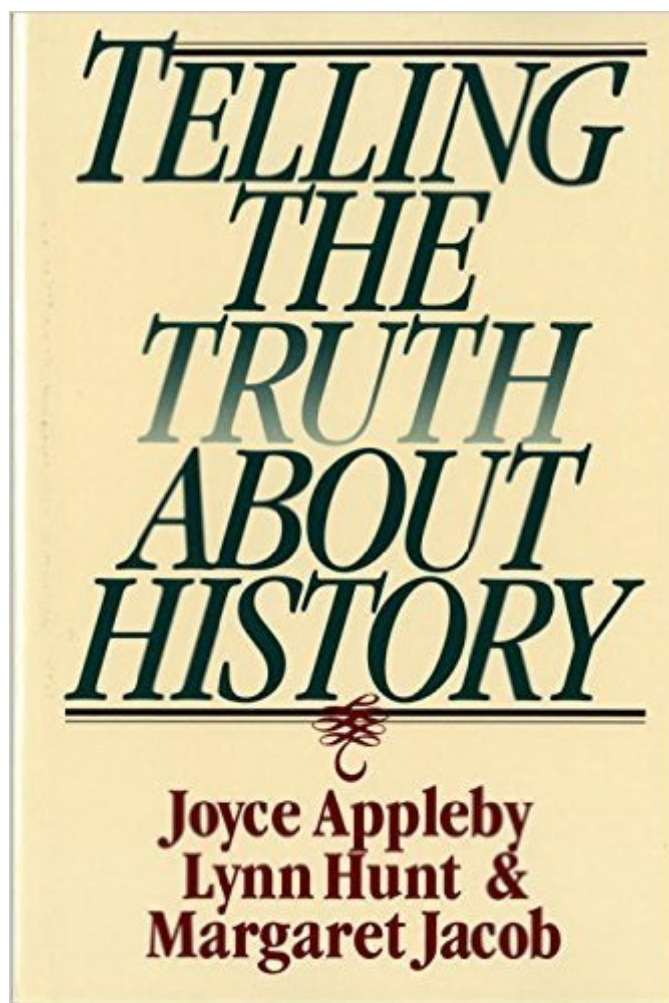


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Telling The Truth About History (Norton Paperback)



Synopsis

"A fascinating historiographical essay. . . . An unusually lucid and inclusive explication of what it ultimately at stake in the culture wars over the nature, goals, and efficacy of history as a discipline." •Booklist

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Customer Reviews

I found this book to be one of the most valuable and most hopeful books I have read in a long time. As a High School teacher of American history, I have long grappled with the question of historical truth and how best to teach it to students. I have also wondered if I could justify my own profession, since American history instruction so often seems to be simply political indoctrination in one form or another. This book gave me hope that my efforts are not in vain. The book traces the evolution of history from the enlightenment model of scientific history through postwar issues of postmodernism and relativism; and the authors persuasively argue that historical truth is possible, even if not absolute. The book is not light reading - I was not able to race through the book, but had to wade through it, so to speak. However, I do feel the book is well worth reading. It is well written, balanced and fair-minded, and it transcends the simplistic conservative-liberal debate over the teaching of history. I feel the book should be read by everyone who is concerned with the teaching of history or the question of historical truth.

Written by three distinguished historians, this is a well intentioned but only partly successful effort to

develop a systematic approach to historical truth. The authors open with a set of historiographic chapters covering the development of history as a discipline since the 18th century. This is a generally concise and nice precis of the importance of the natural sciences as a model of inquiry, the idea of history of a teleological and progressive model of modernity, the development of secular and nationalized professional history in the 19th century, and especially the emergence of a strong and rather distorted triumphalist historical narrative about the USA. This is followed by some good descriptions of how this tradition then began to run into problems. The somewhat "heroic" model of scientific history became its own form of dogma, and with the Progressive era, serious doubts arose about the 19th century triumphalist model. The authors are also justly and conventionally critical of naive positivist views of historical explanation. This is generally well done, though the need for concision may have led the authors to some incomplete and inaccurate statements. For example, the authors' facile attribution of late 19th century racism as the inadvertent consequence of Darwin's theory ignores the substantial contribution of influential non-Darwinist thinkers like Gobineau and Agassiz. Similarly, the authors' discussion of 19th century historiography ignores the fact that the greatest 19th century American historian was the disenchanted Boston Brahmin Henry Adams. Adams' work is a sustained and brilliantly written presentation of history as irony. The authors really go astray in the middle of the book with their chapter "Discovering the Clay Feet of Science." This is a description of the misleading nature of the "heroic" model of science and how this "discovery" provoked an intellectual crisis. I don't doubt the authors' assertion that this was a major issue in the community of historians, but the authors' implication that this was a general intellectual crisis is fairly silly. As the authors point out, one of the major features of academic life in the last 50 years is the enormous expansion of universities and the democratization of access to a university education. The authors seem to be unaware that the other great change in universities over that last 2 generations is the enormous expansion and investment in the natural sciences. At my large research university, a majority of the faculty are in the natural sciences or related fields like Medicine or Engineering. In terms of funding, the natural sciences are even more dominant. The discoveries the authors that authors see as uncovering the clay feet of science had no effect on natural scientists or the university administrators who hire them. The suggestion that the writings of a few historians of science or literary critics provoked a general intellectual crisis is hyperbole. The authors make a similar series of inaccurate claims about the Cold War, which they see as producing "distortions" of science. While there were real problems with Cold War administration of science, the fact is that rivalry with the Soviet Union was one of the factors that turned the Federal government into the major patron of American science. The Cold War was partly responsible for the enormous

