

Shannon Nutt - Claremont Graduate University

## **My Case for Deconstructionist History**

Throughout my study of history there have been three main types of historical theory and practice discussed: re-constructionist, constructionist, and deconstructionist. The re- constructionists have the belief that there is an *Ultimate Truth* out there and if we look in the archives we will discover it. The constructionist also believe there is an *Ultimate Truth* out there that can be discovered if historians look in at the facts, but also take into account the biases that exist in the both the sources and their placement in the hierarchy of other sources. The deconstructionists believe that *Ultimate Truth* does not exist; it can never be obtainable no matter how many sources one looks at because each source has an inherent human bias in its sheer existence.

Deconstructionists do believe that there are some *facts* or *truths* with a lower case *t* that exists; like Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941. But larger *contextual truths* as to why Japan might have bombed Pear Harbor. It is in a situation like this where the facts are seen as contextual and perceptual, versus absolute and commonly accepted that deconstructionist historians go to work.

Re-constructionist historians believe in upholding the archives, and ignore the fact that Archival Evidence are extremely suspect just for its placement in there in the first place. After all, there are documents that never make it into the archives, but that doesn't mean they do not exist...and the bigger questions should be why they were left out? The re-constructionist believes that the way children are taught history in middle and high schools is completely acceptable and there is no need to change the curriculum largely

from the way that our parents were taught. There is no need to question the documents that have been selected because to these people they all represent the entire bank of knowledge we have to draw from. From this standpoint and based on our class discussions and readings, re-constructionist historians are guilty in their acceptance of meta-narrative that exists to perpetuate the hegemonic agenda of the current dominant cultural power. One author who did this and made no apologies for it was Janet Abu-Lughod. In the book that I read to present to the class she speaks about city-states in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries before the European Hegemony fully took effect. But she still uses her hegemonic lens to describe people in the Orient, where she makes them an “other” and only uses Western points of reference for her historical basis.<sup>1</sup> This made it clear that re-constructionists try to look into the past, but also carry their hegemonic biases with them when they go there.

The re-constructionist that clearly sticks out in my mind is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. In his book *The Peasants of Languedoc*, Le Roy Ladurie discusses a very specific time period, in one town in France, and for a specific purpose of reviewing official financial records.<sup>2</sup> He spent his entire time researching in the archives and ignoring any other sources. In lieu of a lack of sources, he speculated based on the archives, and that supposedly made him a re-constructionist. He also uses the phrase of having a *total history*, which is similar to an *Ultimate Truth*. Le Roy Ladurie believes that he had discovered the *Ultimate Truth* for the town of Languedoc and uses his narrative to have his readers follow along on his journey to also discover said *Truth* and *facts*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Abu-Lughod, Janet. *Before European Hegemony: The World Systems A.D. 1250-1350*. 1989

<sup>2</sup> Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel. *The Peasants of Languedoc*. 1976

The constructionists believe that they too can reach the *Ultimate Truth*. This school of thought is a little more progressive (and I use that word specifically) than the re-constructionist point of view in the regard that the re-constructionists believe biases exist in the sources that are in the archives or the official metanarrative. The constructionist historian believes in examining sources that are located outside of the archives in order to get the most unbiased view of what was going on in the past; in other words they have progressed passed the re-constructionist group just like history progresses towards new/better ideas. They believe that using the archives, these other sources, and social theory will lead them to the discovery of an *Ultimate Truth*. The constructionists also believe in fully using the use of a narrative to express the *Truths* that they have discovered. The narratives in this case being almost like a novel (a beginning, middle, and end); except there are facts interspersed instead of just having the author's imagination.

The book that shows the constructionist point of view very clearly is *Telling the Truth about History*. This book asks historians and readers alike to look at the broader picture of history in order to attempt to remove the personal bias that everyone has, by acknowledging the imperfections that exist in official record.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the book the authors discuss the idea of looking at both the archives, outside sources, and then trying to read in between the lines in order to come up with the correct answer, or *Ultimate Truth*. The authors showed that they believe there is an *Ultimate Truth* that is out there waiting to be discovered.

