

University of British Columbia

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: EVIDENCE & NARRATIVE

PHIL 419 | Philosophy of History

Winter 2020, Term 2 (January-April 2021)

Instructor: Professor Alison Wylie

Class meetings: T/Th 3:30-5:00 pm, MATH 204

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Course overview

How do we know what (we think) we know about the past? What makes an historical narrative explanatory? And why does history matter? These questions about historical inquiry have long intrigued philosophers and practitioners alike; often they are framed in terms of contrasts between history and (experimental) science, and animated by epistemic anxiety about whether claims about the past can ever be more than speculation. We will focus on philosophical accounts of evidential reasoning and narrative construction in history and archaeology, with some comparative examples drawn from the philosophy of geology, evolutionary biology and paleontology.

Our point of departure will be the arguments for rejecting conventional skepticism about historical knowledge that Currie develops in *Rock, Bone and Ruin* (2018); he offers a nuanced account of a range of strategies that historical scientists developed to address the methodological challenges they face in broad range of historical sciences. Paired with this are selections from *Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology* (2016) in which Chapman and Wylie articulate an epistemic justification for these strategies as they have evolved and are used in archaeological research. We then turn to questions about the nature of historical explanation and historical narrative that have been central to philosophy of history, framed in terms of newly urgent questions about the value and uses of history; the central texts here will be a new book by Roth on *Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* (2020), and Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995). We close the term with a sample of readings drawn from current debate about the relationship between Indigenous oral history and archaeological accounts of the past, and about the central role of historical inquiry in processes of truth and reconciliation.

Texts: Adrian Currie, *Rock, Bone and Ruin: An Optimist's Guide to the Historical Sciences* (2018)

Robert Chapman and Alison Wylie, *Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology* (2016)

Paul Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* (2020)

Rolph-Michel Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995)

All other readings will be available through the course website and UBC library reserves.

Requirements: weekly reading response posts and in-class presentations (50%), a short expository essay and a final term paper (50%).

Prerequisites: no formal prerequisites but it is recommended that you have at least one prior course in an historical science and/or in philosophy of science. Contact the instructor if you have any questions about appropriate background for this course.

Graduate credit: contact the instructor to arrange graduate-level requirements if you would like to register for 500-level credit. The request form for graduate credit must be approved before registration closes.

This is a tentative list of readings that will be assigned in the course of the term. It is subject to change; suggestions and recommendations are most welcome!

The status of history and the historical science

- Currie, *Rock, Bone and Ruin* (2018): selections to include initial chapters on historical skepticism, and chapters on the role of analogies and model building in the historical sciences.
- Bokulich, "Calibration, Coherence, Consilience: Radiometric Measures of Geologic Time" (2019)
- Norton, "A Material Dissolution of the Problem of Induction" (2014)
- Chapman & Wylie, *Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology* (2016): selections to include "The Paradox of Material Evidence," "External Resources," and Reflexivity Made Concrete"
- Chang, "Keeping the Fixed Points Fixed," in *Inventing Temperature* (2004)

Historical explanation and narrative

- Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History" (1942/1965)
- Collingwood, "The Logic of Question and Answer"
- Morgan & Wise, *Narrative in Science* (2017): selections to include Beatty, "Narrative Possibility and Narrative Explanation"; Currie & Sterelny, "In Defense of Story Telling"
- Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* (2020): selections to include "Problems for Narrative Explanations" and "Essentially Narrative Explanations"

Truth-telling and objectivity

- Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (1995/2015): selections to include "The Power in the Story"; "The Three Faces of Sans Souci," "An Unthinkable History," "Good Day, Columbus"
- Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (1999): "Why Ask What?"
- Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity' Question and the American Historical Profession* (1988): "Nailing Jelly to the Wall"
- Henige, "Not Even Hearsay? Oral Narratives of the First Nations of British Columbia" (2019)
- Menzies and Martindale, "I Was Surprised" – Reply to David Henige" (2019)
- Nicholas & Markey, *Material Evidence* (2015): "Traditional Knowledge, Archaeological Evidence, and Other Ways of Knowing"
- Wylie, "A Global Dialogue on Collaborative Archaeology" (2019)

Reckoning with the past

- Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (1995/2015): "The Presence in the Past"
- Roy, "Who Were These Mysterious People: Cēsna:m, the Marpole Midden, and the Dispossession of Aboriginal Lands in British Columbia" (2006)
- Raibmon, "Unmaking Native Space: A Genealogy of Indian Policy, Settler Practice, and the Microtechnologies of Dispossession" (2008)
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report* (2015)
- Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014): "Seeing Red"