progress made by American science in the last 50 years. Because the authors exaggerate the effects of historical revision of scientific progression, they similarly exaggerate the importance of post-modernism/deconstructionism. The authors characterize this movement correctly as an intellectual deadend. But the amount of attention and number of pages devoted to this essentially inconsequential movement is wholly out of proportion to its actual importance. The authors' positive contribution is an attempt to define an approach to history they call "practical realism." The authors have a good discussion of the problems with establishing truthfulness and causal relationships in historical analysis. Their recommendation, epistemically based on Peirce's fallibilism, is a modestly realist approach based on careful accumulation of data, constant testing of defined hypotheses, skepticism about data, peer review, and a community of scholars open to alternative interpretations. If this sounds familiar, it's because it is. It's essentially a version of the best practices of modern science. This is crashing through an open door with a vengeance. As an aside, the authors contrast their position with the "metaphysical realism" of Karl Popper and his logical positivist "associates." Popper would be surprised to find himself grouped with the Vienna Circle philosophers of whom he was so critical. In fact, Popper's work has a strong fallibilist orientation with strong kinship to Peirce's work. The authors also get themselves into trouble with some fairly careless statements. For example, "the exclusive dominance of European cultural forms in the United States is now consigned to a specific period,..." This from authors whose recommended approach to historical analysis is a clear mimic of western scientific practices and based on a philosophical approach articulated by a 19th century American man. Fallibilist epistemology is based on the work of several important 17th and 18th century European philosophers and has roots in Hellenistic Greece. This is about as European as it gets. I don't see the authors recommending nor would they recommend authentic non-European approaches like Theravada Buddhism or Confucianism. Finally, the authors would like a form of American national history suitable for a democratic society. What does this mean? The authors are appropriately critical of instrumental uses of history like the triumphalist version of 19th century America and they are cautious about the dangers of making the same types of error in things like 'Afrocentric' history. So what is their solution? They are not completely explicit but it appears they wish a systematic, accurate, unbiased account of the past that is fair to the historical experiences of all relevant actors, a kind of inclusionary multiculturalism. But how is this different from naive positivism?

Since this book was written in the wake of the intellectual 'wars' at U.S. universities involving multiculturalism, political correctness and the subsequent backlash to these, it primarily focuses on

the history profession in the United States rather than worldwide. Thus, some of the book's shortcomings in not dealing adequately with non-American or non-Western European views or concerns can be forgiven. Despite these flaws, "Telling the Truth About History" very successfully addresses the many criticisms hurled at the scholarly pursuit of history in recent decades, and the three authors' conclusions can be useful and edifying even for those historians living and working far beyond America's borders. In line with the pragmatism and practical realism the authors extol in their last several chapters, they essentially call for a middle ground between the extremes of postmodern relativism and the apparent absolutes of the Enlightenment 'heroic science' model. This means not abandoning the pursuit of verity while incorporating many of criticisms and even methods of the postmodernist theorists. Truth may still be elusive as ever (to say nothing of absolute truth) but, as they say at one point, even provisional truths are better than ignorance or outright falsehoods - with a nice example from the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev years to illustrate this point. This is a very well-written and persuasive argument for history as a rigorous and expansive (and mind-expanding) academic discipline. Along the way, the authors also provide a very informative overview of historiography from the Enlightenment era to the present, albeit in a largely American context.

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