---

<sup>3</sup> Appleby, Joyce, Hunt, Lynn, and Jacob, Margaret. *Telling the Truth about History*. 1994

The two other constructionists that stick out in my mind the most are Lenin and Mintz. Lenin constructed an essay during the early twentieth century in which he discusses what he believes is the ultimate Marxist ideal: that soon the Capitalist societies will eventually turn into Socialist ones and eventually give way to the Communist society, or his theleological ideal.<sup>4</sup> Lenin was a constructionist specifically because he believed in this *Ultimate Truth*: That eventually Communism would rise as the best form of government because the sources that he chose pointed in that direction, as did his personal biases and beliefs. He believed that all of the signs throughout the entire world were pointing in the direction, and thus he gave his opinion on how this change would eventually take place. Using selected evidence, he arrived at his own *Ultimate Truth*, but not necessarily *The one*.

In his book, *Sweetness and Power*, Mintz agrees with Lenin in the regard that he believes sugar has fueled the world economy of centuries, which in turn helped the national and worldwide economies reach the Imperialistic form of Capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Mintz uses *narrative* to paint the picture of how the rise in demand of sugar was one piece of the puzzle to Imperialism that is seen in the world's economy still today. What makes him a constructionist is his use of his narrative to tell his story and the fact that he believes he has discovered an *Ultimate Truth* like Lenin.

The deconstructionists (or post-modernists) do not believe that any *Ultimate Truth* exists, in the archives or any other sources or places. Like stated previously, there are little truths that can be discovered (or facts), but trying to put them all together to assimilate a larger *Truth* can never be done. The deconstructionist does not like the use

---

<sup>4</sup> Lenin, V.I. *Imperialism: The Highest State of Capitalism*. 1917

<sup>5</sup> Mintz, Sydney W. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. 1985

of narrative because the author can never really remove themselves from the sources they are using, thus the inherent bias in such a method of storytelling. There are some deconstructionists, like Wallerstein, who do use the narrative to portray their historical analysis. *World-Systems Analysis* was somewhat of a narrative in the same way that Lenin used a narrative; the only difference is Wallerstein does not arrive at a teleological conclusion, as does Lenin, thus separating the two ideologically.

The deconstructionists also do not like to use the narrative because a narrative gives the idea that the author is recreating the past. “It bears repetition: the historical narrative is not *the* past, it is *a* history”.<sup>6</sup> Normally the author has to just pick a point to start the narrative out, which completely ignores all of the history prior to the starting point. In this aspect the narrative can never truly express any *Ultimate Truth* because of previous historical omissions. If an author even attempted to include everyone’s first hand account of a certain historical event the book would be thousands of pages long and would still not be able to arrive at the *Ultimate Truth* because what about the people that were still left out of the sources or never wrote their accounts down but lived nonetheless?

The sources are a big part of the equation for a deconstructionist historian. First, all sources are going to have a biased outlook. All people have their own point of view and see the world, events, and history from that particular point of view even when they are attempting to be unbiased. The sources that are written down have a point that they want either their contemporary peers to see or future generations to see, and thus paint the event in that light. “It was the assumption of the new historians when they studied the

---

<sup>6</sup> Munslow, Alun. *Deconstructing History*. 1997. Pg 182

documents in the archives that the actors at the time had not been writing for the future historians but were revealing what they really thought at the time or at least what they wanted others to believe. Of course, the historians acknowledged that such documents had to be handled carefully, to verify that there was no fraud, but once verified, these documents were considered largely exempt from the intrusive bias of the later historian".<sup>7</sup> Then the historians that review these sources either choose to include them in their argument or choose to leave them out because the sources do not support their point of view; in either case the historians are corrupting the source material if in no other way than by selection bias. So the deconstructionist historian would raise the question: How can you ever achieve *Ultimate Truth* while leaving sources out? Furthermore, how can you ever discover or include all the sources to make an *Ultimate Truth* in the first place?

