered seemed to make fuller sense of the whole business of academic history than I had ever grasped before, rendering the activity much more significant and meaningful. Moreover, the book served as a point of access to the wider universe of 'postmodern' theoretical work on which it drew, and with which I now began to engage. (In this respect, incidentally, the common criticism that Jenkins is a vulgarising simplifier has always struck me as gloriously missing the point, since he always intended his key works to serve as gateways of this kind.) So Jenkins' insights into the cultural politics of history proved quite transformative, opening the way to a fairly thoroughgoing intellectual reorientation.

The ensuing process of retooling proved somewhat protracted. Engaging with the soon proliferating literature on historical theory opened up entire new avenues of intellectual stimulation and lent a new texture to my professional life, but given my starting point it was initially hard-going. Moreover, the question of how to put 'postmodern' insights to use within substantive historical work in the sub-field in which I was trained proved somewhat intractable. This was, of course, a much discussed issue at the time: 'postmodernism' seemed

to offer a powerful new critique, but did it simply damn the discipline into a dead end? With hindsight, it is perhaps hard not to think that an excessive amount of energy was expended in earnest agonising over what a genuinely ‘postmodern’ form of historical representation— pure and true - might look like. For some, of course, that notion was nonsensical and even to pose the question of how to ‘apply’ ‘postmodernism’ within historical practice was to betray fundamental misunderstanding of its anti-historicist character. For many, there were powerful incentives to focus solely on theoretical rumination and critique given that intellectual life sometimes seemed to resemble ‘a kind of sweepstakes competition whose goal is to prove how far beyond naïveté the theorist is’ (Graff 1995, 311). Yet for me, making the move from writing about history to actually writing history in this new dispensation was a pressing concern. Eventually, and in common with a number of other ‘culturalist’ historians of international relations, I began to see the way forward in the development of discourse analysis approaches to the study of policy-making, and in the promotion of more reflexive modes of writing and of new forms of critical historiography (Finney 1997).

My own modest contributions here were produced against a backdrop of exciting ferment in the discipline at large. Debates raged in the journals around the validity, politics and ethics of ‘postmodern’ approaches, and their applicability and fruitfulness for various sub-disciplines. Jenkins himself would excerpt some of the key debates from *Past and Present*, *Social History* and *History and Theory* in his *Postmodern History Reader* (Jenkins 1997a). This was a path-breaking collection, testifying to the emergence of a substantial body of scholarship in the field, mapping its contours and making some canonical contributions more widely available. This last point was crucially important because, in retrospect, there was something quaintly primitive about the infrastructure of academic life in the mid-1990s. To all intents and purposes, these were pre-internet and pre-email days. I remember making a pilgrimage to the

Lampeter university library every Wednesday, since that was the day on which newly-received issues of journals were placed on the shelves. The arrival of publishers' printed catalogues in the post was a major event and source of fresh intelligence about forthcoming interventions. Indeed, the post was in general a key lifeline to the outside world and means of plugging into wider intellectual currents: letters were still the key form of correspondence. I recall receiving the package containing my eagerly-awaited copy of Jenkins' *On 'What is History?'* (Jenkins 1995) – in which he substantiated and developed his earlier arguments with extended readings of key figures – and closeting myself off at home to devour it in a single sitting. Granted, these recollections are skewed by the fact that I was living in Lampeter, which even in the 1990s was like living in the 1950s (and it still lacks a decent bookshop); but these old-fashioned physical circumstances were a key element to the lived experience of these theoretical debates.

1997 proved a crucial year. It saw the appearance of the first volume of this journal, which was further testament to the productive impact of 'postmodernism' on disciplinary theory and practice, and to the maturity of the field. Jenkins was a core member of the editorial board, having formed a close working relationship with its sage leading light, Alun Munslow, and he contributed a trenchant essay to the very first issue (Jenkins 1997b). Towards the end of the year, the eminent Cambridge historian Richard Evans published his famous riposte to 'postmodernism' *In Defence of History* (Evans 1997). This was a further landmark: a fully-fledged rebuttal from a prominent 'practising historian' which, for all its invective, engaged in a much more sustained way with the theory than previous responses (Elton 1991; Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob 1994). Moreover, Evans' profile and stature also ensured that his book acquired a high profile in the media- through myriad reviews and think-pieces - which in turn helped to give the core theoretical ideas in play a yet wider airing. Finally, the gradual

emergence of new web technologies enabled the ensuing debates to take place increasingly in the virtual realm, which made them accessible to many more readers – and participants. The forum ‘Continuous discourse: History and its postmodern critics’ hosted by the Institute for Historical Research in London was especially important here: whilst the interactivity was primitive by Web 2.0 standards, the unprecedentedly rapid exchange of views and reviews it facilitated was revelatory for the time.<sup>1</sup> The later 1990s were consequently a period of titanic struggles as partisans of ‘postmodernism’ and ‘mainstream’ counter-insurgents slugged it out in conference halls and seminar rooms, on the burgeoning web and in the pages of learned journals, books and the media.

