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The Combing Of History



Synopsis

How is historical knowledge produced? And how do silence and forgetting figure in the knowledge we call history? Taking us through time and across the globe, David William Cohen's exploration of these questions exposes the circumstantial nature of history. His investigation uncovers the conventions and paradigms that govern historical knowledge and historical texts and reveals the economic, social, and political forces at play in the production of history. Drawing from a wide range of examples, including African legal proceedings, German and American museum exhibits, Native American commemorations, public and academic debates, and scholarly research, David William Cohen explores the "walls and passageways" between academic and non-academic productions of history.

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Customer Reviews

David William Cohen is professor of history and anthropology and director of the International Institute at the University of Michigan.

Interesting ideas on the line, for understanding how history responses to a historical context and its production is bound to the interest of a dominant ideology

With all the things which have happened historically, only a spattering of details ever gets recorded and only a sprinkling of those get remembered. It is in fact the details and what details individuals and groups will remember that is the point behind David William Cohen's book. Cohen argues

that there is always an important story behind the writing of history; it is in this story that we discover individuals, cultures, families, etc. fighting for a voice in the history that will finally be "heard." The production of history involves either "natives" or "outsiders" of historical events deciding which details are the most useful and relevant to the present time and the continuation of the memory, this decision is heavily affected by the training and accustoming of the past. After this sifting of facts, the actual writing and performing of history takes place with its own unique relevance from various points of view. This process is vital. The very metaphor that Cohen bases his book on in the first chapter is all about details as well. Camella Teoli, decided to leave details out of her story to her children. Her daughter who combed her hair everyday didn't know why she had a bald spot; she just knew it was there. Camella deeming her safety and social acceptance more important always left the historical facts of her industrial accident out of reach. However it was eventually through combing back through history that the incident was brought to memory again. In this way she combed over the details and later historians and others combed them back up according to their differing values. Of course Cohen himself cannot escape the selecting, judging and combing over that take place in writing his history. It is impossible to record everything so he records what is most meaningful to him and valuable to his argument. Deciding what is important to us or what details we wish to remember often isn't a conscious choice. When listening to someone speak a foreign tongue, the words you will pick out and understand are those you have previously studied or those you have somewhat of a background in. In this way we have been accustomed or programmed to hear only certain things and until we change the programming we won't hear or won't understand other words or details. While this isn't necessarily a bad thing, it is something that leaves information behind and something that happens to everyone. Reading history is the same way. Those individuals who are natives to an area or have an extended background in a certain topic will bring an entirely different analysis than an outsider or newcomer will bring. Cohen outlines several examples of history being read differently due to background disparities. Cohen believes, and I am also convinced that "the social recomposition of collective history requires the intervention of the stranger;" it is ok for the historian to be viewed as a "stranger." It is also ok to listen to the voice which is native to the area of historical research. Cohen throughout the book points us to the way in which official constructions of history have formed the ways we think about the past. They may be pageants, movies, books, recreations, parades, etc. Even official versions leave out detail that individual and cultural analysis can comb out. I believe Cohen would tell us that the "glossing" of texts, the use of culturally nuanced vocabularies, and the historical projects across the world are really a search and a move for voice and identity in history. No matter why,

where, or how this "reading" and "writing" of history takes place it is to our advantage to listen up and "remember" our own details of interest from these stories. This is where the combing of history begins. Even though I have combed over much of what this book has to offer, my own personal combing through the text to write this piece has brought to my knowledge many viewpoints and perspectives I never thought possible.

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