

**Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). ISBN 798-1-137-409086-7.**

What do historians contribute to knowledge? How do they make that contribution? How are historical arguments justified? How can they be evaluated? In *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, philosopher Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen examines these questions through an analysis of a wide range of philosophical concepts with the goal of showing that there is a philosophically-justifiable middle ground between ‘a nihilistic “anything goes” postmodernism and an absolutist objectivism’ (p. 198). In the introduction, he identifies ‘narrativism’ – the idea that historical writing, like literary writing, relies on narrative to create meaning – as the most dominant contemporary theory of historiography. With this being the case, much of the book is framed in relation to the narrativist philosophies of Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit. Importantly, however, he goes well beyond this and critically engages with many thinkers from many schools of thought. This breadth of engagement is a strength of the book, though the historian may wish he spent more time with the reflections of those that actually practice(d) history, such as E. H. Carr, G. R. Elton, David Hackett Fischer, and Richard J. Evans.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Kuukkanen demonstrates his belief in the idea that the philosophy of historiography should have practical relevance to historical scholarship by grounding abstract philosophical concepts in examples from historical works, particularly E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961); Elton, *The Practice of History*, 2nd edn. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Evans, *In Defence of History*, new edn. (London: Granta Books, 2000).

*Working Class* and Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. The book is structured around the analysis of these concepts.

In the first three chapters, Kuukkanen introduces the main concepts of the narrativist philosophy of historiography and suggests that narrativists are correct in at least some of their assertions. This includes the basic idea that historians primarily contribute to knowledge through the creation of texts (i.e., writing books and articles) and the idea that those texts contain 'synthesising entities' that organise the content of the text and create meaning. He refers to this as the 'narrativist insight', but persuasively argues throughout the book that it is historical theses and arguments rather than narratives that synthesise and create meaning in historical writing.

The subsequent chapters follow this premise by analysing how these synthesising entities work and how they can be evaluated. In chapter 4, Kuukkanen analyses and rejects the idea that an historical text can directly or exactly represent the past and, in chapter 5, he likewise rejects the narrativist idea that a text is an autonomous narrative that can only be analysed as such. In disagreeing with the narrativists, he suggests that an historical text is not simply or solely constructed as a narrative, but is, rather, constructed as a rational argument. Interestingly, Kuukkanen considers the idea of historiography as argument to be the central concept of the book and gives credit to Jorma Kalela for first formulating it (p. ix). He fails to acknowledge that Nancy S. Struever critiqued narrativist theory via the concept of historiography as argument as early as 1980.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 6 completes the analysis of the primary narrativist concepts of

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<sup>2</sup> Struever, 'Topics in History', *History and Theory* 19, no. 4, Beiheft 19 (1980), 66-79.

historiography by discussing colligatory concepts (synthesising expressions, such as 'Renaissance', 'Enlightenment', and 'Cold War'). It is concluded that colligatory concepts do not correspond to historical reality because they are created by historians, but are, nonetheless, necessary in historiography. This argument can be read as both a narrativist rejection of the concept of truth in historiography and a defence against narrativist critiques that do not fully consider how colligation is used by historians.

The book is rounded out by chapters examining truth, justification, and objectivity. Though these chapters provide many insights, only the discussion of objectivity satisfies the history-minded reader's desire for a practical explanation of how these concepts can be conceived of when practicing history. In the book's conclusion, Kuukkanen presents his fully-formed theory. In brief, this is that 1) the main contributions of historiography are historical theses rather than narratives 2) historical theses are constructed by historians to synthesise historical data 3) because they are constructed by historians, historical theses do not bear a corresponding relationship with historical reality and therefore cannot be judged in terms of truth/falsity 4) this lack of correspondence does not mean that historical theses are imaginary or non-rational – they should be viewed as rational arguments and 5) as arguments, historical theses can be evaluated based on rational criteria. In this formulation the idea of 'truth' becomes superfluous because the act of giving reasons for an argument, combined with the possibility that this can convince a rational person to accept the argument, is enough to establish 'epistemic authority' (p. 146).

Kuukkanen's postnarrativist theory provides an approach to understanding historiography that maintains a solid practical and cognitive footing while bridging the gap between opposing views

on truth, reality, and objectivity in historiographical discourse. This is an impressive feat and the only issue that truly stands out is the lack of in-depth discussion regarding the role of evidence in the creation of historical theses. This shortcoming, however, does not undermine Kuukkanen's contribution. Though full of abstract philosophical concepts and terminology, this book would be beneficial to history students and historians interested in engaging with the philosophical underpinnings of their discipline. Furthermore, Kuukkanen has taken a step towards making philosophical studies of historiography more accessible to historians by attempting to ground some of his analysis in examples from works of history. Hopefully this initial step is expanded upon both by Kuukkanen and by other philosophers who will do more to convince historians that their work is relevant to historical scholarship.

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