

also suggestive of possible future research in the history of education.

Kari Dehli
O.I.S.E.

Lutz Niethammer. *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* trans. Patrick Camiller. London: Verso, 1992. Pp. 158. \$43.95 Cdn., cloth.

We who came to the history of education in the heady days of the early 1970s thought we knew why we were doing the history we did: our work was informed by our politics and would, in turn, contribute to social renewal. In the mid-1990s, the social purposes of studying the history of education are not nearly as clear: reforming schools alone, much less laying the foundations of a new social order, seem distant, utopian projects in the current cynical and despairing climate. The subtitle of the volume under review, addressed to historians, asks whether history has come to an end: i.e., have we seen the demise of intellectuals' meaningful engagement with the processes of historical change? Lutz Niethammer deals with the grand sweep of twentieth-century European intellectual history, next to which our own political-intellectual biographies may appear diminutive indeed. But he means us to think about our larger responsibilities as historians and in fact, he challenges us to do so.

Apparently common currency in German intellectual circles, the word

"posthistoire" will be unfamiliar, I suspect, to most North Americans. A seemingly French word, its origins actually lie among post-war German intellectuals. Posthistoire refers to a world in which life is lived without any seriousness or struggle, "in the regulated boredom of a perpetual reproduction of modernity on a world scale" (p. 3). It recalls poststructuralism, post-modernism, and the other "posts" which are part of the epistemological confusion of the current intellectual moment. "The inflation of the various 'post' concepts might suggest that we are no longer able or willing to define the content of where we are and where we want to go....What used to appear self-evident or desirable has lost its innocence, and now words more or less fail us" (p. 10).

But while these allusions point us in the right direction, there remains a long journey through dense verbiage to understand what this book is about. Niethammer is a prominent German historian, far more at home with speculative philosophy of history than most Anglo-American historians. While ultimately the intricate thickets of his translated German yield glimpses of shining clarity, the question facing English-speaking readers is, is the difficult read worth it?

Consider the following postulate offered without further argumentation, as if we all understand, accept, and are guided by it in our historical practice: "As a rule, meaningful history is created through advances in the interpretation of traces of real events from the past. However, for the relationship between history and any practical endeavour, what is decisive is that the

status of macro-historical interpretive models and deductions—without which it is impossible to demonstrate a significant relation between details—should not become so blurred that the interpretation appears immanent within the events themselves” (p. 145). How many of us give serious thought to “macro-historical interpretive models and deductions?” Would any dare write history so that the interpretation does *not* appear “immanent within the events”? The reader trips not infrequently over such obstacles.

Deeply critical of the proponents of posthistory, Niethammer invites us to “track the *Zeitgeist*,” to define and locate the geneology of the spirit of the present age. The method he employs in his intellectual history is anything but a linear, chronological narrative. He begins with a backwards glance at the concept of posthistory, through three thinkers, radically separated by ideology, nationality, and temporality. In the writings of Peter Bruckner, one of the last spokespeople of the German New Left, Niethammer sees the formerly right-wing notion of posthistory adopted by the left. The particular conjuncture in which this occurs is the aftermath of 1968, and a collapse in the promise of traditional Marxism. In his discussions of posthistory Bruckner cites Arnold Gehlen, a Nazi philosopher whose career survived into the Adenauer period. And Gehlen, in turn, refers to A.A. Cournot, French Second Empire philosopher. In Cournot, the twentieth-century pessimism about the end of history took the form of the optimistic promise of modernization. Niethammer’s reason for choosing these three remains obscure, but he

gives us a second run at the geneology of posthistory, using three “sceptical tropes” for diagnosing the twentieth century. These three “chains of associations” include what he calls “the dialogue of spirits” or great men speaking to each other across time, the megamachine, and “nature and death.” The writers whom Niethammer analyzes concern themselves with the progress which is decline: technological progress which lessens individual subjectivity, the development of “anonymous structural processes before which individuals feel so powerless that they endow them with ominipotence” (p. 57). The ubiquity of their references to Nietzsche is explained by this concern: the “way out,” if any exists, becomes the great man who separates himself from the masses and speaks to others like himself across time. The writers, Niethammer emphasizes, invariably conceive of themselves as separate from the masses, whom they despise as powerless and without subjectivity. Posthistory is the culmination of an intellectual politics of despair.