Another thing the deconstructionist historians do not think is obtainable is recreating the past or that the past is an obtainable idea at all in that history will accurately mimic it. To the deconstructionist, certain views of history can be displayed in a narrative, but the actual past will never be seen or discovered. "...the past has no content. The past- or, more accurately, pastness- is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past *as past*".<sup>8</sup> Therefore the past and history should never be used as a synonym for one another. Instead history is nothing more or less than a collection of everyone's point of view that wishes to venture an educated guess at something from back then. The past, in that regard, is not as much a specific point in time that can be pinpointed by any person, but rather can only be understood by looking at the larger

---

<sup>7</sup> Wallerstein, Immanuel. *World-System Analysis*. 2004. Pg 4

<sup>8</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. 1995. Pg 15

contextual, cultural and power relations surrounding what makes it from the past to be considered and called history in the present, in the first place.

### **The Deconstructionist and the Student Teaching Experience**

After my last semester of my master's degree, I found myself in a camp that I never thought I would find appealing: Deconstructionism. From the first reading of Munslow's book, I became fascinated with the idea that everyone can have an opinion and add to the discussion of history, but that there would and could never be an *Ultimate Truth* discovered.<sup>9</sup> For some reason, I grabbed on to the belief that we should not be teaching our students just the meta-narratives that the standards in Social Studies requires us to, but we should also be challenging them to ask questions from every angle possible to have the students arrive at their own conclusions based on critical and contextual inference and reasoning on top of any and all accepted *facts*, let alone *Truths*.

I did my student teaching this semester in the very small and conservative town of Prescott, AZ. I thought I was going to be prepared to teach in this area because I graduated from Prescott High School and attended Granite Mountain Middle School where I was assigned to do my student teaching. I also thought that I was prepared because I considered myself to be fairly conservative in my political beliefs and I would have definitely put myself in the category of a constructionist historian and educator the first couple weeks of my student teaching. Needless to say that getting past the introduction lesson plans and actually delving into the lessons that began looking at our country's structure and constitution mixed with this class experience was a big turning point in my outlook.

---

<sup>9</sup> Munslow, Alun. *Deconstructing History*. 1997.

In my advanced class I chose to show President Obama's speech—one that every single President has given in modern history- done at a university to encourage kids to stay in school and get an education. Personally I did not vote for our current President, nor do I agree with all of his policies, but he is our President. The country elected him and the man deserves the respect as the leader of our country. Now I chose to show this speech because of two reasons: I could fit it in with the standards that I was covering at that moment in time and there was no political agenda driving the speech from his or my end. First the school district made calls home the night before stating that some teachers might be showing the speech in class, and then I had to tell my principal how the speech fit into my curriculum. I also had to ask if any children did not want to watch it and set them up with an extra activity to do while the rest of the class was watching the speech.

After the speech was over I asked my class what the main message was. It was unanimous that they all believed it was to stay in school. I even had one student ask me what the big deal was surrounding the speech? It turns out that I was the only teacher in the entire school district that decided to show the speech and I took some heat for it. Luckily I had covered all my bases and my cooperative teacher completely backed me up in how I included the speech in the lesson plan we were already doing.

It was through and because of this experience that I really connected with the book, *Silencing the Past*, by Michel-Rolph Trouillot. This book was written from the deconstructionist (or post-modernist) viewpoint because he discusses three large historical events that are widely known in the historical field. He discusses these ideas in the fact that he is trying to change the idea of the meta-narrative because no matter how



far you narrow down your scope there can never be a complete form of history that never leaves anything out (or a big picture Truth).

The reason why he argues against the narrative is because the winners always write the history, which means the winners/writers leave out anything that would disagree with their form of history. This literally means that they are silencing part of history because they are choosing not to include it in their form of history. “Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts are missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded”.<sup>10</sup>

I felt like this is what I was getting asked to do by the community I was teaching in, to specifically leave out some part of history because it did not agree with their point of view. Another author that resonated with me because of this is James Scott. In his book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, he spoke of a public transcript and a private transcript.<sup>11</sup> I felt like I was being required to have two transcripts, the *public* one that the parents of my students required of me and the *private* transcript that I myself believed but could not express in the presence of the dominant power (or believers of the meta-narrative).

