

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1949-2012) Haitian academic and Anthropologist, PhD John Hopkins (1985); taught Anthropology at the University of Chicago until his death in 2012. He published 5 monographs.

“THE POWER IN THE STORY”

SILENCING THE PAST: POWER AND THE PRODUCTION OF HISTORY, MICHEL-ROLPH TROUILLOT, 1995



AIMS OF THE BOOK: HISTORY AND POWER

“This book is about history and power. It deals with the many ways in which the production of the historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means of such production.” The power exerted over the making of historical narratives is as powerful as guns etc. xix

(Consider, for example, the recent discussion about the Martin Luther King Memorial)

“I also want to reject both the naïve propositions that we are prisoners of our pasts and the pernicious suggestion that history is whatever we make of it.” (xix)

BEYOND DICHOTOMIES

HUMAN BEINGS PARTICIPATE IN HISTORY BOTH AS ACTORS AND AS NARRATORS

HISTORY—A FUNDAMENTAL AMBIGUITY:

THE FACT OF THE MATTER –WHAT HAPPENED– socio-historical process &

THE NARRATION OF FACTS – “THAT WHICH IS SAID TO HAVE HAPPENED” – story about that process

Distinction between what happened and what is said to have happened not usually clear

Importance of Context

****TROUILLOT'S INTERVENTION IS THE MOVE BEYOND THE DICHOTOMY and we will keep returning to this point**

TWO TYPES OF HISTORY

Positivism: “the role of the historian is to reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate truth. Within that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative....At best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won” (5).

Constructivist: “history is another form of fiction....everything is interpretation” (5).

“the historical narrative bypasses the issue of truth by virtue of its form.” (6).

Beyond the dichotomy: “If history is merely the story told by those who won, how did they win in the first place? And why don’t all winners tell the same story?” (6).

BETWEEN TRUTH AND FICTION

Rules: govern historical truth claims (6)

“The need for a different kind of credibility sets the historical narrative apart from fiction” (8). SOURCE

“collectivities experience the need to impose a test of credibility on certain events and narratives because it matters to them whether these events are true or false, whether these stories are fact or fiction” (11)

Scholarship and political responsibility (12)

“if there is... nothing to be proved or disproved, what then is the point of the story?”

-to establish moral authority (Hayden White) 13

BOUNDARIES THAT MATTER

“The boundary between what happened and that which is said to have happened is necessary” (13).

“The past—pastness—is a position” (15)

“when does the life of a collectivity start? At what point do we set the beginning of the past to be retrieved? How do we decide—and how does the collectivity decide—which events to include and which to exclude” (16)

“the collective subjects who supposedly remember did not exist as such at the time of the events they claim to remember. Rather, their constitution as subjects goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of the past” (16)



HISTORY IS NOT FIXED

the past and the present are not separable and the problem with positivism is that it suggests that history is a fixed set of things that occurred in the past that we can get at through some transparent form of memory or language. (p. 15, also part of discussion of positivism on p. 5 which “reinforced the chronological boundary between past and present.” (5)

History is not fixed. Historical facts are not sitting and waiting to be found. History (what happened) exists only in relation to the present because we can only know and understand the past from the position in we currently are. Individual and collective memory are shaped by the politics and power relations of the present and the meaning of the past influenced by them.

THE TROUBLING QUESTION

If slavery was more sadistic in the Brazil and the Caribbean, why does slavery matter more both symbolically and analytically in the US? (18)

1-how it ended: Civil War

2- the fate of the slaves' descendants (issue of the present)

History is produced in overlapping sites by a variety of narrators:

Debates about weighted historical events : the Alamo, the Holocaust, US slavery—involve ethnic and religious leaders, political appointees, journalists, and various civil society organizations— as much as professional historians (19)

History produced outside of Universities: The Panama Canal Museum will be an example of that.

What we collect in dLoc is also another example of producing archiving that produce histories

TROUILLOT'S PRESENT- HISTORIANS' CRITIQUE

Trouillot part of a debate about history and we can see the contours of the debate by looking at 2 reviews in particular:

Anthropologists appear more likely find Trouillot's work solid and useful—Trouillot was an anthropologist –anthropologist critique: that he should pay more attention to oral accounts/histories.

(Traditional) Historians are more likely to find his work inadequately based in evidence, lacking a strong argumentative structure, and creating silences of its own. Thus, Prominent historians of the Caribbean such as Franklin Knight and David Nicholls have been very critical

Knight criticizes Trouillot for not being more of a traditional historian, (for not considering in greater depth the history of history writing which goes back to Herodotus (and no doubt earlier), for disregarding prominent contemporary historians and historical organizations), and for failing to provide a coherent argument for his main assertion that “those who manipulate power also manipulate the production of history” (483).

