Postmodernism and Historiography: A Critical Study

Abstract / The aim of my book is to explore and make an assessment of the repercussions that postmodernism has exerted on contemporary historical thinking. Thus considered, some representative figures, for instance, Foucault, White, Derrida and Barthes, are deliberately chosen for the illustration of the major themes. By providing an introductory context based on related perspectives, I hope to facilitate the understanding of their arguments. That contextual foundation will serve as a basis for my effort to offer not only a balanced and sophisticated assessment of their contribution but also my own critical comments about their doctrines.

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Postmodernism has dominated the intellectual world since the 1980s, but reached its peak at the turn of the century. Recently, its influence has also extended to historical studies and provoked a number of heated debates between modernist and postmodernist historians. Therefore, the aim of this book is to explore and make an assessment of the repercussions that postmodernism has exerted on contemporary historical thinking.

The major impact of postmodernism on Western historiography is the so-called "linguistic turn." Thus considered, such representative figures as Foucault, White, Derrida and Barthes are deliberately chosen to illustrate the major themes discussed. The first chapter deals with the historiography of anti-humanism, and Foucault is the archetypical representative of this trend. Foucault establishes many new fields for historical research and, with such ideas as "discontinuity" and "discourse," sheds new light on historical conceptualization. He also shakes the very foundation upon which modern historical scholarship rests. He has heavily engaged the old camp of historians and thus become controversial. Nevertheless, his pioneering work combines postmodern theory and practice into one.

One impact of postmodernism upon Western historiography is "the narrative turn," or what its adherents like to proclaim as "the revenge of literature." The key figure in this trend is Hayden White whose *Metahistory* has been hailed as the most important classic since Croce. White promotes the poetics of history that not only undermines the myth of "scientific history" but also revitalizes the ethos of "history as literature." No less significant, White is among a few historians whose contributions extend to a wide range of the humanities, cultural studies and literary criticism. White is renowned for his erudition and tends to draw upon such diverse intellectual sources that it makes his writ-
More fundamentally, the postmodern way of reading texts proposes a serious challenge to conventional understanding of writings. The theory of reading, broadly speaking, is concerned with the discourse of interpreting texts. In historiography, it deals with the decoding of documents and the history the documents are used to construct. But currently it refers to a specific style of reading raised by postmodernists. In this regard, Barthes and Derrida stand out as the most important because their doctrines have already had a tremendous impact upon the humanities and social sciences in the West. More recently, they have also invaded the field of historical studies and drawn the attention of a new generation of historians. Chapters 3 and 4, therefore, provide a perspective from which we can see the emergence of historical hermeneutics. This perspective also provides a contrast with the postmodernist theory of reading. The merits and demerits of the postmodernist way of reading when applied to historical studies are also evaluated.

The problem of philosophy of history also must be addressed. The narrative philosophy of history unintentionally brought up by White’s historical poetics has largely taken the place of the analytical philosophy of history, a subject which practicing historians often saw as boring and barren. Instead of the normative role claimed by that older tradition, the new philosophy of history now modestly focuses its analysis on historical writings. The shift of emphasis is welcomed by both modernist and postmodernist historians.

Most importantly, the book discusses the interaction between postmodernism and current Chinese historiography. Among today’s social sciences, history is the only branch that is indigenous to Chinese learning; thus, it is particularly significant to focus on historiography in order to observe how a traditional field of learning is responding to the impact of Western culture.

In sum, by providing an introductory context based on related perspectives, the book seeks to facilitate understanding of the arguments of postmodern scholars. That contextual foundation serves as a basis for an effort to offer not only a balanced and sophisticated assessment of their contributions but also critical comments about their doctrines. Only after presenting a detailed excursion into postmodern historiography does the author venture to set forth his reflections on the development and future of historical studies. The author expresses the hope that historians would regain confidence in historical knowledge about the past through surviving the so-called storm of "the day after tomorrow." Viewed in this light, although the book is designed for readers with a background of Chinese culture, it is not simply a synthesis of Western writings on postmodern historiography. Rather, it seeks to provide an encounter or a dialog between two different cultures or generations of historians.

(Taipei: San-min Publishing Co., 2006)