I know for a fact that no parents protested their child watching President Bush give similar speeches during his presidency, but because the parents of this ultra conservative community had vilified President Obama so badly they did not want me to show him in a light where he was doing good for the community. Their goal was to literally silence any source that showed the President in a positive light because they want their children to believe as they do: President Obama represents everything that is wrong

---

<sup>10</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. 1995. Pg 49

<sup>11</sup> Scott, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. 1990

with the country and if John McCain would have won the election the country would not be facing the issues that we are today. “When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that fore reality within the scope of these beliefs”.<sup>12</sup>

It was at this moment that I began really questioning how I viewed my job as an educator and what I wanted my students to take away from my classroom. I realized that I did not want to be one of the teachers that could be intimidated by the parents who wanted me to stick to the meta-narratives from their own education and only teach what the parents believed. I found myself being able to buy into the meta-narrative of America and progress in general less and less just because of how I was feeling in the classroom and what I heard surrounding the ideas that I chose to cover in the classroom.

Before this realization I thought that the deconstructionist view of history was a nice idea and that maybe I could buy into it in theory at least, but the more I had to deal with constructionist and re-constructionist parents, I found myself being pushed more and more towards deconstructionism. I came to believe that my students deserved me to question their beliefs, have them question mine and question and get both sides of the story; even if that means there are five more sides we will all never get to hear. This is the only way in which I could hope each student would arrive at his/her own opinion, and I believe they deserve nothing less from the education process or me.

The more I was in the classroom I realized that I could never ask my students to find one answer to bigger questions that worked for all of them. For instance when I did a Mock Congress, I had each student write at least two Bills for the classes to discuss. In

---

<sup>12</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. 1995. Pg 72

order for one of those Bills to become Law it has to pass all five classes and I was the President who would either sign the Bill into Law or veto it. There was one bill that came up several times...and it broke my heart to hear some students respond to gay marriage the way they did.

Before I was student teaching I believed in some sort of way to provide equal rights to same sex couples, but I did not know if I agreed with that including marriage. Hearing what some of my 8<sup>th</sup> graders were saying, which I am sure some of that they heard at home and just repeated it in the classroom, was so devastating to me as to have me questioning even that which I thought was fundamental to myself. While trying to show students both the pros and cons to legalizing gay marriage and outlawing gay marriage as a country I found myself moving closer to the side that was all for equal rights of gay marriage. I found myself saying that just because I have some sort of religious affiliation with the idea of marriage that does not mean that everyone should have to adhere to my beliefs.

This is another instance when I had to keep my personal transcript hidden.<sup>13</sup> The first time a Bill came up I tried to discuss that being gay was not a choice, in fact there is scientific proof that you are born either straight or gay. But after minutes of trying to explain this to my conservative students, I realized that I was only making sense to about 5 out of my 140 students. And that evening I received an email from an angry parent explaining that they firmly believed being gay was in fact a choice and I should not tell students something that is still just a “theory”. From that point on I allowed the students

---

<sup>13</sup> Scott, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. 1990

to debate amongst themselves, but I kept my mouth shut when the idea of gay marriage came up. I was so discouraged that I could not ask the kids to see both sides of the story.

How could I ask a complete stranger to feel the same way I feel about anything when they have a different background and point of view than I do? I could no longer do this, which meant I could no longer discount anyone else's point of view on a topic. I could disagree with it all I wanted and find evidence to support my ideas, but they could do the same with theirs and that is just as right and fair, or it should be at least. "Sources can ultimately say whatever you want them to because you can manipulate the text to fit your idea. "...sources imply a choice".<sup>14</sup>

Historians always have to choose what sources they are going to include in their argument, but this also means that they are choosing what to leave out. Believing this, how could I purposely leave out someone's point of view just because it was different than the one that I have? This had to mean to me that everyone's idea to them is just as valid as my opinion is to me. There is no way that every single person can agree on the *Ultimate Truth* because every person has a different background and life that has led the way they believe; which means there will never be an *Ultimate Truth* no matter how many sources we look into, because if even one person disagrees based on perception or experience then it is not an *Ultimate Truth*.