David Nicholls criticizes Trouillot for not identifying which positivist historians he is criticizing, for creating silences of his own by ignoring particular aspects of Haitian history, and for writing in a didactic fashion that shows a lack of respect for students/readers by talking down to them (p 724)

TROUILLOT'S PRESENT- ANTHROPOLOGISTS' & CARIBBEANISTS' PRAISE

By contrast, scholars in Trouillot's own field of anthropology have praised the book.

Many Caribbean scholars (among them Verene Shepherd and Bridget Brereton whom we will read) have sought to provide a history for people whose stories have been excluded from the dominant version of history and who have not been able to leave their own accounts of the past in traditional archives.

Winichakul argues that Trouillot furthers the debate of the role of historians in recovering history by presenting “the production of historical knowledge” as “a bundle of silences” (cited 27) and thus “obliterate[ing] any remaining false hope” of “naively trying to recover the objective past.”

“WE ARE ALL AMATEUR HISTORIANS”

Sites of history learning and making

Celebrations, site and museum visits, movies, national holidays,
primary school books

Academic history has weight (hegemony) but it is recent, fragile and
limited (20)

Again recall public debate and CHANGE around the Martin Luther
King, Jr. Memorial.



THE PRODUCTION OF NARRATIVES

Making the process of producing a narrative the object of study (22)

Overlap between process and narrative (23)

History as social process= peoples in 3 capacities

1-agents– occupants of structural positions (class/status: workers, slaves, mothers)

2-actors – in constant interface with context (time and space—historical particulars)

3-subjects – voices aware of their vocality (“people define the very terms under which some situations can be described”) why the workers refuse to work and their objectives for not working (ie, striking (24)

*”The capacity upon which they act to become subjects is always part of their condition” (24)

HOW HISTORY WORKS: TRACKING POWER

Power differentials that make some narratives possible and silences others
25

“Someone else has already entered the scene and set the cycle of silences”
(26)

Silences enter the process of historical production at 4 crucial moments:

1-Sources- the moment of fact creation (making sources)

2-ARCHIVES-the moment of fact assembly (making archives)

3-NARRATIVES- the moment of fact retrieval (making narratives)

4-HISTORY-the moment of retrospective significance (making history)

Therefore, “any historical narrative is a particular bundles of silences” 27

Power is constitutive of the story– not outside the story 28

“Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times and
from different angles.” 28-9

“History begins with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossils, texts,
buildings” 29

TROUILLOT'S INTERVENTION: BEYOND DICHOTOMY

How does Trouillot go beyond the dichotomy between positivist and constructivist ideas of history?

As William Roseberry explains, he does it by examining the historical process through which historical knowledge is produced:

“For Trouillot, the really interesting problem is how histories as stories (that which is said to have happened) are constructed from or in relation to history as sociohistorical process (what happened).”

”Power relations enter at each of the junctures[the making of sources, archives, narratives, and retrospective significance], rendering certain facts more real, recoverable, or memorable than others.” 926

ORAL HISTORIES- AS KEY SOURCE

Roseberry does offer 1 critique: Trouillot should pay more attention to oral history in the first two phases of making history—the production of sources and archives. We should pay more attention to the lack of importance given oral accounts as opposed to written accounts:

“The relation between written and oral sources is, of course, a critical one in which power frequently comes into play as written sources are privileged over oral ones” It is here, closest to what happened, that silences and erases most frequently occur, and it is also here that much creative and recuperative work is being done, gathering oral accounts and collecting them in archives” (927)

Here we might consider McKay’s “Peasant Way of Thinking” and its assertion of an peasant’s oral vision and skepticism about official narratives...



DISCIPLINARY DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT HISTORY

Anthropologists such as William Roseberry and Thongchai Winichakul appear more likely find Trouillot's critique of historiography accurate and useful, while historians are more likely to find his work inadequately based in evidence, lacking a strong argumentative structure, and creating silences of its own.

"The selectivity of Trouillot's sources and his narrow dependence on narrative history to represent the varied fields of historical production will leave many readers quite dismayed." Franklin Knight

"Why the silence about the slave revolts of earlier in that year in the South, so well chronicled by Caroline Fick?

Mention of such events might perhaps interfere with the legend which Trouillot manifestly wishes to perpetuate. Perhaps the silence is due to ignorance; surely not." David Nicholls

"Unfortunately the tone of this handsomely-produced book is excruciatingly patronising and self-consciously didactic. It derives from his work as a university professor, but does he need to talk down to his students in quite this way?" David Nicholls

TROUILLOT'S REACH- THE LITERARY

Trouillot's approach is consistent with much literary approach to history and this is indicated by the fact that the book, now nearly 20 years old, was just quoted by Edwidge Danticat as a must read about Haitian history: When asked this summer " What books, recent or otherwise, would you recommend about Haiti?", Edwidge Danticat replied:

.... For some brilliant analysis from the past - and on the past - one also cannot fail with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's "Silencing the Past" and Joan Dayan's magnificent "Haiti, History, and the Gods."

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