

Boorstin and Knowledge

There are propositions we all make when we tell a story, or teach someone something, or write a book. Daniel Boorstin's book *The Discoverers* includes certain propositions Boorstin makes, whether implicitly or explicitly, about the discovery and acquisition of knowledge.

Whether or not there is an objective reality, people operate as though there were.

The English language presupposes an objective reality — that there are at least some things that are true and there are at least some things that are not. Whether or not one believes that humans can attain knowledge of that truth generally remains unspoken, but our language determines that we can only make statements in a true-false world. The proposition that Boorstin directly makes that relates to this proposition in an indirect way is that people tend to try to impose control, order, and predictability upon their environments; this type of behavior and way of looking at the world at least does not appear odd to Boorstin in this writing, so it can be inferred that he does not question its validity. For example, he writes of the purpose of the calendar and the necessity of its consistency: variation among individual subcultures upon the structures of their calendars served “to defeat the very purpose of a calendar — a time scheme to hold people together, to ease the making of common plans, such as agreements on the planting of crops and the delivery of goods” (Boorstin, 6). Boorstin also believes that people like order and predictability more than they do chaos: when the Gregorian calendar was implemented in 1582, people were disgruntled at the unexpected and unusual “loss” of eleven days, when in fact their lives were no shorter or longer, and they did no more nor less actual work. Boorstin belies his own bias in this direction in his statement that “abstracted time was captured” (Boorstin, 30) by clocks eventually. He also equates accuracy with uniformity (Boorstin, 39)—not an analytical similarity. Here, equality of parts is superior to asymmetry (“There are few greater revolutions in human experience than this movement from the seasonal or ‘temporary’ hour to the equal hour” (Boorstin, 39)). The assumptions of predictability of events and agreement upon an external reality of time and space necessitate a belief in some objective reality and, therefore, in some absolute truths. It is this philosopher's belief that that is how our minds must operate, by virtue of the fact that our language is constructed such that it is, or perhaps that the relationship works in a converse manner, but that, in any case,

for anyone living in our culture and in most European cultures, we cannot operate in a world that we do not first presuppose to actually exist.

Collective, bodies of knowledge build upon themselves. Boorstin, through the generous hindsight allowances of historical interpretation, paints a picture of the discovery and acquisition of knowledge as a flowing, continuous, constantly building linear creature, with links adding onto the most recently learned methods and technologies. The planetary week, for example, “was a path into astrology. And astrology was a step toward new kinds of prophecy. The earlier forms of prophecy can give us a hint of why astrology was a step forward into the world of science” (Boorstin, 16).

Men are significant contributors to the body of knowledge; women are not. This is certainly not an explicitly expressed proposition on Boorstin’s part; in fact, he might deny that he makes it at all. However, the fact that he uses gender-exclusive language indicates a definite bias towards men’s significance in the historical picture. There are, for example, 41 references to “man” or “mankind” in the first Book of *The Discoverers* alone, not including quotations of others—more than one every other page. (This does not include, either, the first paragraph in the entire book, in which Boorstin states that “Eskimos spread a feast, their sorcerers perform, they extinguish lamps and exchange women” (Boorstin, 4). Weren’t the women Eskimos, too? Were all Eskimos men?) Boorstin’s exclusion of the female half of society in his language at almost every opportunity reflects such an exclusion in his mind: “because language screens our perception of reality, the very words we use can reinforce our sexist assumptions and attitudes” (Maggio, vii). Rosalie Maggio writes:

The Renaissance philosopher-educators who formulated the humanist concept of the ideal citizen as a man of broad learning and artistic achievement were not interested in the education of women. The eighteenth-century political philosophers who championed the rights of man were concerned with the rights of men, not of women. When the framers of our Declaration of Independence expressed “a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind,” they were oblivious of the fact that women, too, held valid opinions on the subject of governance. It is sexism as a fact of history that has modified the meaning of man. Women’s historical exclusion from such philosophical constructs as the Renaissance Man, the Common Man, and Mankind is a political reality that explains and underscores the sex-specific connotations man, men, and mankind have acquired in modern English (Maggio, viii).

Conclusion

Boorstin makes few major propositions about the discovery and acquisition of knowledge explicitly; he presents himself as a storyteller relating only what he sees in history. But it is impossible to speak as an historian without infusing your version of history with your own views about reality, humanity, and the events in question.

Boorstin's Eurocentric, male-oriented descriptions of historical trends are metaphysically centered in a world of objective truths--the one proposition he implicitly makes with which I mostly agree.