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Take-home exam 1**

*“People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them.”* James A. Baldwin

The historians read in this class represent a range of historical perspectives. Some of them eschew an adequate treatment of the human costs of regional development on Seattle’s minority, immigrant, and working-class populations, while others make more explicit those costs. In this paper, I will use Thrush’s challenge “to confront directly the human costs of both material and discursive practices” (117) as a basis to evaluate the inadequacies in the accounts by Morse, Berton, and Laurie, and the more equitable discursive practices contained in the historical analyses of Friday and Blackford. In addition, I will offer a critique of some of the latter set, arguing that a greater degree of explicitness is valuable in discussions of historical suffering. Finally, I will argue that examples of this optimal treatment are exhibited by both Rydell and Frank.

Berton, Morse, and Laurie each approach their subject matter from a “traditional” historical perspective. Key events and elements required to familiarize a reader with the material are outlined and described, with little emphasis placed on the human dimension of the narrative. Berton writes about Klondike Fever, the rush of people from the Eastern United States to make their fortune in the Alaskan gold rush, focusing on the wide range of approaches and techniques of the prospective prospectors, and the competition between West coast cities to meet the demand for supplies (185). Berton evokes the grand scale of human events, capturing the color and excitement of the “parade”. Conspicuously missing from this story is the toll exacted on the indigenous people of the Northwest Territories, or the effect of the outfitting operations on the working-class elements of the population charged with procuring supplies or stocking shops.

Morse takes an even higher-level view of historical events. Her curriculum materials consist of a brief overview of the Klondike gold rush and its consequences for the economy of the city of Seattle, largely due to the marketing expertise of Erastus Brainerd. While the introduction briefly discusses the hardships endured by miners on the trail to the Yukon, it does not otherwise address the human costs in any dimension. The list of primary sources within the curriculum has the potential to provide some amount of human narrative, but Morse does not include analysis required to make connections between individuals and the larger discursive context.

Similar to Berton and Morse, Laurie does not appear to demonstrate an interest in the human cost of large-scale region building. He writes about US Army intervention in anti-Chinese violence in 1885, a subject that seems like it would be a natural fit for “directly [confronting] the human costs” (Thrush, 117). In his introduction, Laurie details tensions caused by job competition between unionized white labor and inexpensive imported Chinese workers. However, his descriptions of events, which draw heavily from US military records, deal almost exclusively with tactics and other independently-verifiable facts. Wounded and injured appear as military statistics, and no attempt is made to investigate the effect of the conflict or the casualties on the Chinese population or on those who perpetrated the violence. Although an engaged reader can form an accurate picture of the facts on the ground, Laurie has invested no time in exploring the interpersonal dynamics and, more importantly, the lasting impact of race-related violence on and the minority and working-class populations in the Pacific Northwest region.

Blackford and Friday bring more class and race consciousness to their historical analyses. Blackford, writing on the subject of city planning, mentions the city’s varied ethnicities and economic classes. He then identifies key stakeholders (upper and middle-class professionals) in the city planning effort, and explores how their contributions to an unsuccessful early city planning effort paved the way for the success of less ambitious future efforts (Blackford, 559). However, this discussion does not detail the cost of city planning on minority and lower-class populations. Restructuring Seattle’s development plan probably exacted a toll on the workers performing the jobs and the populations living near the sites. These hardships are not discussed; the focus seems to be on the various plans of Important People.

Friday, writing on the portrayal of Chinese communities in the Pacific Northwest by various periodicals, seems ideally positioned to take a position on the human toll of this type of inevitably limiting framing. He appears to be aware that members of Chinese communities, working in labor-intensive jobs for low wages, experience suffering (101). However, he appears to see his role partially as an antidote to “New Social History” (103), augmenting simplistic knowledge of anti-Chinese policy with descriptions of the shifting positions taken by publications over the years, rather than stepping within the Chinese communities to assess the impact. This may also imply a belief by Friday that the presence of Chinese stereotypes in regional publications is merely evidence of community-based anti-Chinese sentiment, rather than a source of it.

Frank and Rydell take the surface-level analysis of Friday and Blackford a step further, distilling, from the historical record, the effects of major decisions on minority populations. This approach provides three valuable services to the average reader of history not available in the writings of any of the previously discussed authors. First, it adds a human element, making large-scale historical events come alive. Second, it recapitulates the point that universal social issues such as racism and classism have always existed in human society. Third, it liberates under-represented minority groups from their role as passive pawns in a great historical game, highlighting their survival strategies in the face of oppression.

Frank writes about the formation on the Seattle solidarity movement in the early 20th century. She squarely addresses one of the myths of the labor movement, namely that it developed without racial barriers or class consciousness. In reality, she points out, race-based union exclusion was practiced in 91% of all unions, and that the exclusion played a pivotal role in shaping the destinies of both the white working class and the immigrant and minority workers who were denied entry. She emphasizes the role of racism and exclusionary tactics as being central to telling the “real” story of the labor movement. Frank touches on three main groups - white, skilled-craft unions, poorer, less skilled International Workers of the World, and parallel Japanese labor organizations - discussing the conflicts between them, and the widely varying approaches used to resolve the conflicts.

In his piece on the international expositions in Portland and Seattle, Rydell demonstrates a thorough treatment of the human costs of surrounding the overarching events. His principal areas of focus are the conflicts between labor organizations and business interests before and during the exposition, and a discussion of the discursive frame surrounding the exhibition of a Filipino minority community and the representation of other non-European people groups. Rydell writes of working-class laborers suffering from insufficient wages due to the lack of a union contract (46), and the corresponding opposition to the exposition within the union community created by this action (48).

After the completion of the exhibition structures, Rydell moves on to discussing the content of the exhibitions. He uses historical records of exposition exhibits to analyze the overall tone. “The Eskimo village created the impression that progress for these people would be judged by their racial attributes and by what and how much they contributed to the economic growth of America’s commercial empire” (56). The expositions, Rydell suggests, created an American foreign policy myth composed of equal parts racism, imperialism, and unfettered capitalism that could be embraced by both labor unions and big business interests.

In the readings, both Frank and Rydell demonstrate a willingness to provide a treatment of working class and minority populations into their analysis of large-scale events. Of all the assigned authors, they have most adequately answered Thrush’s challenge.

Word count: 1300

**Works cited:**

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