

Parkes, R.J. (2011). *Interrupting history: rethinking history curriculum after 'the end of history'*. New York: Peter Lang. Paper back, 176 pages, \$34.95

WHILST THE IMPACT of postmodernism continues to be debated, most would agree that it challenged the humanities in general, and the discipline of history in particular, by casting doubt on the possibility of achieving total social and historical knowledge. For some, this lack of certainty heralded the 'end of history' Fukuyama (1989). As indicated in this book's title, Robert Parkes's focus in this careful exploration of postmodern social theory is history, as it is encountered in the curriculum, and he situates his analysis of the debates about history's possibilities with reference to the implementation of a particular curriculum in New South Wales (NSW) in 1992.

Parkes's insightful book is timely and significant in the issues it raises for praxis. Soon Australia's first national History curriculum will be implemented in schools. This book is concerned with some of the paradigms that inform curriculum discussion. It will be of particular interest to those History educators and their students keen to deepen their theoretical understandings about the ways in which postmodern social theory has unsettled the epistemological foundations of history as a discipline and prompted much debate about representations of the past. More broadly, this book will interest scholars interested in "critical-reconceptualist" (Cormack & Green, 2009) curriculum inquiry, as Parkes unpacks and questions assumptions whilst raising possibilities for critical and effective histories in his examination of the implementation of this history curriculum and the social politics around it.

As postmodernism reminds us, the historian is an actor in the creation of his/her own narrative inquiry and this means that historians need to be self-reflexive and self-conscious in constructing their accounts. It is therefore fitting that Parkes begins his book with a thoughtful preface in which he locates himself and situates his curriculum concerns with the late 20th-century postwar 'end-of-history' discourse. In the chapters that follow, Parkes takes his reader on an interesting theoretical journey in his quest to explore the challenges and possibilities arising from a postmodern conception of the school curriculum and his concern with the ways in which historical representation can be placed at the centre of a History curriculum.

Parkes selects the new History curriculum introduced in New South Wales in 1992 for attention given what he terms its "radicality" (Parkes, 2011, p. 74). That is, this curriculum was significantly different from what had gone before and its possibilities serve his theoretical attention to the pursuit of critical and effective history. In many ways the 1992 NSW History syllabus reflected the shift to 'critical approaches' to pedagogy that were taking place in Canada and the United States. Moreover, this curriculum mandated that one hundred hours of Australian History content would be taught and drew on social history conventions in calling for the representation of various voices and perspectives to be embedded in this content. Five focus questions directed this attention in relation to Australian identity, heritage, Australia's international relationships, women's experiences and Indigenous perspectives. As Parkes notes, whilst welcomed by most teachers, this curriculum unsettled more conservative politicians and some historians. Parkes's grasp of theory is deftly illustrated in his thoughtful discussion of how this curriculum disturbed assumptions about the place of history in securing public memory. We should not be surprised by this.

In fact, history is never far from the public gaze. Increasingly, popular culture portrays particular interpretations of historical eras and events. Witness, for example, the range of films, documentaries, reality television shows and websites that claim to represent aspects of the past. Whilst these representations of national, social and cultural versions of the past might provide a vicarious sense of belonging and identity, some argue that much of this popular 'history' is more fabrication, fantasy or fiction than the result of rigorous historical inquiry. In political terms, the construction of national histories is particularly significant in securing a version of a nation's past, which, in turn, helps to foster a sense of community, of nationality, and a sense of nationalism. Contestation about what should be represented in national histories prompts some troubling historical questions. Consider, for example, the debates in the United States over the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima, debates in Japan over the 1937 Nanjing massacre by Japanese troops in China, and in Australia, debates about the degree of violence on the frontiers of European 'settlement' in Tasmania during the early nineteenth century. Of the latter, the terms 'history wars', and more broadly, 'culture wars', have been used to refer to the disputes about

the representation of Australian history and how it has been written. At the risk of oversimplification, these disputes were prompted when revisionist historians began to critique the silences and omissions about the treatment of Indigenous Australians in accounts of Australian history that privileged Anglo or European versions of British colonisation. Concomitantly, during the mid-1980s, conservative historians responded by claiming that the record of Australian history was being rewritten in response to partisan political interests and that the focus on violence and dispossession was methodologically flawed.

If national narratives matter, as Parkes reveals, so too do national history curriculums. This was witnessed in Australia during the height of the 'history wars' when the Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, made clear what he thought should be represented in the national story and how a particular version of history should be taught in schools (see Howard's Sir Robert Menzies Lecture of 1996, and his speech on the eve of Australia Day a decade later) (Howard, 1996; 2006). Howard wanted to secure a progressive narrative as the means of capturing a collective or public memory about the nation's past through the History curriculum. Indeed, Howard's intervention prompted moves towards a national History curriculum and a national summit in 2006 on the teaching of History in Australia. Under the auspices of a different national government, these debates continue as we move towards the implementation of the first national curriculum in Australia in 2013. As noted in a recent edition of *Curriculum Perspectives*, this History curriculum has been widely critiqued (Henderson, 2011).

Parkes' command of theory and his ability to employ it lucidly to develop his argument makes this book most worthwhile. *Interrupting history: rethinking history curriculum after 'the end of history'* makes an original contribution to the discussion about the nature and purpose of history and its role in the curriculum. Parkes reminds us that historical representation emerges from within specific historiographical traditions and that we need to be cognisant that our own readings and interpretations are influenced by the methodological biases of the historiography traditions we've encountered. However, this author does not leave us with the pessimism that has accompanied the 'end of history' discourse and only an awareness of methodological limitations. Rather, he offers a way forward and this is one of the book's

many strengths. Parkes offers a "critical pluralist" (Parkes, 2011, p. 134) stance in the concluding chapter. First, he reminds us that our pedagogy needs to be informed by an awareness of the "narrative diversity in the curriculum" (p. 134), such as the wide ranging and varied standpoints that inform different historical interpretations. Second, if we harness the capacity "to make value judgements about the historical narratives we encounter and to advocate for those stories of the past that are generated for defensible historical methodologies" (p. 134), Parkes argues we can "provide hopeful visions for the future" (p. 134). If Parkes is correct, and I'm convinced by his carefully crafted thesis, we could achieve something worthwhile as history educators. This text is highly recommended for History educators and their students, teachers and curriculum specialists.

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