



The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past

Keith Windschuttle

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A huge success in hardcover, *The Killing of History* argues that history today is in the clutches of literary and social theorists who have little respect for or training in the discipline. He believes that they deny the existence of truth and substitute radically chic theorizing for real knowledge about the past. The result is revolutionary and unprecedented: contemporary historians are increasingly obscuring the facts on which truth about the past is built. In *The Killing of History*, Windschuttle offers a devastating exposé of these developments. This fascinating narrative leads us into a series of case histories that demonstrate how radical theory has attempted to replace the learning of traditional history with its own political agenda.

The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past Details

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Dfordoom says

In *The Killing of History* Keith Windschuttle takes aim at the various silly French intellectual fads that have been infesting our universities in the last few decades and that have been such a blight on our intellectual life.

The structuralists, the semioticians, the post-structuralists, the postmodernists and the rest of this motley crew of pseudo-intellectual frauds are demolished one by one. Windschuttle examines case histories of attempts by these charlatans to replace the traditional academic discipline of the professional historian with politically correct fantasies.

The growth of travesties such as cultural studies is steadily undermining the intellectual foundations on which our civilisation is built. It's another example of the increasingly self-destructive nature of our beleaguered civilisation.

Windschuttle's masterly hatchet job has, predictably, enraged the cultural Marxists and their fellow travellers. All the more reason to read this important book.

Allison says

Especially good is the chapter on "The return of tribalism" as well as the chapter on "history as Literature." The discussion on Foucault did not excite me.

Greg says

This book by an Australian author tells the background of literary criticism theories and then proceeds to debunk many of the scholars who use them by showing examples of good scholarship. The side by side comparison of post-modernists writings next to other writings on the same subject is really devastating to the literary critics. I was pretty much thrilled to discover this storehouse of intellectual ammo.

DoctorM says

A dismal and willfully obtuse rant about the dangers of cultural studies and critical theory by a conservative Australian historian. It's hard in the end to decide what Windschuttle's real complaint is. Is he hostile to theory as such? Is it that he just dislikes methodologies that treat history as a narrative like any other? Or does he just disagree with the results reached by historians using "postmodern" techniques? Several of the examples he cites are certainly open to serious critique as to *results*, but Windschuttle is not attempting to debate the use of sources or argue interpretations. What he wants is to discredit and reject any hint of perspectivism or the use of "outside" disciplines (e.g., sociology, semiotics, cultural studies) that undermine

the idea that History reaches "objective"--- and here he seems to mean "conservative" ---truth. Windschuttle seems to be arguing that unless History can reach objective truth, there is no hope for deriving a sense of order in the world or holding societies together--- one of the usual conservative fears of any critical theory. All in all, a rant by an author who wants History to reach only *his* version of Truth.

Brett Williams says

The Totalitarian Era of Political Correctness

"The essence of history," writes the author, "is that it once tried to tell the truth, to describe as best as possible what really happened." Not so much anymore. Less is there a distinction between history and fiction in this, one of many fronts in the culture wars against Western Civilization. In this book we find a war of atrocities committed by the West upon itself, most notably in the US. The Australian author, Keith Windschuttle, carries us through the wreckage to find objectivity has been abandoned, truth hopelessly politicized. But no vacuum remains. The old objectivity is replaced by kind sounding censorship, control, and quiet vendetta. This is not isolated but permeates the West's political system, media and every university that once considered education its aim. Not a conspiracy but a movement. The attack is not only on history but on knowledge. (Fortunately, nature is the final judge, and technology conforms to that nature – i.e. technology works.)

One such "new Left" theory discussed by Windschuttle is "structuralism" (pioneered by Claude Lévi-Strauss), claiming that people are incapable of seeing outside structures imposed by their culture – a psychological edifice confining every thought to this structure. But structuralism cannot account for insights radically outside accepted modes of thought that are the mainstay of scientific and social revolutions – Einstein and Jesus. According to Windschuttle, the new movements tell us we can never really know what happened in history, then contradict themselves by telling us what really happened. Far from defeating Eurocentric bias, we find structuralists extending it. University professors rename their personal political agendas as "cultural studies" in order to brainwash students their way under rules of "academic freedom." We find revisionist history, segregation of students by race or gender with White Studies or Women's Studies on campus (what the Klan wanted but failed at), and the blending of fact with fiction to insert a totalitarian indoctrination little different than fundamentalist conservatives who seek to rewrite text books because the facts of life are unsettling. Not just another transient social fad, these new movements are a crisis of civilization for Windschuttle.

Oswald Spengler said this would happen: the West would begin to doubt itself, find itself guilty, and pronounce a verdict of its own extinction. Windschuttle indicates we've arrived. An excellent book by a man immersed in the field. If you read this book you'll find it hard to put down, but you may never sleep soundly again.

Tom Darrow says

Dreadfully painful and dull to read. Ironically, the author is guilty of the offence on which he is writing. By producing literary criticism so dry and dense he has killed my desire to read and even think about history.

