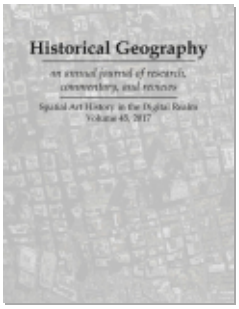
Two Cheers for Historical Geography after Postmodernism: An Ironic Assessment



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Research Atlas," *Reference Services Review* (1994): 45-55. I appreciate Skip Ray bringing these sources to my attention.

6. For geographical expertise applied to Aboriginal struggles, see the following Wiley Lectures: Peter J. Usher, "Environment, Race and Nation Reconsidered: Reflections on Aboriginal Land Claims in Canada," *Canadian Geographer* 47 (2003): 365-382; and Arthur J. Ray, "Ethnohistorical Geography and Aboriginal Rights Litigation in Canada: Memoir of an Expert Witness," *Canadian Geographer* 55 (2011): 397-406.
7. William G. Dean, "Forward," in *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume 1: From the Beginning to 1800*, ed. Cole Harris (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1988), i.
8. Jean-Pierre Wallot, "Forward," in Cole Harris ed., *Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume 1: From the Beginning to 1800* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1988), ii
9. Consider the *Atlas of Alberta* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1969). Unlike Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Alberta has not produced an updated provincial atlas.
10. A retrospective account provides an instructive account of large data sets and cartographic design, see Rosemary E. Ommer and Clifford H. Wood, "Data, Concept and the Translation to Graphics," *Cartographica* 22 (1985): 44-62.
11 This portrayal was done before the release of census data, and it would be a valid exercise to re-map the divided city with 1921 census data.
12. The configuration of Canada in 1891 does check metropolitan biases by indicating Inuit land use areas, and ceded and unceded Indian lands, see volume 3, plate 1.
13. D.W. Meinig, review of *Historical Atlas of Canada*, vol. 3, *Addressing the Twentieth Century*, in the *Canadian Historical Review* 73 (1992): 399.
14. For an outstanding piece of scholarship, informed by the needs of the Specific Claims process, see Stewart Raby, "Indian Land Surrenders in Southern Saskatchewan," *Canadian Geographer* 17 (1973): 30-52.

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Two Cheers for Historical Geography after Postmodernism: An Ironic Assessment

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> *One of the great [liberal] heroes was the English novelist and essayist, E.M. Forster, who wrote a book called, Two Cheers for Democracy. He couldn't summon a third.*[1]

One hundred and fifty years into the project of Canada, historical geography matters. Having been weaned on postmodernist theory and methods as an English major in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I find this surprising, because the "history matters" proposition threatened to fracture at the height of the postmodern revolution. There were good reasons for postmodern skepticism, the principal being a growing disavowal of historiographical 'objectivity,' authorial 'neutrality,' and especially historical 'fact'—historical truth—in the wake of the deconstruction of the foundations of Western philosophy and epistemology. Without objective truths or facts, why would anyone write history at all?

Postmodernists deconstructed both research and the positions of researchers, especially history writers' defective historiographical premises: their "commitment to the reality of the past," to "truth as correspondence of that reality," and their "sharp separation between the knower and the known, between fact and value … between history and fiction."[2] Postmodernism reduced the professional writer of histories to creator of historical fictions.[3] Hayden White maintained history writing was "manifestly … a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse," the historiographer performing "an essentially poetic act, in which he [sic] *pre*figures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain 'what is *really* happening' in it." Historiographers reproduced past structures and processes by "*explaining what they were by representing them,*" an act Erich Auerbach called "the representation of reality."[4] Frank Ankersmit believed historiography's problem persisted in the history writer's perceptions of historical reality. "Reality reflects the knowledge we have of it," he posited. "Epistemological fixation thus stimulates ontological fixation—in this case the [false] notion of a past reality, constant and existing independently of the historian, which can be studied as an object."[5] Here lay the historiographers' objectivity-problem laid out by Hans Georg Gadamer, who contended over 50 years ago that "historical research does not endeavour to grasp the concrete phenomenon as an instance of a universal rule."[6] In other words, not only is historical narrative incapable of reproducing truths about historical phenomena, it is not a truth-method. Even Peter Novick, in his study of objectivity and history, approved of "the arguments" of the critics of historical objectivity, while remaining "unimpressed by the arguments of its defenders."[7] Conservative historian C. Vann Woodward, witnessing the decline of academic "History" in the 1980s, warned that "[d]eafness or indifference toward criticism of the guild, whether it comes from artists, scientists, or philosophers, would appear to be singularly perilous at this time."[8] At its most "perilous," then, the postmodern critique of history transmogrified historiography into "a discourse about, but categorically different from, the past."[9]