These exchanges, it will be recalled, were often impatient and ill-tempered. Accusations of bad faith, misrepresentation, stupidity and malign intent were freely-exchanged. With hindsight, this or that polemical statement might seem unwarranted or excessively exuberant, but they were conditioned by the sense that this was an unwonted period of ferment in which really momentous things were at stake, ideologically and professionally. Of course, every generation succumbs to the solipsistic illusion that its own formative moments just are world-historical ones of decisive contestation, but this genuinely was a time of energising excitement when it seemed as if a profound transformation of the discipline might be in the offing. Participating in the birth of this journal, even as a relatively junior player, served for me to reinforce this sense of bracing possibility, and also engendered a comforting sense of belonging to a particular tribe with its own distinctive ethos and values. At a time when British politics appeared to be dissolving into a morass of neo-liberal consensualism after the triumph of Tony Blair and New Labour, this alignment also offered a professional means to keep alive a sense of radical endeavour and oppositional politics. So this particular personal investment involved a complex amalgam of intellect, temperament, affect and circumstance.



Jenkins was a key figure in the upheaval of this era in more ways than one. Apart from its scholarly impact, his work – as already noted - also made possible new ventures in teaching historical theory. Where this had once been utterly neglected, by 2000 the History Benchmark Statement of the UK Quality Assurance Agency was mandating that all students ‘should be expected to reflect critically on the nature of their discipline, its social rationale, its theoretical underpinnings and its intellectual standing’ (quoted in Gunn and Rawnsley 2006, 370). Granted, factors other than the rise of ‘postmodernism’ contributed to this heightening of pedagogical reflexivity, including the emergence of a new managerialism and quality assurance agenda in higher education which required departments to justify their activities in the ‘measurable terms of the audit culture’ (Gunn and Rawnsley 2006, 383). Equally, the expansion of higher education in the UK and the end of the so-called ‘binary divide’ between universities and polytechnics opened up job opportunities for a new generation of academics, leading to an influx of new blood that promoted curricular change.

All these factors were in play in Lampeter, where I participated in the creation of a pair of new team-taught core modules for our first-year undergraduates which explored theoretical issues, the history of the discipline, and the place of academic history in wider society. Such modules and textbooks based on or servicing them are now fairly commonplace, but for its time these were quite path-breaking and controversial. A precondition for their creation was the availability of relevant and accessible literature, and pre-eminent here was *Re-thinking History* which could be set as core reading against the canonical visions of Geoffrey Elton and E. H. Carr (Elton 1967; Carr 1961).

Constructing and delivering this programme was a fascinating experience. Indeed, it remains one of the most rewarding collaborative ventures of my professional life. There were complex issues of content and approach to be negotiated between colleagues with very divergent theoretical investments and expertise. A good number of these were products of a previous transformative moment in the discipline – the ‘social history turn’ of the 1960s and 1970s – and they were initially highly sceptical as to whether exposing students to ‘postmodern’ ideas was intellectually valid or practically feasible. (With hindsight I suspect they were actually quite benignly tolerant of the impertinent youthful zealotry they had to endure.) While debating the content of the new modules, we also had heated discussions over whether new theoretical ideas should be embedded right across the curriculum or treated solely in this foundation programme, and around the desirability of innovative pedagogical methods.

It was difficult to decide how to pitch the theory content of these modules, and specifically how to make ‘postmodernist’ ideas accessible to beginning undergraduates without excessively diluting them. Delivering lectures and running seminars on the programme, however, proved to be an absolute pleasure. The first cohorts of students, fresh from very traditional A-Level or access programmes offering visions of history as a truth-seeking craft, found the perspectives on offer challenging and sometimes bewildering. In time, some of the students were happy to run with what we were trying to achieve, and reported with gratitude that the experience had significantly broadened their horizons. Others were relentlessly hostile to what they saw as efforts to gull them with radical nonsense, and to illicitly ‘tell them what to think’ (which at least revealed the power of the entrenched discursive structures that were being called into question). Many others, of course, muddled through and quickly forgot it all. Yet whatever the precise response there was a gratifying edge to the whole experience. Like many others in my generation, the want of a theoretical dimension to my

own training meant I had had to engineer an autodidactic exposure to ‘postmodern’ theory (cf. Gunn and Rawnsley 2006, 376-7); in this situation there was particular excitement to be gained from pioneering its teaching back to undergraduates.

