

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**PETER NABOKOV, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. 2002, x + 246 p., Index, \$ 20.00 (U.S.) paper.**

The established belief of Western Euro-American academics is that history is a faithful and accurate reproduction of what happened in the past. Academics have developed an historiography that provides the general guidelines for how a researcher goes about to bring past events into perspective and reflect "what really happened" in the past. So what happens when Indians are asked to provide a history of their people? Why is it that their history seems so different than the history of Euro-Americans? How is it that Indian history is viewed as so unbelievable by non-Indians?

The author argues that Indian history is as much "stories of philosophical, ideological, and symbolic creativity and synthesis, processed through definitions of self and community," as they are objective, discrete events that have happened over time. Professor Nabokov goes on to acknowledge this is a respectful way to represent the past but he also raises the issue as to whether or not there are alternative ways to reproduce the past. Moreover, he notes that the number of revisionist histories that are produced around the world call into question that Euro-American and other histories are a good reflection of what happened in the past – or did it really happen?

Indian history, in contrast to Euro-American history has been analogized as a "forest with many different trees" while Euro-American history is like a "tree with many branches." While Euro-Americans view history with little "plasticity," Indian history has experienced transformations in order for history to make sense in Indian terms, to integrate the old with the new and to pass on to the next generation, the essential meanings of events that have taken place. Drawing from the literature on Indian histories, the author explores a variety of factors that contributed to the unique configuration of how past events are revealed to today's audience.

At a conceptual level, this all makes sense. What remains is whether or not Euro-American scholars will be able to weave this perspective into their ways of viewing history. How can we truthfully reflect the past using a different perspective than one usually taught in our academic halls? How can we represent Indian ways of history? Both Levi-Stauss and James

Clifford have argued that it may well be that historical reality is not something independent of differently centred perspectives. But that is the antithesis of science as we know it.

Is Euro-American history appropriate for Euro-American society? If the answer is yes, then it would seem reasonable to accept that Indian history (however reconstructed) is appropriate for Indian society! This makes sense if you confine your history to the culture providing the explanation. What becomes problematic is when we try to cross over from one culture to the next. Euro-American scholars cannot see Indian history as truthfully/accurately representing the past. One can easily see why courts of law are skeptical in accepting historical accounts of events from Indians because, when told, they seem like a mixture of myth, religious ideology, and contemporary events.

Nabokov's book is an admirable effort to present an understandable analysis of Indian history and the causes and processes that brought about this unique perspective of the past. Written with clarity, incisiveness and a comprehensive attention to both theory and facts of the situation, *A Forest of Time* is a model for other scholars and a warning that cultural context poses problems in the interpretations of past events. His data enrich not only the theoretical debates regarding the "accuracy" of Indian history but address, for the first time, the context in which Indian history is formed, processed, and passed on.

In the end, the author maintains his objectivity in dealing with a sensitive theme and presenting the facts related to the issue. This monograph is strongly recommended for both scholars and their students. It is an excellent source to a complex and controversial subject.

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