How did objective history become discursive fiction? For a start, scholars undermined primary sources. They suspected archives, impugned their contents, including photographs, and labelled them social constructions privileging a tendentious and ultimately untenable historicist conception of the past.[10] To be fair, this was not exactly a postmodern view. R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (1946) questioned how historians know, how they apprehended the past, and what it was about past events "that makes it possible for historians to know them?" Especially germane was Collingwood's contention that "the past has vanished and our ideas about it can never be verified as we verify our scientific [and theoretical] hypotheses."[11] In the 1961 Trevelyan Lectures at the University of Cambridge, E. H. Carr scolded historiographers for their unveiled belief in a past vouchsafed through their "fetishism of documents," an idea he linked with historiographers' concomitant "fetishism of facts"—which sounds much like Bruno Latour's critique of facts but decades earlier.[12] More recently, in this journal, Richard Schein recited a litany of primary source challenges that included:

> *Elision*: the frequent truncation of subaltern voices from public records;
> *Collection:* constructions of the archive;
> *Categorization:* constituting similarity/difference in organizing/collecting materials;
> *Periodization:* the politics of representing continuity/change in narratives;
> *Obscuration:* regarding concealing the identities of vulnerable informants;
> *Relation:* dynamics between disempowered communities and scholarly/historical praxis;
> *Misprision:* defining and practicing graft as situated public professionals;
> *Representation:* strategies regarding "recovering" voices in the past; [and]
> *Persuasion*: institutional contexts vis-à-vis "evidence."[13]

Or, as David Livingstone asserted in a landmark historical geography text, there "is no history on the mortuary table. The facts do not simply 'speak for themselves;' the historian stage-manages their performance on the contemporary scene."[14]

This approach to the past swept up a principle primary source of my own discipline (urban historical geography): the newspaper. As historical "fact," the newspaper waxed irredeemably inadequate, as the hardly radical Donald Harman Akenson explained in 1997:

> Take the average newspaper. It is a jumble of simultaneous stories, some of which are verifiable, others of which are not; a mélange of magical and superstitious statements that imply faith in the causal power of invisible forces … There are found, often on the very same page, reports of serious scientific advances, ideas for "folk" medicine, and, at least on the sports pages, predictions of the future, expressed in terms of what teams will beat the point spread; royalty and presidents are chronicled, but so too are births and deaths of historical nobodies … The newspaper inevitably has an underlying ideology (which varies according to country, region, and who the owner is). Such present-day newspapers are history and consciously claim to be, but … they [cannot] be said to be "history in the modern sense of the word" … [because] "history in the modern sense of the word" is bogus.[15]

Not objective representations of a past awaiting historiographic plunder, newspapers were instead the material and ideational tool of interested agents-of-change who used their substantial influence to advance—in and through newspapers—their economic position in the urban growth machine.[16] The early twentieth-century critic Walter Lippmann thought a prime motivation for journalism and journalists was the creation of pictures in the heads of readers—fictions of an environment too complex for readers to apprehend on their own.[17] Such a view of newspapers, and primary sources generally, compelled Akenson to aver: "save perhaps the odd eccentric," no historian "believes that there is such a thing as objective historical truth." So, in such a milieu of postmodern skepticism, of messy deconstruction, you may understand why I am surprised and relieved that historical geography not only still matters, but also that it survived at all.

But not unscathed. If postmodernism taught us anything, it is that our historical geographies *that matter* can never be the same again. How could they? If our histories are heuristic fictions, the literary consequence of inadequate, perhaps even false but at the very least ironic, sources, what should we call historical geography after one hundred and fifty years? My suggestion: a contradiction.

This conclusion, of history and historiography as contradiction, is one I recently drew in my own work on the influence of Toronto's newspapers in the production of Toronto's public space at the turn of the twentieth century, specifically its surface infrastructure. The research for *Newspaper City* drew heavily on Toronto's liberal newspapers, the *Globe* and *Daily Star*. I spent a good deal of time undermining the veracity of newspapers as a primary source, because contemporaneous critics insisted that newspapers and journalism were inherently untrustworthy due to their links with capitalism, advertising, politics, and subscription. I used those critics to question historical journalists' predilections for self-interest, for overstatement, for intentionally creating unreliable pictures in the heads of newspaper readers. Yet I equally occupy my time justifying and defending newspapers for their urban reform efforts, for their advancement of women and women's causes, and for their ability and desire to render in print as accurately and faithfully as newspapers could the social geography of Toronto. They did this simultaneously.