Getting to know Jenkins personally further enriched these heady times. Once our new courses were established, I sent the module handbooks to Heather McCallum, the history editor at Routledge with whom I was discussing various publishing ideas, to illustrate what use we were making of Jenkins’ work. (McCallum and Routledge emphatically deserve a place in this story, since their vigorous promotion of ‘postmodern’ approaches in a whole series of key publications was vital to their dissemination.) Consequently, at a conference on ‘History in Literature/Literature in History’ in Cheltenham in April 1996, Jenkins came over and introduced himself. I was initially a little intimidated, even star-struck, but his warm openness, intellectual generosity and genuine interest in exchanging ideas soon put me at my ease. Thereafter our paths crossed regularly if not frequently at conferences; he was kind enough to agree to speak at a small workshop I co-organised in out of the way Gregynog in mid-Wales in 1997, and we met again at the same venue later that year at a more lavish conference on E. H. Carr. Considering his growing reputation as a bloodthirsty ‘postmodernist’ Jacobin, and the caustic tone of his prose, it was amusing to discover that in person he was gently witty and even sometimes diffident. He would also prove to be ‘set in his ways’ to an extent that sometimes verged on mild eccentricity, albeit of a highly-engaging kind. For example, I vividly recall a meeting of the *Rethinking History* editorial board at the Routledge offices in New Fetter Lane one summer Saturday in 1999. After a productive meeting, the group fragmented and Keith and I set off in search of lunch – except Keith had already decided precisely where he was going to have lunch and so we embarked on a route march across the whole of central London, past thousands of perfectly good restaurants, until

we reached his favoured small and nondescript Italian, the peculiar and imperative virtues of which were slightly lost on me.

Moments are by definition evanescent conjunctures, of course, and this particular late-1990s one did not endure. Fierce and fertile debates about the theoretical ideas at the heart of ‘postmodernism’ and their implications for historical practice continued – not least in the pages of this journal. Yet it was widely understood that the discipline was in the process of absorbing the challenge through partial incorporation. On the one hand, this entailed the rise of new forms of cultural history, in which a vocabulary and concepts drawn from ‘postmodernism’ were too often ‘blandly appropriated’, ‘freely and liberally deployed’ but stripped of their former ‘critical freight’ (Vernon 1999). On the other hand, ‘mainstream’ historians now commonly acknowledged a productive influence from ‘postmodern’ scepticism in sensitising them to the literary dimensions of historical writing, the significance of authorial voice and the fragility of historical interpretation; yet asserted that the discipline had emerged essentially unscathed (Evans 2002). Rhetoric about the discipline having entered a phase ‘post-postmodernism’, including the trope of the ‘cultural turn’ being completed, now really began to flourish (Wilder 2012). Some argued that ‘postmodernists’ had acquired a role as licensed dissenters of the kind that all hegemonic discourses are wise to tolerate, incorporated into the terrain of the discipline with their own niches and outlets, enjoying a ‘comforting institutional separatism’ and shorn of their power to threaten the *status quo* (Evans 2002, 8). Often, somewhat ironically, ‘postmodernist’ radicals and their ‘practical realist’ critics were united in voicing this sentiment, respectively with regret and glee.

Although with hindsight it is obvious that the more extreme hopes – or fears – about the revolutionary transformation of the discipline went unrealised, assessing the import of these

developments is not straightforward. (For contrasting pertinent observations on the current state of affairs, see Jordanova 2011 and Pihlainen 2011.) To concede that some contemporary cultural history writing is sorely devoid of any critical theoretical edge is not to damn the whole enterprise on that account. Moreover, it is certainly not tantamount to an endorsement of triumphalist claims that ‘postmodernism’ has been defeated, ‘seen off’ by a robust and rigorous disciplinary ‘mainstream’ (Marwick 2001, 14). It is equally possible to maintain that ‘postmodernism’ has won a ‘quiet victory’, becoming a fixture in disciplinary training and practice and engendering methodologically-innovative cultural history writing that is ‘pragmatic and neo-empiricist but also unworriedly theoretical and relativist’ (Joyce 2001; though cf. the greater pessimism in Joyce 2007, 93). Such work seeks to explore and play with ‘the tensions between historical method and the [antihistoricist] theoretical underpinnings of various critical discourses aligned with postmodernity’, aspiring to make the move ‘from “critique” to critical history’ (Dean 2006). Granted, this new configuration represents something less than the establishment of a hegemonic ‘postmodernist’ paradigm; but it demonstrates that some of the core insights of that thinking remain valid and pertinent and that their creative potential is neither yet fully realised nor exhausted. Even critics keen to locate the contemporary discipline as being beyond the ‘cultural turn’ profess that it is shaped by its potent insights. Thus Gabrielle Spiegel has talked of a ‘profound change’ in ‘historiographical praxis’: ‘no one can doubt that it constituted a wholesale revision of the ways that historians understood the nature of their endeavour, the technical and conceptual tools deemed appropriate for historical research and writing, and the purpose and meaning of the work so produced’ (Spiegel 2007, 3). Evidently, a good deal here depends on the yardstick being employed in the judgement.