After two chapters (2 and 3) which dash back and forth among the ideas of intellectual figures across time, sandwiched by two chapters (1 and 4) which serve respectively as introduction and recapitulation to help the reader potentially “confused by our backward and forward movements” (p. 56), Niethammer promises to locate the next discussion of literary texts in their historical contexts, just before and after the Second World War. Though the promise of context and chronology is welcome, much of this section remains impenetrable. Begin-

ning with an examination of the shifting references to the end-of-history in the work of the Hegelian Alexandre Kojève, Niethammer is most interested in the ideological moves of an intellectual who faced a dramatically changing historical situation during his own life. The analysis of Kojève is followed by one of Ernst Junger, "after Thomas Mann, the most widely read author of serious prose in West Germany" in the 1950s (p. 69), and parallel intellectual biographies of legal theorist Carl Schmitt, philosopher Martin Heidegger, Belgian psychologist and politician Hendrik de Man, and French journalist and political theorist Bertrand de Jouvenel. All were associated with fascists for a time, subsequently withdrew from active public life, but were treated after the war as Nazi collaborators before attempting a return to active public participation. In Niethammer's analysis, their postwar writings, each of which bear posthistorical traces, were the outcome of attempts to reconcile their personal positions with the defeat of fascism.

Niethammer's admiring account of literary critic and historian Walter Benjamin, and his legacy among Frankfurt School colleagues exiled in the United States, offers a moral counterpoint to his treatment of the others. Benjamin died attempting to escape the Nazis, but left eighteen reflections on the concept of history. Niethammer provides an analysis of these elliptical fragments, particularly Reflections I and IX, largely through an examination of Benjamin's many interpreters. At a moment when he was threatened as a Jew by the Nazis, and when his own intellectual bearings were shaken

by the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Benjamin tried to reunite a religious tradition with historical materialism, "recalling the hopes of redemption stored in the religious tradition, so as to introduce them as a meaning and yardstick into human contact with history—both in reference to the past and for political action in the present" (p. 112). Benjamin's position serves as inspiration for Niethammer.

In the final chapter, Niethammer revisits ten theorists of posthistory encountered in the course of the book, and paints a powerful group picture as a final indictment of the posthistorical project. Initially associated with radical oppositional politics of either Left or Right, these theorists became disillusioned when the regimes they had advocated came to power: "the need to compromise themselves in particulars had not been anticipated in the grandeur of their original project" (p. 142). Disillusionment led to withdrawal from public life, but not from scholarly production. Intellectually wounded, their new writing was devoted not to self-analysis, but to "self-exonerating diagnosis of the external world" (p. 142). From this self-exoneration arose the concept of *posthistoire*, "an elitist, culturally pessimistic inversion of the optimism of progress" which "blinker[s] rather than illuminate[s] the diagnosis of the age" (p. 144). Their personal loss of meaning was superimposed upon history itself.

Yet, says Niethammer, they cannot simply be dismissed. The megamachine, the self-reproducing techno-social structure which has slipped out of conscious human control, is our common experience in the

contemporary age. The problem of posthistoire lies in the perspective from which its theorists wrote—as educated bourgeois who could not bear to think of themselves as part of the unconscious and disempowered “masses.” Niethammer implores contemporary intellectuals—historians in particular—to understand the subjectivity of the “masses,” to ally themselves with the latter, and to “support the subjectivity of individuals in their historical perception of themselves” (p. 149).

Niethammer’s basic assumptions are so far away from the empiricism of North American historical research, even from our tentative and occasional ventures into theory, that most of us, I suspect, are going to find *Posthistoire* a tough slog. Nevertheless, those committed to history “from below,” those committed to exploring the questions of the uses of historical understanding in promoting change, will confront a stimulating and challenging set of ideas in this difficult book.

Peter Seixas
University of British Columbia

Harvey J. Kaye. *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History.* London: Routledge, 1992. Pp. xiv, 211. \$18.95 Cdn., paper.

In this collection of eight essays, Harvey Kaye briefly examines the work of the English Marxist historians George Rudé, Victor Kiernan, Christo-

pher Hill, Edward Thompson, Leslie Morton, and Rodney Hilton. Additional essays are devoted to the work of the American socialist historian Leo Huberman and to that of the eclectic cultural critic John Berger. Kaye also offers a number of reflections on the competing uses claimed for the past by socialist and by New Right politics, attempting thereby to reaffirm the importance of critical historical study in the face of pronouncements that history has ceased.

Many of the English historians covered here were connected at some time with the Historians’ Group of the British Communist Party, a venue for the articulation of a characteristic approach to historiography. Guided by the Marxist dictum that “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle,” these historians were particularly responsible for the creation of history “from the bottom up.” Most of them have attended particularly to the recovery and investigation of the activities, culture, and experience of the “common people.” Through their efforts, our understanding of the transition from feudalism to capitalism has been altered and, perhaps more significantly, their work played an important role in the legitimacy acquired by “social history” within the larger historiographic enterprise.

In the essays devoted to Rudé, Thompson, Kiernan, Morton, and Huberman, Kaye outlines briefly the main interests and contributions of each, presents a brief biographical sketch, and probes some of their work in more detail. These essays are mainly expository, and some appeared