In the end, I conclude, "why not newspapers?" They substantiate our own deftly imagined and researched cities.[18]

I cannot tell you what philosophical and professional respite that insight gave me. I had partially resolved my own longstanding dilemma: a queasy recognition that a past contrived from primary historical documents shares no space with truth or fact. Instead, historiography must be contradiction, because there is no escaping the torsions of a multivalent present *and* a fragmented past embodied in paradoxical primary sources. Urban historical geography after postmodernism, then, is not fictitious. It may not be truth-telling, but it is rich and meaningful. I do, however, warn my readers that the Toronto they will read about in *Newspaper City* is *a* Toronto, not *the* Toronto.

At the close of Canada's one hundred and fiftieth year, a century and a half that saw history posed simultaneously as unimpeachable, objectively verifiable fact *and* self-serving, self-deluded fiction, acknowledging historical geography as contradiction seems as good enough reason to celebrate as any.

NOTES

1. "Stephen Fry on Trump, Liberals, and Bullies – 2017," *YouTube* (Accessed 10 July, 2017) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QN3riEFwl0Q&t=16s
2. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.
3. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Frank Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism," *History and Theory* 28 (1989): 137-153; Frank Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994); Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 2003); Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on An Old Discipline* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow**,** eds., *The Nature of History Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).
4. White, *Metahistory*, ix, 2 (original emphasis); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).
5. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology,* 128.
6. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1989[1960]), 4.
7. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 6.
8. C. Vann Woodward, *The Future of the Past* (Oxford, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), 22.
9. Jenkins, *Nature of History Reader*, 7, 18.
10. Bruce Trigger, "Ethnohistory: The Unfinished Edifice," *Ethnohistory*, 33 (1986): 253-267; Raymond Fogelson, "The Ethnohistory of Events and Nonevents," *Ethnohistory* 36 (1989): 133-147; Joan Schwartz, "'We make our tools and our tools make us': Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics," *Archivaria* 40 (1995): 40-74; Joan Schwartz, "The Geography Lesson: Photographs and the Construction of Imaginative Geographies" *Journal of Historical Geography* 22 (1996): 16-45; Joan Schwartz, "'Records of simple truth and precision': Photography, Archives and the Illusion of Control, *Archivaria* 50 (2000): 1-40; Richard Schein, "Practicing Historical Geography: Re-placing the Past," *Historical Geography* 29 (2001): 7-13; Ciaran Trace, "What is Recorded Is Never Simply

'What happened': Record Keeping in Modern Organizational Culture, *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 137-159.
11. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 3, 5.
12. E.H. Carr, *What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered at the University of Cambridge, January – March* 1961 (New York: Vintage, 1961) 15; Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225-248.
13. Schein, "Practicing Historical Geography," 8 (de-emphasis added).
14. David Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise* (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 5.
15. Donald Harman Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the* Talmuds (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 10-11.
16. John Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 50-98.
17. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), 15). Later, the intellectual historian Thomas Bender used a similar idea in a popular urban documentary: Bender, in Ric Burns, 1999. "Episode Two: Order and Disorder." *New York: A Documentary Film* (WGBH Boston and PBS, 1999). See also, Thomas Bender, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Area* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 20.
18. Phillip Gordon Mackintosh, *Newspaper City: Toronto's Street Surfaces and the Liberal Press, 1860-1935* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 243-244.

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Swearing Allegiance to No Crown: Thoughts on the Lost Histories of Municipal Rdical Politics

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The arrival of the 150th anniversary of Confederation presents scholars of Canada with an opportunity. This opportunity comes in the form of a temporal 'trail marker', affording us an arbitrary point, imbued with state- and culturally-created meaning, at which we may look back, look around, and look forward.

From my position, at the intersections of political science, geography, and history, I choose to critically examine the past so as to optimistically consider the future. In doing so, I am brought back to an issue that has followed me through my nascent academic career: that of lost or obscured histories. It is truly difficult to critically examine the past when one is examining selective fragments. Those fragments may only exist because they aligned with previously accepted dominant cultural narratives or may simply be arranged in a way that neatly fits the aims of those who organized them as such. Possessing only historical fragments is similar to holding a book with selected paragraphs redacted.

My interest in lost histories originated during my undergraduate final research project on the role of women in Hamilton, Ontario's municipal government. In subsequent conversations on