What of Jenkins' role in all this? Well, he was certainly in no mood for retreat or accommodation. As he explained in his 2005 professorial inaugural lecture, towards the end of the 1990s, and particularly with the publication of *Why History?* in 1999, his position hardened and radicalised. Previously he had 'argued for the end of problematical metanarrative and academic histories in the name of postmodern replacements' which might help keep alive a project of emancipation in the spirit of Jacques Derrida (Jenkins 2009, 217). Thus the replacements envisaged in *Re-thinking History* included 'detailed historiographical studies to examine how previous and current histories have been constructed both in terms of their method and their content' and a 'series of methodologically reflexive studies of the makings of the histories of post-modernity itself' (Jenkins 1991, 69-70). Yet in *Why History?*, he argued that it would be more conducive to emancipation not merely to abandon the entire project of 'modernist' historiography, but to eschew the search for 'postmodern' replacements and to embrace a future without any historical consciousness at all. It was widely understood, he wrote, that given the potency of its critique of conventional practice postmodernism would need

to invent its own type of history ... and hence the anxious query 'what will it look like?'  
But why need it look like anything? Why need it exist? ... I mean, why bother  
historicising a past any more? Thus it will be my argument here that we might as well  
forget history and live in the ample imaginaries provided by postmodern type theorists  
(Jenkins 1999, 11-12).

Scarcely surprising that Hayden White was moved to note approvingly: 'I have said it before and I now have a chance to say it again. Keith Jenkins follows a thought to the end of the line' (White 2009, 1).

So, confronted with trends and contingencies that by his lights threatened to curtail the influence of 'postmodernism', Jenkins decided to play *vabanque*. Of course, he was not blind to the unfolding historiographical reality around him and nor had his thought come to a full stop. In 2002 he published *Refiguring History*, another concise masterpiece of economical prose and majestic phrase-making, in which he took a slight step back from this 'end of history' stance. Acknowledging slightly reluctantly that academic history – never mind historical consciousness - had not yet collapsed under the weight of 'postmodern' strictures, he set out to explore again whether it could be productively remodelled 'through the reflexive foregrounding of a postmodern discourse wedded to the idea of emancipation' (Jenkins 2002, 2). This would entail breaking with conventional forms of representation in the name of an endless openness.

Postmodernism, as understood positively here, is the getting of an attitude, a militant, radical disposition, that undercuts not just the content but the grammatical form of modernist histories without a hint of nostalgia and offers in their place, in its new grammars and acts of attention, new ways of rendering up 'the before now' as yet unconceived of (Jenkins 2002, 68).

Jenkins was not interested in offering a 'how to' guide for the production of such renderings, but he did suggest, following Jean Baudrillard, a whole series of possible language games through which history might be figured as anagram, acrostic, spoonerism, rhyme, strophe and catastrophe (Jenkins 2002, 65).

This was elegant and provocative stuff, and Jenkins continued to work this idea of refiguring history in some of the many essays that he published over the next few years. Yet, and even allowing for the legitimacy of a certain measure of ambivalence on his part, close reading of some of these suggests that his heart was never really in this project, and that it remained for

him always a matter of pragmatic tactics, a second best (see, e.g., Jenkins 2009, 16, 146-8). Perhaps it smacked just too much of the attempt to help ‘academic historians’ get over or through ‘postmodernism’ that he fundamentally and explicitly disdained (Jenkins 2002, 70)? Whatever the reason, on my reading he had arrived at a preferred stance that favoured a total rejection of nostalgia for any ‘historical past’ (‘what, really, is the point’); his radical politics mandated instead a headlong and wilful welcome of the ‘end of history’ (Jenkins 2009, 243).

The decision to take this position at this juncture had various consequences. For one thing, in raising the stakes as to what success for his ‘postmodern’ project might look like, Jenkins was probably condemning himself to practical failure. Those historians who had found his previous arguments distasteful were scarcely likely to find a supercharged variant any more palatable, especially when in the eyes of many the tide was turning against ‘postmodernism’. If Jenkins was thus marginalised, however, it is important to emphasise that this was not a fate that haplessly befell him, but rather one that he actively welcomed with characteristic dogged stubbornness. After all, if he cared, he had a very funny way of showing it: his urging that historians should ‘relax’ in the face of their epistemic failure – ‘you have nothing to lose but your pasts’ – was hardly calculated to build bridges (Jenkins 2002, 68).

