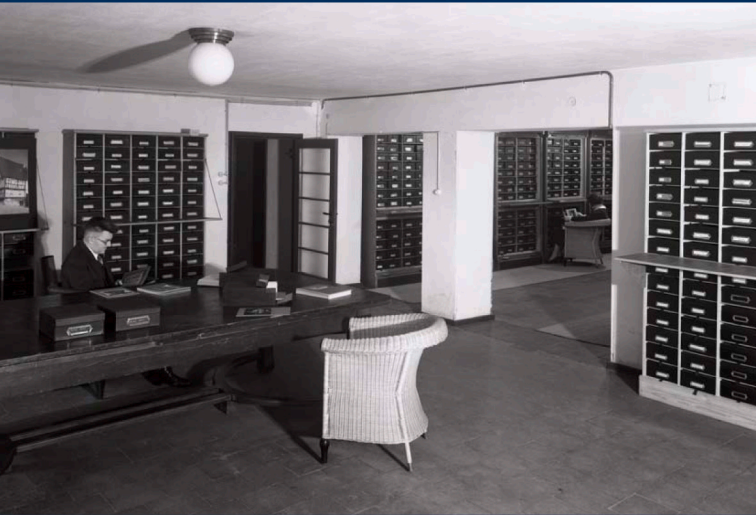


Sebastian Jobs, Alf Lüdtke (eds.)

UNSETTLING HISTORY

Archiving and Narrating
in Historiography



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Unsettling History: Introduction

Sebastian Jobs/Alf Lüdtke

Whose demand is it?

Opinions vary as to whether interest in history is waxing or waning. At any rate, not only professional historians claim that society needs history. At least in 'Western' countries, that is in North America as well as most parts of Europe, history fairs and historical re-enactments¹ flourish (Schindler 2003). Many seek active participation in weekends of medieval markets if not scenarios of historical battles; even more people join the respective crowds to add their cheers. At the same time, feature films, documentaries, and, not least, TV series distribute their take on history. They accentuate events, particularly those breaks with the seemingly ordinary that convey catastrophe and include a hefty component of blood, sweat and tears: the campaigns of Alexander the Great or Caesar and, then, the Napoleonic Wars or the Civil War in the United States. But most frequently they zoom in on the First and Second World Wars. In general, their grasp of history often revolves around wars and warfare but also the Holocaust and other genocides: mass violence in its many occurrences.

Some historians lament this trend as nothing but a media hype.² In their view, audiences simply fall prey to clever strategies of media moguls and film technocrats. However, this stance underestimates what people demand

1 The many examples include the *Annual Gettysburg Civil War Battle Reenactment* in Pennsylvania or a reenactment of the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt (1806) in Thuringia/ Germany in October 2006 as part of the celebrations for a special *Year of German and French Relations*, as well as numerous medieval fairs in Germany taking place throughout the year, such as nightly jousts at Auerbach Castle in Bensheim-Auerbach, a *Medieval Easter Fair* in Pforzheim or the *Medieval Christmas Fair* in Munich.

2 The subject sparked wide debate on panels regarding the role of contemporary witnesses for writing and telling history and on *History on TV—A Challenge for the Science of History?* at the 2006 Historikertag of the German Historians' Association (DHIV) in Constance (see a summary of the discussions at <http://bsoz&kult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=1193> and <http://bsoz&kult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/id=832&type=diskussionen>).

from historical display, narration and memorialization. Their efforts to get close to historical sites or re-enactments reveal an attraction to the visual and even tangible that reflects a quest for ‘true reality’, whether people flock to exhibits, visit memorials or prefer infotainment. Of course, juicy stories or a gripping performance are drawing people. Yet representation may arouse but cannot satisfy the hunger for reality. And it seems that this dimension of people’s curiosity too often escapes the attention of those who tend to raise their eyebrows or voices in contempt. Instead it may be more productive to consider the clues that bolster such interest in if not lust for reality—even among intellectuals and academics (and others in these domains) who turn their attentions to history.

The appetite for retrieving and regaining or, in difference, for destroying and rebuilding a past reality “anew” seems also at work when people aim at “taking history into their own hands”. Such claims fuelled rebellious and revolutionary actions, from the American and the French Revolutions of the eighteenth century to the most recent movements that furthered the implosion and revolutionary change of the “really existing socialism” in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989/90.

In recent decades, the interest in and curiosity for the reality of historical actors, who were ignored if not disdained and, thus, excluded from the historical record (Trouillot 1995), stimulated efforts to reconstruct “history from below”³. Such practices of ‘doing history’ unsettled prevailing interpretations of academic historians who for a long time had claimed the monopoly on deciphering the past—“set apart like priests to do something special”, as Greg Dening ironically remarked (1996). While much of the history of everyday life also drew inspiration from this change of perspective, a strident accent was added by the subaltern studies. Their advocates put a specific flavor to these efforts to redirect historical investigation: their aim was to show the colonized as agents who pursued trajectories of their own making notwithstanding the repressive settings of colonial rule and socio-cultural *mission civilisatrice*. Yet, similar to activists of alternative movements in the West, protagonists of subaltern studies also continued to operate within Western frameworks.⁴ In due course, however, their focus on actual

3 On historical work outside the academic institutions, particularly on History Workshops in their German variant, see Lindenberger and Wildt 1992.

4 However, this was a multifaceted process in which more traditional, not least Marxist, notions kept a strict hold on those approaches to people’s ways of perceiving, interpreting and acting that did not fit models of, for instance, ‘rational man’ (Chakrabarty 2000, 97–113).

practices, utterances and gestures of historical actors in colonized societies like British India made apparent the ambivalences of the strategies of survival many ‘subalterns’ developed. In turn, only reluctantly did respective studies explore how and to what extent subaltern people cooperated in their everyday practices with the forces of domination and exploitation.⁵

Clues and Traces

Interest in and desire for history seems increasingly sparked by a rejuvenated curiosity for the materiality of the past. In a very literal sense this very materiality often translates into a quest for an objective history. Professional historians have picked up these demands; in a parallel move they began to acknowledge ‘things’ and ‘objects’ as topics of research proper (Auslander 2005; Betts 2004; Briggs 2003).⁶

Previously, efforts to explore material cultures for the understanding of past (and present) contexts reflected the traditional focus of historiography on written or visual clues: material objects would compensate the assumed lack of scripture and picturing in large segments of society. Meanwhile, this interest in the many layers of materiality has been increasingly driven by a rather recent focus on the specific presence of objects. Their peculiar logic if not *Eigensinn* reverberates with their individual shapes, smells and textures. Similar to overcoming the disdain of orality and literacy (and accepting their use-values and inter-dependencies), the objects appear now among people’s multiple everyday practices which demand study. Therefore, material clues—and the materiality of clues—pertain to every historical figuration or societal context.

Yet, the notion of and the senses for these traces are not a natural given, but need training. Karl Marx already pointed this out when, in 1844, he remarked that “the forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present” (Marx quoted in Howes 2005, 282). In such vein, Carlo Ginzburg has drawn attention to what he calls a

5 See, for instance the range of studies on practices of collusion, cooperation and collaboration and, not least, denunciation in dictatorial regimes or under military occupation in various contexts of the twentieth century.

6 From the history of science Bruno Latour’s reasoning about things as actors (or actants) has stirred much debate in cultural studies at large, see Latour 2004 and Kreienbrock 2008.