### **The Deconstructionist in Me Going Forward**

The idea of not being able to arrive at an *Ultimate Truth* is no longer a scary idea; rather it is one that is exciting and exhilarating for me, being in the historical field and discipline. My semester of my master's degree, has led me to the path where I do not

---

<sup>14</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. 1995. Pg 48

believe that I am cut out for public education in middle or high schools. Instead and with a great deal of help from this class, I firmly believe that I should continue on with my own education in the pursuit of a PhD in history to have the ability to be a professor at a university level. It seems like the university setting is where and when students actually are encouraged to think for themselves (for the most part and depending on Degree Program I will grant you) and question their previous positions. My experience from growing up and attending school in small Prescott, AZ showed me that I was not really encouraged to think critically of metanarratives or *Ultimate Truths* until I went to the University of Arizona. I realize that in order to teach the way I want to and introduce students to the kinds of materials I want to, I am going to have to do that at a university level.

One of the big problems with not accepting the deconstructionist view of history is both the constructionist and re-constructionist histories use the meta-narrative that is written by the winners in history, and usually represent those winners in form and function. Therefore there is always someone left out, which ultimately makes them an “other” because they do not fit into to the meta-narrative of the dominant cultural viewpoint. When thinking about the “other” in history, I always come back to Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*. Throughout the book Said discusses how the mere classification of studying the “Orient” creates a form of the “other” of the peoples of that area of the world.

The Orient is often seen (in terms of *Orientalism*) as being a mystic place where the people have not progressed in the same ways as the Western people. The Orient is

literally stuck in time.<sup>15</sup> The problem here remains: Who said the Western way of living is the correct way for everyone on planet Earth? Why is any way of living not of the dominant way of thought wrong or mystic even? Is it simply because it is different than the West? And when the Western people study the Orient, they only see the Orient through the Western lens.

The best way that I can describe the way deconstructionist view on history is this: Everyone has different groups of friends, co-workers, classmates, teachers, family, and strangers in their life. Each one of those people has a certain idea of you, your ideals, attitude, sense of humor, just the whole personality. Some people's view of you will overlap, but for the most part each person has a unique view of you as a person. When you put everyone's view of you together, it still does not add up to the full picture of who you are. There are some things that you keep to yourself or secrets that you do not share with anyone that are left out of this put together puzzle of yourself. There is also the fact that people change and grow over time, so some people's view of you is not necessarily accurate any longer.

I have had this happen recently and led me to believe that I fall into the category of a deconstructionist in my education and my life. A year ago in March I was in a car accident that led to the discovery of a mass inside my kidney. After two months of testing it was determined that I needed to have two procedures to remove the mass just incase it was the worst-case scenario. It turned out that it was the worst case: it was cancer.

---

<sup>15</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1997

After I found out, the people that I feel know me the best reacted in a variety of ways ranging from my boyfriend spending every night in the hospital with me for a week, to my brother not being able to speak to me for weeks because he were too scared, so he pushed me away. It also meant that one person in particular who does not like me very much told me it was my karma that I got cancer at 24 years old. Everyone reacted differently to finding out because of the person that I am to him or her; I am a different source to each one of them so they could not all have the same reaction in the exact same way.

So is the same with history. If we look at a specific event, like the bombing of Pearl Harbor and get the first hand accounts from everyone that was there, then gather all the documents from both governments (the Japanese and the U.S.), there are still going to be things left out from people who are too scared to speak out against the meta-narrative; along with the people who never were able to voice an account because they were killed that day. And there is also the fact that some people's first hand account could have been biased from the start because of how they felt about the war in general. There are all of these links that can be put together that can show us a version of an event (or *a history*), but never the *Ultimate Truth* (or *The History*). It is just like the *you* on display for the people around you, different in certain situations and always in flux.

I think I have found a great deal of comfort in the deconstructionist camp with the idea that I will never be fully 100% correct in the history field if I try to "discover" big picture *Ultimate Truths*. Instead I can find small truths and give my informed conclusion on and about them to add to the historical arena, both discussion and debate. I will never be able to fully see history, as it was when it was the past, but that does not matter. What

does matter is that I am challenging ideas and pushing the boundary of the thought process in the field of history by adding my critical input and inference on historical events. People will agree and people will disagree, but the most important thing is that people are talking about them. Isn't that the point of studying history in the first place?