

REVIEWS

Donald E. Brown. *Hierarchy, History, and Human Nature: The Social Origins of Historical Consciousness*. Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1988. Pp. x + 384. Indexed. \$35.00. Hardcover.

Hierarchy, History, and Human Nature: The Social Origins of Historical Consciousness attempts to answer a seemingly simple question: Why has the study of history flourished in some cultures and not in others? To answer that question, anthropologist Donald E. Brown examined societal factors among selected literate cultures of the past to determine which factors, if any, predict the quality, quantity, and nature of historical writing within those cultures.

Early in his research, Brown rejected a traditional explanation for the lack of sound historiography among certain past cultures: that highly placed leaders discouraged candid historical accounts. Ultimately, he dismissed other cultural determinants of "ahistoricity" that have been proposed by scholars:

an agricultural emphasis, defective means of measuring time, foreshortened time scales, cyclic concepts of time, otherworldly religions, civilizational decline, poor economic conditions, illiteracy, lack of urbanization, war, peace, political decentralization, borrowing [from other cultures], "dark ages," and "holism." (p. 307)

In place of these proposed explanations, Brown hypothesized that "no hereditarily stratified society . . . developed sound historiography" (p. 5). His hypothesis was confirmed when he found among the many cultures investigated a positive correlation between two variables: the "open" or "closed" nature of a culture's social stratification system and the quality of its historiography.

The early Hebrews, ancient Assyrians, ancient Chinese, Kashmiris, Sri Lankans, Medieval Byzantines, Classical Muslims, Ionian Greeks, late Republican and early Imperial Romans, and Renaissance Florentines are deemed by Brown to have produced relatively sound historical writing. In contrast, historiography among the late Egyptians, Homeric Greeks, Classical Spartans, late Western Imperial Romans, Sassanid Persians, Hindu Indians, Medieval Western Europeans, and Renaissance Venetians is judged unsound. In every case, Brown found at least some correlation between the ideology (and, in some cases, the actual degree) of social class mobility as determined by heredity and the quality of historical writing.

Brown relied heavily upon historians and other scholars for judgments about the relative quality of "particular historiographic traditions." He uses the term historiography "to denote the general principles--sound or unsound, conscious or unconscious--that underlie any account of the past" (p. 10). Although he suggests that myth and history "are two ends of a continuum, with no sharp boundary between them" (pp. 10-11), he nevertheless distinguishes between "things *alleged* to have taken place in the past" (myths,

place in the past" (myths, fables, and the like) and "real history" (p. 1). He notes that modern historians, who largely base their "standards of objectivity" on the writings of the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke, judge historical works on the basis of how well the works communicate what actually happened in the past. He further argues that modern historians tend to agree on the general soundness or unsoundness of the historiography of particular cultures.

As for the second part of his hypothesis, the author states that "I was prepared to make my own assessments of stratification" (p. 5). That statement notwithstanding, Brown frequently cites other authorities on the subject of social stratification. For the purpose of this study he defines a closed society as "one in which rank is a fundamental feature and in which rank is essentially acquired by birth alone" (p. 14). He defines an open society as "one in which there is rank," but in which rank

is more achieved than ascribed at birth. The greater insistence there is on the priority of merit over birthright, and the more actual vertical mobility there is, the more open is the society. (p. 14)

Brown classifies as hereditarily closed those societies with a majority of persons whose rank was determined by heredity. To facilitate meaningful comparisons of stratification between cultures, he disregards both the "universal or very nearly universal disabilities of

women and children" (p. 14), and the presence (or absence) of a small hereditary nobility.

The author compares the two variables that form the basis for his hypothesis--historiography and social stratification--between similar cultures only, avoiding comparisons between vastly dissimilar cultures. He devotes a lengthy and detailed chapter to the historiography and stratification among selected subgroups within the following relatively homogeneous cultures: South Asia and China; Southeast Asia; the Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome; Medieval Europe and the Near East; and Renaissance Europe.

An example of contrasting subgroups within a relatively homogeneous culture--the Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome--is the great difference in historiographic quality and quantity between Egypt on the one hand, and the Mesopotamians and Hebrews on the other. The author points out that although Egyptian rulers kept voluminous archival records, their historical writing occurred much later than in the other similar subgroups, and when the first history of Egypt did appear it was written in Greek. The fact that the Egyptian society was considerably more hereditarily stratified than the Mesopotamian and Hebrew societies supports the author's hypothesis.

Once Brown identified the existence of these and other correlations, he searched for causes, because "without intelligible linkages . . ., any correlations would be mere curiosities" (p. 6). This search led to the identification of certain other "concomitants" of open

stratification: strong concern for divination (through astrology, omenry, and the like), general education (or educational theory as a "major literary genre"), biography, realistic portraiture, natural and social (especially political) science, and humanistic and secular ideals. The closed societies studied, on the other hand, exhibited a different set of concomitants:

a racist conception of human nature, reduced individualism, hagiography in place of biography, iconography in place of realistic portraiture, non-uniform education, hypertrophied religious and ritual concerns, little political or social science, less fanatic divination, and perhaps a lesser concern with natural science. (p. 9)

Brown suggests that these latter "traits are all reflections of the hereditary transmission of social rank" (p. 9). He also believes that certain factors may contribute more directly to a culture's sense of history. These include society's conception of its members as individuals and a belief in the universality of human nature and worth. In short, the author found that "the quality of historiography was often only part of a larger pattern" (p. 315), that "the dichotomy between open and closed stratification had profound consequences for the development of a series of features of modern civilization" (p. 18). He notes, for example, that "while urbanization may be a necessary cause [for the development of sound historiography], . . . it is far from a sufficient cause" (p. 309).

Music education historians might wish to read this book for two reasons. First, the author's findings shed

considerable light on the nature and importance of historiography within the framework of culture. He notes that:

All, or virtually all, of the historically minded peoples defend historical writing [within a] framework of pragmatic usefulness [T]he recent conception of writing history for history's sake, as an end in itself that needs no further justification, is far from being a universal conception even now and has virtually no counterpart in the history of historical writing. With monotonous regularity, the historians of diverse civilizations justify history as a guide to life, using the past to understand and make decisions for the present and future. (pp. 324, 335)

Brown also points to rulers who value sound historical knowledge:

a surprising number of extraordinarily successful individuals managed to combine learning from history with learning from experience. The ethnographic record is replete with examples, and few modern statesmen are exceptions. (p. 336)

Especially interesting are the author's accounts of how historiography developed in various cultures, as are his summaries of criteria used by historians to evaluate past historiography, such as the use of documentary evidence, concern for chronology, the concept of causation, and others.

The second reason for reading the book is that it presents a workable model for multi-disciplinary research. The author draws from history, sociology, and anthropology, using relevant features from each. Only in a few instances do his admittedly sociological and anthropological perspectives overwhelm the historical methodology, such as when he suggests that historical writing is frequently read for its "entertainment value," and that since much history is biographical, it is "interesting because people are interested in social mobility" (pp. 335-37).

Brown's account of the methodology he employed is worth reading. He defines his terms carefully, presents opposing opinions among experts cited, and reports on all important conflicting and missing evidence, even when it contradicts or weakens his hypothesis. He fully explains how he modified his hypothesis as he gathered data, and he gives a complete account of several alternate hypotheses and why he ultimately rejected them.

The reviewer highly recommends *Hierarchy, History, and Human Nature* to historians interested in learning more about the history of historiography within and across different cultures, and to those who wish to read about a fascinating cross-disciplinary approach to the study of human affairs.

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