Perhaps more intriguingly, and awkwardly, Jenkins’ stance also created some tensions with others in the broad ‘postmodernist’ camp. Thus his long-time associate and collaborator Alun Munslow recently averred that he and Jenkins had followed somewhat different paths ‘in that I want to see many different understandings of history in the future rather than just forgetting it’ (Munslow 2009, 321). If this turn in Jenkins’ thinking opened up some distance between himself and Munslow, it obviously put him at a greater remove from historians such as



myself practising forms of cultural history considerably tamer than the avant-gardism mooted in *Refiguring History*. To him, this kind of work must bespeak disappointment and domestication. By the same token, the terms of engagement with Jenkins' writing for me and others of similar disposition could not but change. There remained, of course, much that I found utterly convincing in his epistemological critique. I still read his work with profit, finding that it opened up new ways of thinking about individual authors and broader problematics that lingered long in the mind. Equally, I entirely appreciated his provocative presence as someone prepared to ask uncomfortable questions about disciplinary orthodoxies. Yet inevitably former affinities and solidarities were somewhat diluted now that I was no longer interested in following Jenkins to his chosen destination.

It would be unpardonably melodramatic to call this an estrangement, since of course it is not necessary to be of entirely like mind to enjoy fruitful scholarly and personal interchange. However, it is worth dwelling on the terms of this divergence, since they can illuminate some larger issues in the intellectual history of our recent disciplinary times. For me, the kind of cultural history that I was beginning to write was explicitly informed by insights from 'postmodernism' and represented a means to put these usefully to work. So, on the one hand, discourse analysis approaches to the history of foreign policy-making drew on 'postmodern' ideas about culture, power and identity to rethink the role of race, class, gender and national identity in international history (Finney 2003). On the other hand, essays in critical historiography were premised on thinking about the mutable and ideologically-freighted nature of historical representation, and its imbrication with broader cultural discourses (Finney 2010). These approaches seem to me to have an indubitable critical edge, as they respectively pose fresh epistemological questions about dominant 'realist' modes of analysis in policy-making and scholarship thereon, and probe the cultural politics of historical

representation. That said, and although such work is, on these counts, liable to be criticised by some ‘mainstream’ historians of more traditional temper, in formal representational terms it is pretty conventional. Certainly, its form is far removed from ‘the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism’ (White 1999, 81) that Hayden White has advocated as a means to escape the political pitfalls of disciplined linear narrativisation. It thus may fall short of fulfilling the generic requirements of the critical history called for by various ‘postmodernist’ and poststructuralist luminaries in the collection of *Manifestos for History* recently co-edited by Jenkins (Jenkins, Morgan, and Munslow 2007). But it is nonetheless certainly animated by a conviction similar to Joan Scott’s that ‘a poststructuralist history is not only possible, but necessary. Now more than ever’ (Scott 2007, 21).

A range of factors were in play shaping the decision to move towards this kind of cultural history writing. In terms of its conventional features, it is impossible to deny that there are a range of institutional and structural pressures confronting anyone forging a professional career within British higher education today that are inimical to extravagant formal experimentation. These would include the demands of successive research assessment exercises, ‘the politics of research funding’ and ‘the political economy and social anthropology of ... the journal, the conference and the lecture’ (Joyce 2007, 91). While these pressures are not utterly inexorable – manifestly they do not entirely preclude the appearance of innovative and critical scholarship – they do impose palpable and particular demands that require careful negotiation. Reviewing a clutch of *festschriften* dedicated to some of the leading social historians involved in the early 1990s debates, Susan Pedersen recently reflected ruefully on how their subsequent careers were shaped by the ‘dispensations of power’: ‘through some opaque process of affiliation and acculturation, historians defending empiricist methods and resisting [bold and theory-driven] monocausal explanations float to

the top of elite institutions while those on less elevated perches stud their prose with the latest theoretical terms and pose as prophets of dissent' (Pedersen 2011: 32). Yet that said, to stress such factors to excess would be to play too much into a narrative of defeat and domestication, and they certainly do not tell the whole story.

