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[Review of] The Ethos of History: Time and Responsibility, edited by Stefan Helgesson and Jayne Svenungsson

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Stefan Helgesson and Jayne Svenungsson (eds.), *The Ethos of History: Time and Responsibility* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018), 230 pp., ISBN 978-1-78533-884-7, \$90.00.

With eleven engaging and well-written chapters, *The Ethos of History* offers a substantial contribution to contemporary debates about the role of history in our present cultural condition. A diverse group of writers, from junior researchers to established scholars such as Joan W. Scott, Aleida Assman and Hans Ruin, bring a wealth of thoughtful perspectives from philosophy, gender studies, literary and cultural theory – all gathered to assess the complex question of how historiography in (post)modern times relates to issues of justice, gender, postcoloniality and concepts of time. The topics under discussion are anything but narrow; still, the heterogeneous selection of subjects serves the general goals of this volume quite well, i.e. to launch a broad scale temporal diagnosis of the risk and potential for history's engagement with the present. Accordingly, the volume invites the reader to consider the makings of historical consciousness through fresh angles, and the discussion is often commendably palpable with well-chosen empirical examples. A small sample will illustrate the volume's wide scope: 'the vampire' as a literary trope which exposes inherent tensions within modern historiographical culture (Lindén and Ruin), imprescriptible crimes as an ethical concern which breaks up the linear time of historiography (Fareld), the different roles of historiography for promoting reconciliation in the aftermath of war (Bevernage), the challenges from psychoanalysis to historical knowledge (Scott), critical assessments of gendered notions of time (Fjelkestam) and the transformation of collective identities in the hashtag commemorations of the digital age (Vincent).

Still, the diverse contributions of the volume have one common denominator; namely, a shared commitment in their approach to the questions at issue. This is the idea that an assessment of historiography in the present condition, must involve an investigation of the inescapable ethical and existential entanglements of any attempt to make sense of the past. The authors of the volume articulate this ethical and existential concern as a question about the *ethos* of history. By using the term of *ethos*, rather than simply 'the ethical', the authors seek to explore a deeper aspect of the ways in which a reflective understanding of our own historicity bring a moral-existential burden of responsibility to the fore. Thus, as Ruin points out in a clarifying conceptual discussion, the word *ethos* is used with appeal to its original and broad meaning in Greek, and is not to be confused with 'ethics' in the limited modern sense of moral principles that are supposed to govern human behaviour. This broad meaning of *ethos* – evoking both a society's basic character as well as an ethical appeal to commitment and responsibility in the production of knowledge — makes the term of *ethos* very appropriate also for describing the most basic concerns of the texts in this volume. This is to examine the interplay between the character of a society and the meaning of the concept of history, as well as the potential role of historiography in the future as a tool for resistance against hegemonic and oppressive norms and identities.

The texts included in *The Ethos of History* are products of a conference by the same name organized in 2015 in Sigtuna, Sweden. The conference was part of a comprehensive research project titled Time, Memory and Representation, led by Ruin at Södertörn University. Consequently, the texts of the volume also reflect the limited framework of a conference paper: the arguments are compressed and, as several authors also acknowledge, their papers do not aim to offer an in-depth analysis of the issues under discussion. The drawback in choosing to include many short chapters in the volume, instead of a select full-length few, is certainly that the reader often finds that the paper end just

about when the author reaches the most crucial and contested aspects of the question at issue. However, as a compensation, many of the papers are excellent short introductions to the topics under discussion. For instance, Assman delivers a concise presentation of the main changes in the character of the *ethos* of history during the last 500 years, Fareld offers a well-written introduction to the discussion about historical time and justice, and Bevernage presents a clear account of basic questions concerning to the role of historiography in reconciliation processes. These chapters, along with several others in the volume, can serve as accessible and well-informed short introductions to key issues about the existential and ethical dimension of history in contemporary research. Consequently, the texts of this volume will be relevant not only to scholars in the related fields, but also to students from a broad range of subjects within the humanities.

The concepts of temporality and historical time constitute the general theoretical framework for most texts in the volume. The upside of this focus is, on the one hand, that the volume offers fresh ways of connecting discussions about history more closely with the on-going theoretical interrogation of time in literary, postcolonial and gender theory. The downside is, on the other hand, that this focus tends to neglect questions about the specificity of the relation to the past in historical research, i.e. concerns about how historical relations to the past are products of history as a *practice* with its own methods and standards. The result is that the volume offers few instruments for thinking about one central aspect of the very idea of history – what Wittgenstein called “the historical proof-game” – and how this aspect of history, as a critical but not ‘scientific’ way of reasoning, relates to concerns about *ethos* and the public role of history. Rather, contributions explicitly about historiography in the volume seem to presuppose that the practice of historical research deserves no special treatment. This is apparent from the fact that the general form of investigation offered tends to subsume the idea of historical research under more general notions concerning our temporal condition – a condition that, supposedly, determines the very character of history itself. As an antidote to this tendency, it would have been welcome to also include contributions about *ethos* from contemporary philosophy of historiography, a field in which questions about the autonomy of history has received much attention. However, these concerns do not diminish the quality of the work on issues that the book does indeed explore. Undoubtedly, *The Ethos of History* will be essential reading for anyone wanting a better understanding of the ways in which ethical and existential concerns shape history in our present historical condition.

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