BC says

This is a fun book to read, especially if you have to read some of the more 'pomo' stuff for class.

Windschuttle takes aim at the culture of literary criticism and cultural studies which is now supplanting traditional history as the backbone of history departments. I found the larger premise of Windschuttle's case solid. He is at his best when he is writing about his own area of knowledge (Australian history), and a bit weak when he ventures outward.

At the end of the day, Windschuttle makes a convincing case for the empirical study of history; a return to Ranke. It is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the history (and future) of history as a discipline.

Stephen Coates says

With examples concerning Captain Cook's visit to the Hawaiian Island and the subsequent settlement of history, Windschuttle presents the case how new pseudo-academic disciplines of social and cultural theory, post-modernism, anti-humanism, Marxism, cultural relativism and scientific relativism are destroying the discipline of history by preferencing myths, semiotics and discourses over factual records and scholarship.

Brett Thomasson says

Complaints against the modern university's production of weapons-grade balloon juice have been around for a long time, although they have mostly been the province of more conservative-minded folk. Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* gave respectable cover for people who would identify as liberal but who were seeing goofy ideas grab hold of their respective disciplines and render them inaccurate, distorted or in many cases, just plain silly. It's kind of interesting to look on some of those works some years down the line and see if their alarm was warranted.

The concepts of literary criticism and theory were beginning their inroads in 1997, when Australian history professor Keith Windschuttle published his *The Killing of History*. Although he would later move significantly rightward in his politics, Windschuttle was still a centrist when *Killing* was published. And like many moderate or leftist folks who have to confront views similar to their own taken to extremes, he seems somewhat at sea in parts of his argument.

Windschuttle's core claim is that folks who practice a broad range of politicized writing and study that's often lumped together as "theory" are exerting their influence on historical research and writing. His view as a historian is that such writing needs to communicate the central facts of its subjects in the clearest and most engaging manner possible. Writing about the Civil War as a whole, for example, needs to include things like major battles and some of the people and forces that played roles in them. A book focused on a diary of a poor farm family affected by Lincoln's 1863 conscription order lights up a small corner of that time, but someone who learns it backwards and forwards has not learned the history of the Civil War.

But the literary theorists and social critics were claiming that just that kind of change was needed to do "real history," and focus on the voices previously drowned out by the privileged few. Windschuttle acknowledges the gaps, but reconstruction of the missing material is a job for a novelist, not a historian.

Windschuttle spends a lot of time explaining and exploring the roots of the theories that offer this new and to his mind, vague and often inaccurate form of history. He ventures into some very deep weeds in these sections, devoting a number of pages to critiquing, for example, the idea that Karl Popper's falsifiability model is useful for historical research. Some of these are far too jargon-rich for folks who don't work with history for a living, and Windschuttle writes in a mostly academic style that doesn't much leaven these pages.

More interesting to us in 2017 are Windschuttle's cautions against the ultimate result of history modified by theory and social criticism. When we see people insisting that statues be removed and building names be changed in order to wipe "unpleasant" history from our public view, we can see that although history ain't dead yet, it's got a pretty bad cough that it ought to see the doctor about.

Original available [here](#).

The Hanged Man says

Horseshit.

Jim Chase says

For the past many decades, even the casual observer cannot help but to see that any activity, approach, or viewpoint that takes on (or has forced upon it) the descriptor of "traditional" is increasingly portrayed in a negative light. The arguments over traditional vs. contemporary (modernism, postmodernism, relativism) play out in almost every venue imaginable, most notably in academia, religion, and politics. Keith Windschuttle's *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* pulls back the curtain on one such pitched battle in the field of historical studies. For the layman who may be largely unexposed to the various positions, theories, and methodologies at play, this book is a difficult read, and will take additional effort and self-directed research to properly interpret and absorb. While Mr. Windschuttle does offer definition, description, and context in his presentation of the issues that form the basis of the argument, what is offered presumes a certain level of preexisting knowledge of the subject matter and the debate.

From the opening pages of Mr. Windschuttle's treatise, it quickly becomes apparent that his work is not so much an intent to introduce the layman to the ongoing philosophical battles surrounding the study of history and its methods, but rather it is in fact a series of salvos directed at proponents of more contemporary theories on the discipline. The layman is unlikely to be familiar with the works of Derrida, Foucault, and a host of other historical theorists, past and present, and so to a certain extent has to trust the author's presentation of their cases and viewpoints. Nevertheless, the reading is a worthwhile exercise, because in doing so one acquires a better understanding of the motivations and the deficiencies behind the movements and initiatives that do reach the public eye, particularly as it pertains to history curriculum in schools, the phenomenon of "cultural studies" as a substitute for the more traditional views identified with Western civilization, and so forth.