More positively, and more broadly, there was a different kind of professional dynamic underpinning the articulation of a new cultural history practice hallmarked by an 'eclectic repertoire of approaches and themes' (Eley 2005, 201). In his moving intellectual history *cum* personal memoir, Geoff Eley has argued that by the later 1990s there was a pervasive sense of an impasse, as once exhilarating theoretical debates seemed to have dissolved into stale rancour and the unproductive reinscription of binarised dichotomies: 'desires for theoretical purity or some finality of resolution ... were not getting us very far' (Eley 2005, 200-1). Seeking renewal, and a way out of this blockage, the turn from theory to practice was a natural move for historians *qua* historians to make, and the turn specifically to new forms of cultural history followed ineluctably from the theoretical preoccupations of 'postmodernism'. Yet as Eley tells it, this was not simply a matter of professional self-preservation, or the generational dynamic, for this new cultural history also seemed to offer the hope of gaining a political purchase on the new and oppressive realities of the post-Cold War neo-liberal order (albeit, in his view, that a melding of the insights of the social and cultural offered the optimal means to achieve this). As he put it

the effectiveness of grand narratives can't be contested by scepticism and incredulity alone, least of all when new or refurbished grand narratives are so powerfully reordering the globe. Grand narratives can't be contested by pretending they don't exist. ... Unless critical historians can find ways of joining this fray – by offering persuasive frameworks for understanding the contemporary dynamics of international conflict and societal

change – the latest pack of recklessly and hubristically aggrandizing master narratives will continue enlisting popular imaginations, shaping the political common sense, and generally sweeping the globe (Eley 2005, 203, 198).

It is certainly possible that Eley here over-estimates the potential political utility of academic history, but he nonetheless illustrates a pervasive mind-set on the part of historians of radical bent. For Jenkins (certainly the later Jenkins), on the other hand, such talk would seem pretty mystifying given his conviction that historians have nothing meaningful to offer any project of emancipation. What this underlines is the pervasive extent to which Jenkins' project was that of an intellectual and institutional outsider from the discipline of history. On the one hand, this liminality empowered his initial critique, enabling him to challenge taboos and pose large questions via an expansive philosophical vision. But on the other hand, it also proved a source of profound limitation, or at least diminishing returns, once it became apparent that what historians could do with it – while remaining historians – was severely circumscribed. Given his overarching theoretical and philosophical antipathy to the practice *per se*, Jenkins is very uninterested in discriminating between different forms of history, in probing the conditions of possibility that cause certain kinds of histories to emerge and flourish at particular conjunctures, or indeed in parsing the particular ideological valence of specific modes of history or individual interpretations. His (dare I say) totalising dismissal of history as a practice thus cuts him off even from critical historians who remain vitally concerned with such issues both as theorists and practitioners.

This claim too might seem to lend succour to an argument that cultural historians have taken a turn of accommodation, pressed by professional dynamics and internal disciplinary imperatives, while Jenkins has remained in a state of radical theoretical purity. Yet there are

also theoretical arguments to be advanced here in defence of the turn to cultural history. Michael Roth has argued that Jenkins' attack on the epistemological foundations of the discipline does not logically entail the consequences he claims. Specifically, antifoundationalism does not necessarily require the turn to new and experimental forms of representation ('postmodernism should have taught Jenkins that *nothing* follows from the critique of epistemology, since this epistemology did no real work to begin with') (Roth 2004, 375), and such forms of representation would not necessarily conduce to the radical political ends that Jenkins professes ('there is nothing theoretical to link ... critiques of epistemology to ... radical democratic proclivities') (Roth 2004, 373). So for Roth, there is nothing in 'postmodernism' to preclude the holding of continued dialogues about the past which might serve a variety of cultural and political purposes, and nothing indeed to preclude them pragmatically adopting 'realist literary forms' (Roth 2004, 375). Moreover, Jenkins' insistence that 'there is nothing in the past until we get there with our categories, our schemes – the meanings we will project onto the “before now”’ – which underpins his belief that doing away with historical consciousness altogether would be desirable – is at odds with key aspects of 'postmodern' thought. 'Indeed, for all the talk about undecidability and the imposition of meaning on the past, Derrida underscores the ways that we cannot avoid our inheritance, and the ways that we are haunted (like it or not) by the past' (Roth 2004, 376).

Now, there are arguments to be had on each of these points, and Jenkins has engaged them variously in his essays, but the key point is that his 'end of history' is not the only terminus on the 'postmodern' network. Despite Jenkins' insistence that 'postmodernism *is* its excesses' (Jenkins 2002, 68), it can equally be claimed that a pragmatist 'postmodernism' still remains 'postmodernism'. Moreover, this again underlines the limited utility of Jenkins' particular full-blooded stance: 'without foundations to destroy, this postmodernist hasn't much to say

about the conversations we continue to have, the histories we continue to write, and the art we continue to make' (Roth 2004, 377).

