The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History is Revisionist History. James M. Banner, Jr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. xi + 284 pp. $28. Hardback ISBN-13: 9780300238457.

Every history instructor has a version of this book in their repertoire: whether we are responding to tactical skepticism or tactless credulousness, in classroom discussions or family gatherings, we all run into the "why does history have to change?" question. I start with "Sources lie. But they're all we have" and go on to caution that "almost all history is written to prove somebody else is wrong about something," noting that history encompasses the study of all human activity including history itself, at which point I introduce the term "historiography" and warn students that I use it a lot. Banner's whole book could be described as an explication of L. S. Stavrianos's 1989 dictum that "Each generation must write its own history, not because past histories are untrue but because in a rapidly changing world new questions arise and new answers are needed."[1]

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the arguments arrayed here, Banner claims that this is a long-overdue, nearly unique work because it addresses historical work through the lens of "revisionism." One chapter attempts to categorize historical work into different sorts of revisionism. The rest of the book is mostly potted historiography peppered with meditations on whether a particular work is "properly" categorized as revisionist, or is more revisionist than something else, and concludes with a discussion of objectivity in sources and history through cognitive psychology, modern epistemology, and post-modern theory. His core argument is that revisionism is fundamental to historical work, a healthy skepticism that moves us constantly towards greater understanding, and that the term should be reclaimed from its origins and popular usage as a denigration of work believed to be scandalous or dangerously at odds with an existing consensus.

Banner's intended audience is two-fold: history students concerned about philosophical underpinnings, and non-historians who are curious, or perhaps suspicious, about revisionism as practiced by historians. Banner is also clearly aware that this will be read by practicing academic historians, because it admonishes us to be tolerant of the mental habits of non-historians. Banner frequently engages in rhetorical strawman moves, false dichotomies which can only be resolved by rejecting extremes and accepting what the text positions as pragmatic norms (though, oddly, "pragmatism" is not a term which appears in the text).

Banner makes a whiggish argument that all historical ideas contribute towards the gradual perfection of our understanding, but there is barely any recognition that people can be *wrong* about history, that not all errors are productive, especially when reinforced by patriotic fervor or hegemonic power, a troubling analytical gap for an argument about revisionism. There are frequent defenses of history written in chauvinistic modes no matter how low the standards of evidence or argumentation. Academic and "patriotic" history are presented as equals, and there are several references to history as "a democratic, public possession" (135) without acknowledging that the

[1] L. S. Stavrianos, *Lifelines From Our Past: A New World History* (Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon, 2015), 13.

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democratization comes with a loss of the standards of evidence; academics just have to put up with that as the price of doing business, according to Banner.

Banner presents fights over historical meaning as mostly being between the political left (mostly academics) and political right (mostly concerned citizens), and though that fails to capture much nuance, it represents his focus on revisionism as both an internal academic process and a public political phenomenon. The book opens with historiography of the causes of the US Civil War as an example of historical views shifting from participant observation to increasing dispassionate analysis, demonstrating significant influence from elite cultural and political views, culminating in the post-Second World War fracturing of disciplinary consensus with increased diversity of historians and historical perspectives. Another chapter presents the historiography of the French Revolution and of the US usage of atomic weapons against Japan in the Second World War, both of which involve a great number of non-historians and vigorous public debate, questions of national character, and periods of consensus and revisionist fracture. Banner's attempt to portray himself as a neutral reporter of the ongoing conversations doesn't always succeed, as in his obvious satisfaction that the planned *Enola Gay* exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum was beaten back by veterans and conservatives, capped by his claim that the current American academic consensus—no Japanese historians on the subject are cited—is that the use of those weapons of mass destruction was "legitimate, justified, and unavoidable" (227). The French Revolution historiography is there, it seems, to give an example where the consensus is sometimes on the left and the revisionism is then from the right.

Two chapters cover the development of the discipline in the West from the Greeks to the Rankean positivists (though 'positivism' is another technical term that never appears; it is unclear whether this is to reduce jargon for non-specialist audiences, or to give the appearance that these arguments are original) and *Annales* school social and cultural historians; twentieth-century postmodernism and the cultural/linguistic turn is relegated to the last chapter. The disciplinary survey is structured around the idea of tension between Herodotus as a cultural historian and Thucydides as a political historian, and several iterations of historians who pose a revisionist challenge to existing historical practice by switching back and forth between those modes.

This is well-trod territory, but it would be hard to tell that from the missing citations and terminology. Many standard readings on historical practice, all of which address revisionism as an element, are absent, including Marc Bloch, E. H. Carr, John Tosh, and David Hackett Fischer. The writing of history by participants and public memory would benefit greatly from acknowledging works such as Paul Cohen's *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, or Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (which would also have the salutary effect of broadening the discussion beyond the West). Banner's account of the effect of diversity and social movements on twentieth-century historiography echoes Ellen Fitzpatrick's *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880-1980*. Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* is invoked, of course, as is Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (though historians of science no longer consider it a reliable historical account, a missed opportunity to engage actual

revisionism). An array of notable conservative historians is cited as authorities, including Donald Kagan, Herbert Butterfield, and Felix Gilbert. Howard Zinn is mentioned only to cite Sam Wineburg's critiques, though there is hardly a better example of revisionism engaging with public memory; Wineburg is only cited to attack Zinn, though his work on historical cognition and public memory is much more relevant than the evolutionary and cognitive psychology that occupies so much of the objectivity chapter.

The chapter on varieties of revisionism starts on the question of what threshold of impact might constitute "real" revisionism, admitting that the concept is too fluid and historical work too much about changing minds for any kind of clear demarcation, framing the chapter as general ideas rather than a "formal typology" (143). The next section starts by debating whether Herodotus or Thucydides is *more* revisionist, highlights Christian historian Eusebius as the exemplar of "transformative" revisionism (despite his work having little impact on historical writing until Renaissance writers began to write similar works, influenced or not), and mentioning Christianity and Marxism. "Philosophical revisionism" relates to theories about the utility of history; "conceptual revisionism" is about the categories of analysis, most famously the ones that have proliferated in the last century, and involving a substantial detour through American women's history touting the reclamation of complementarian "separate spheres" theory as an understanding of female agency; "evidence-based revisionism and method-driven revisionism" are the dramatic new materials and new technologies that sometimes grab headlines (the Jefferson-Hemings question is used for illustration here); finally, "normal revisionism" covers most work historians do, incrementally moving towards answering big questions with little projects. This is the fourth chapter of six, though it is not clear why this was not introduced at the beginning so that it could inform the whole work, instead of just the chapters on the French Revolution, atomic bombings, and objectivity.

The Ever-Changing Past is not revisionist, but rather a restatement of basic principles of long-standing practice. It is not neutral, but it is resolutely mainstream in its commitments to both academic standards and popular discourses, and apparently uninterested in resolving the contradictions between them. For its intended audiences—students and presumptively patriotic amateurs—it is a serviceable introduction to the history of history and the epistemology it has developed over time, though there are many places where academic audiences may quibble or bristle. As someone who teaches historiography, I would not assign this to students at any level without significant caveats about the limitations and biases of the work, but individual chapters might work for some discussions and exercises.

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