

Unsettling History

Archiving and Narrating in Historiography

Bearbeitet von

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Leseprobe

Unsettling History: Introduction

Sebastian Jobs/Alf Lüdtkke

Whose demand is it?

Opinions vary as to whether interest in history is waxing or waning. At any rate, not only professional historians claim that society needs history. At least in 'Western' countries, that is in North America as well as most parts of Europe, history fairs and historical re-enactments flourish (Schindler 2003). Many seek active participation in weekends of medieval markets if not scenarios of historical battles; even more people join the respective crowds to add their cheers. At the same time, feature films, documentaries, and, not least, TV series distribute their take on history. They accentuate events, particularly those breaks with the seemingly ordinary that convey catastrophe and include a hefty component of blood, sweat and tears: the campaigns of Alexander the Great or Caesar and, then, the Napoleonic Wars or the Civil War in the United States. But most frequently they zoom in on the First and Second World Wars. In general, their grasp of history often revolves around wars and warfare but also the Holocaust and other genocides: mass violence in its many occurrences.

Some historians lament this trend as nothing but a media hype. In their view, audiences simply fall prey to clever strategies of media moguls and film technocrats. However, this stance underestimates what people demand from historical display, narration and memorialization. Their efforts to get close to historical sites or re-enactments reveal an attraction to the visual and even tangible that reflects a quest for 'true reality', whether people flock to exhibits, visit memorials or prefer infotainment. Of course, juicy stories or a gripping performance are drawing people. Yet representation may arouse but cannot satisfy the hunger for reality. And it seems that this dimension of people's curiosity too often escapes the attention of those who tend to raise their eyebrows or voices in contempt. Instead it may be more productive to consider the clues that bolster such interest in if not lust for reality-even among intellectuals and academics (and others in these domains) who turn their attentions to history.

The appetite for retrieving and regaining or, in difference, for destroying and rebuilding a past reality "anew" seems also at work when people aim at "taking history into their own hands". Such claims fuelled rebellious and revolutionary actions, from the American and the French Revolutions of the eighteenth century to the most recent movements that furthered the implosion and revolutionary change of the "really existing socialism" in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989/90.

In recent decades, the interest in and curiosity for the reality of historical actors, who were ignored if not disdained and, thus, excluded from the historical record (Trouillot 1995), stimulated efforts to reconstruct "history from below". Such practices of 'doing history' unsettled prevailing interpretations of academic historians who for a long time had claimed the monopoly on

deciphering the past-"set apart like priests to do something special", as Greg Denning ironically remarked (1996). While much of the history of everyday life also drew inspiration from this change of perspective, a strident accent was added by the subaltern studies. Their advocates put a specific flavor to these efforts to redirect historical investigation: their aim was to show the colonized as agents who pursued trajectories of their own making notwithstanding the repressive settings of colonial rule and socio-cultural mission civilisatrice. Yet, similar to activists of alternative movements in the West, protagonists of subaltern studies also continued to operate within Western frameworks. In due course, however, their focus on actual practices, utterances and gestures of historical actors in colonized societies like British India made apparent the ambivalences of the strategies of survival many 'subalterns' developed. In turn, only reluctantly did respective studies explore how and to what extent subaltern people cooperated in their everyday practices with the forces of domination and exploitation.