Looking back, it is tempting now to begin historicising the particular 1990s moment in a particular way. Geoff Eley has argued that any honest intellectual history of the discipline must acknowledge that 'history's renovative energy – its new influences, new approaches, and most inspiring works – always came from the outside ... from broader intellectual departures (ferments of theory, philosophical interventions, changes of fashion, discursive shifts), which were effective across disciplinary boundaries and traveled promiscuously through the public sphere' (Eley 2005, 191). This may perhaps be how to think of the theoretical turn of the 1990s, with Jenkins as just one more very welcome outsider offering an invigorating infusion to the discipline – even though this was ironically quite contrary to his intentions and desires. Yet his intervention was never likely to prove a full stop since – as the history of the discipline again suggests – there never is an 'end of the story' or 'final chapter': 'something else, I'm sure, is lying in wait' (Eley 2005, 202). So historical practice continues, albeit sharpened and profoundly reshaped by 'postmodernist' insights and concerns. It does so not only because of oppressive and entrenched institutional power or professional self interest – though those factors are not to be discounted – but because we still need to autobiographically construct interpretations of the past that can serve our intellectual and political purposes.

These points can be further illustrated and dramatised by considering the emergence of memory studies, one of the key themes within the new cultural history. This is one of my current core preoccupations, originally engaged owing to its intersection with critical historiography but now the focus of a standalone project on the legacies and remembrance of

the Second World War. This is not the place to fully narrate the emergence of memory studies as a huge interdisciplinary phenomenon over the last two decades, nor to debate the numerous pros and cons of this development, or the thorny issues of terminology and conceptualisation entailed within it (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011). For me one of the key drivers behind a new concern with memory was ‘postmodern’ scepticism about the truth claims of history and awareness of the constructed nature of all representations and understandings of the past. Yet if this thus represented one way to put ‘postmodernism’ to work, by foregrounding the notion of trauma aspects of it also challenged representationalism, and specifically the notion that ‘the past is *only* present in the form of representation’: ‘in trauma the past refuses to become history – “to go away” – because it remains somehow present’ (Lorenz 2011, 29). So this was a new problematic that could be illuminated through ‘postmodern’ thinking and which offered an opportunity to test, nuance and extend it. On the basis of my conversations with Jenkins on the topic, however, he seems to be resolutely uninterested in the field. Partly this must be because of the previously-noted general indifference or antipathy he professes towards innovations in historical practice. Partly, it seems to be because he – not entirely unjustifiably – regards it as suspect because of its possible association with the notion of ‘presence’ advanced by Eelco Runia and others (Jenkins 2009, 12; Jenkins 2010). Either way, he once asked me: might it not be better if all these people engaged in remembering could just forget the past?

Of course, it is quite legitimate to suggest that sometimes painful memories would be better put aside, or historic grievances forgotten in the name of reconciliation. Equally, it is evident that some forms of remembering – for example, certain forms of official commemoration – can be ideologically pernicious serving only to reinscribe the sovereign power that inflicted traumatic violence and suffering in the first place (Edkins 2003). Yet more broadly this

response struck me as unfortunate. The memory boom in scholarship is a reflection of a wider upsurge in mnemonic activity in the real world, as a response to a whole series of inter-related factors including geopolitical shifts (such as the end of the Cold War), ideological transformation (the exhaustion of utopian ideologies and rise of identity politics), generational change (especially as participants in the Second World War pass away), technological developments (as digital and networked technologies transform the possibilities for representing the past) and normative forces (specifically the emergence of global and transnational norms victimhood, apology and reparation). This memory work constitutes a dense and fertile cultural field ripe for interrogation, and to simply wish all this activity away in the name of a generalised *a priori* philosophical hostility towards historical consciousness seems curious.

There are important political issues at stake here as, in Eley's words, memory 'offers a crucial site of identity formation under our contemporary predicament, a way of deciding who we are and of positioning ourselves in time and place, given the hugeness of the structural changes now so destructively remaking the world' (Eley 2005, 151). Equally, there are ethical considerations in play which suggest we should at least pause before dismissing the potential therapeutic benefits of remembering – the possibilities that narrative might serve as a balm, or means of metabolising trauma – or the right of the traumatised survivor to insist that the pain of the offence be kept visible and present as the years roll by. This memory work is not necessarily incompatible with the sort of anti-foundationalism Jenkins proposes, since, for example, truth and reconciliation commissions often 'make no pretense to certainty' (Roth 2004, 377-8) in their search for effective narratives; equally, it is quite possible to use exploration of these phenomena to extend and develop such theory (Bevernage 2011). Of course, my own investment in this field makes me a partial observer,



and I am not blind to the myriad problems with the ‘memory industry’. But my overarching point here is that the position at which Jenkins arrived, with its high-level philosophical critique, was a rather static and abstract one that rendered him incapable of engaging meaningfully with all these dramatic developments, despite their manifest political, ethical and theoretical pertinence. His position deprived him of critical purchase on this terrain and foreclosed his interest in any form of substantive historical work, however potentially intriguing. Scarcely surprising, then, if it sometimes seemed as if he and even the most bold of new cultural historians were bound to end up talking past one another.<sup>2</sup>