As one reads the final chapter and closes the book, the reader cannot help but to sense that an important opportunity has been missed. For while Mr. Windschuttle's aim is to expose as illogical and unsupportable the theories of history that cannot be supported by empirical evidence, his defense of traditional methods of

historical study is often limited to the contrast he presents against the ideas and theories he opposes. In other words, he fails to make a strong final case in favor of the traditional model of historical study. This is unfortunate, because he has a case to make. The reader would have been better served if the author had provided a conclusive retrospective that summarized the supremacy of his preferred methodology, instead of a two or three paragraph write-off to close the work. As a result, one is left with the impression that the book is more of a broadside against the ideas he opposes, and less a defense of the ideas for which he advocates. There is fantastic research here, and worth additional study. But it could have been more.

Alberto Martín de Hijas says

Interesting polemic denouncing the damage caused to history as a discipline by tendencies more interested in promoting a given discourse than in studying the facts (mainly postmodernism and poststructuralism). Windschuttle not only responds adequately to his arguments but also exposes them with the clarity that the refuted rarely practice. Although several years have passed since its initial publication, its validity only has increased (Specially with the aggravation of the problem in these post-truth times)

Jack Gardner says

Intellectual, Historical, and Literary Treat

Thank you for The Killing of History. I am giving copies for Xmas, both for their enjoyment and hoping they will help parents and kids counter some of the nonsense students are exposed to. Your examples of fraudulent, incompetent history accepted at universities in the name of political correctness and diversity demonstrate the undermining of true education.

You mention Foucault's neglect of crediting sources he likely drew upon and you discuss his argument that the medical model applied to psychology has been used to repress unconventional attitudes and lifestyles. Dr. Thomas Szasz argued against the misuses of the medical model much more cogently and accurately in his The Myth of Mental Illness, published in 1961, two years before the Foucault work you cited. Moreover, Szasz was not trying to argue that minds are incompetent tools.

I appreciate the discussion of the issue of theory coloring observations, and in particular history. It occurs to me that those who maintain that theory is controlling in every observation, must also maintain that, since dogs observe, dogs must have theories? Else, they are maintaining that only beings with theories (conceptual thought) are unable to accurately observe reality? Whereas, beings with only perceptual thought can do quite well? I suppose they want to say that anyone who puts an observation into language necessarily uses theory and cannot distinguish perception from conception? The implication is that reason is not a means of knowledge, subject to error and error correction, but is necessarily a distortion of reality. This in essence seems the view of Kant and all of his various followers, who, while usually touted as supporters of reason, are actually anti-reason -- reversing cause and effect, and encouraging a reliance on emotions as knowledge.

An issue you did not address is what makes these intellectually dishonest fools influential in our culture? Thinkers like yourself are self-made, through years of effort in building a hierarchy of objective values, in refining methodologies, and in identifying and resolving confusions. How is it that a seemingly increasing

percentage of people in universities fail to develop these virtues and values?

Obviously, their failure is not an act of effort, but of lack of effort. What these people have is a default, non-intellectual morality of tribal collectivism and altruism. This cannot be defended rationally; so, only irrationality will do for them. Their emotions tell them so. To paraphrase Ayn Rand: They cannot build, but they must act; so, they only destroy.

I suggest that the central influence in the last hundred years in intellectually and morally crippling students is the increasing government support for schools and universities. With financial support comes political influence on textbooks, teacher qualifications, teacher unionization, and forced attendance in approved institutions.

It is government influence that creates the jobs and pulpits for fools and intellectual failures, whether in the arts, science, or education. In a degenerative cycle, with progressive generations the citizens, the government, and the schools get worse. The resulting culture is one which has degenerated into fostering postmodernism philosophy. Would any of the promoters of such nonsense find jobs and pulpits if they had to rely on support from private citizens?

In the Europe of past centuries, government money and influences supported religions and schools that promoted religious teachings, else these teachings would not have been so influential. Today, governments are promoting the religions of environmentalism, multiculturalism, relativism, collectivism, etc.

Jordan says

Read a chapter or two in Dr Matzko's historiography course in undergrad and the whole thing in Dr Grubb's grad historiography at Clemson. Excellent. Not popular with the talkative Pomo and deconstructionist types in the seminar. Proved a good introduction to the absurdist manner in which examining evidence critically and seeking objective truth gets a scholar labeled "racist" nowadays. (Someone in my class, in response to Windschuttle's takedown of Michel Foucault, literally said "Keith Windschuttle hates brown people.") Need to revisit it now that I'm trying to introduce a little historiographical awareness to my 100- and 200-level students.

Lane Wilkinson says

I am a very patient and calm person. So, it is rare for me to read a book that makes me so angry that I have to put it down every ten pages. Honestly, the theories of the lit-crit elite are so infuriating that I have to stop reading to keep my blood pressure down. So, I commend Windschuttle for directly addressing the theorists who are indirectly destroying the academy, and I further commend his attempt at a fair approach. Windschuttle does not denigrate nor does he dismiss the contributions of the new historicism. However, Windschuttle makes a direct and convincing case that the relativism, anti-realism and anti-intellectualism of postmodernism is, ultimately, doomed to failure. We just have to hope that when it does fail, the valuable lessons of post-modernism remain, and the tripe (relativism, inconsistency, incoherence, etc.) is gone for good.