For all these reasons, in the new century Jenkins’ centrality to disciplinary debates and his power as an agenda-setter slightly waned. (Admittedly, I may again be generalising too much from personal experience. In 2002 I moved to a new post in an international politics department and stopped teaching historical theory as such, which meant that I was no longer directly engaging with his work in a teaching context.) His challenge to historical practice was no longer as fresh as it had been in the 1990s, not least because of the very success ‘postmodernists’ had enjoyed in establishing a place for themselves at the disciplinary table; in a discipline that ‘feeds off the new with an insatiable appetite’ (Joyce 2007: 93) it lacked the novelty of other claimants to incarnate the cutting edge. (Influence and intellectual validity are, of course, very different things.) This is emphatically not to say, however, that he ceased to be an active scholar: he co-edited two important collections on the nature of history and the future of the discipline (Jenkins and Munslow 2004; Jenkins, Morgan, and Munslow 2007); he continued as a prolific essayist and contributor to this journal offering insightful and sophisticated readings of key thinkers from Frank Ankersmit through Sande Cohen and Jean-François Lyotard to Hayden White; and he co-convened of an important seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research in London (Macfie 2006).

Equally, Jenkins continued to be a very visible presence on the conference circuit where he lost none of his power to command an audience. The panels in which he has appeared – often in conjunction with Alun Munslow - have usually been high-octane affairs. I recall particularly the session in which he presented at the European Social Science History Conference at The Hague in 2002 (Jenkins 2009, 150-68). The large room was absolutely packed with spectators, and the tension was heightened by Jenkins' slightly late arrival, sweeping dramatically into the room in his long trench coat. (His lateness was presumed by some present to be indicative of superstar *hauteur*, but was actually I believe because he had got slightly lost). The session crackled with intellectual energy and friction, and Jenkins delivered his paper in his trademark languid and uncompromising style. The question and answer session saw angry and aggressive questioning from the floor, as historians simply infuriated by Jenkins' position flung accusations of 'totalitarianism' at him. His cool and blunt responses simply fanned the flames, as he consistently refused to engage with his antagonists on their terms, to accept their logic, or to 'prove' his argument in the way they demanded. There was real emotion and drama in this session, a world removed from the tedious point-scoring and routinised showboating too often encountered at conferences, and Jenkins was entirely responsible for creating it. At this and numerous other gatherings Jenkins was also routinely waylaid by admirers from all continents of the globe, who had certainly not lost interest in what he had to say. Moreover, even in the presence of intellectual differences of opinion, he has continued to be excellent and sociable company, generously sharing gossip, support and insights.

This critical appraisal *cum* appreciation should emphatically not end on a downbeat note, even though to an extent it follows an emplotment of disenchantment. Keith Jenkins was a

pivotal figure in the heated debate within the discipline over 'postmodernism' that unfolded in the years after the publication of *Re-thinking History*. Even if his influence slightly receded a decade as he hardened his position and the discipline at large adapted so as to absorb the 'postmodern' challenge, his role in this momentous phase of heavyweight altercation, when the future of the discipline seemed to be at stake, was a historic achievement. He also acquired sales, significance and a reputation of a kind that most historians can only dream of, and all in the space of two rapid turbulent decades. Moreover, his influence did change the discipline in significant and important ways, reconfiguring its common sense (even though he would probably not admit this). The dogged determination with which he has set forth his case, and his consistency, are rare and in many ways utterly admirable. If it is true that he has now retired from the active fray of writing, it may be difficult to gauge how he feels, in retrospect, about his contribution over the last twenty years, and whether he is satisfied with how his work was received. In the introduction to his collected essays, he explained that he had always deliberately intended his work to have a polemical character, and to be imbued with a political cutting edge, because 'I have always wanted to try and influence or change young historians' (young at heart historians') minds vis-à-vis the shibboleths of the profession' (Jenkins 2009, 19). Well, for what it's worth, I can assure him that he changed mine.

## Notes

1. This is no longer available in its original form, but some of the key contributions can still be accessed at <http://www.history.ac.uk/resources/discourse-postmodernism>.
2. It could also be said that Jenkins' rather traditional, text-focused approach to epistemological issues makes him ill-equipped to take the measure of how

technological change is transforming the possibilities for producing, exchanging and consuming representations of the past, in ways that have profound implications for historical consciousness and our theorising (Kansteiner 2007). This is perhaps not surprising since personally where technology is concerned he is somewhat legendarily not an 'early adopter'.

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