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Book Review: Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies by Jörn Rüsen

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Rüsen, Jörn. *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies*. Translated by Diane Kerns and Katie Digan. New York: Berghahn, 2017. xiii + 250 pages. Hardcover, \$120.00.

Jörn Rüsen is Professor Emeritus of General History and Historical Culture at Witten/Herdecke University. He has taught at universities in Germany and has served as the Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies in Essen. His works have been translated into a number of different languages and are read by historians and students all over the world. The current work is an update of Rüsen's earlier (1986) three volume series on the basics of historical theory. The volume arose from a series of lectures given in 2007 at the Catholic University in the city of Eichstätt.

Rüsen uses the current volume to expand on, and explain in detail, his theory of historical studies, which he calls *metahistory*. He finds the seminal idea for the theory of metahistory in the writings of Johann Droysen (1808-1884) and considers his own work as an extension and continuation of Droysen's studies. Metahistory, Rüsen explains, is a theory of historical studies existing in three elements: history, scholarship, and theory (p.7). It is a paradigm about what historical studies are, and from this, everything that touches the study of history is affected. Metahistory is deeply concerned with the craft of historical studies. However, it reaches beyond the discipline of history and encompasses the work of other disciplines. Rüsen asserts that since history is the study of the human story, everything within it is part of history. Consequently, an adequate examination of history, or of an historical event, must be examined through the lenses of anthropology, psychology, sociology, and so on. Reaching beyond the singular discipline of history is what makes this theory "meta." Ultimately, metahistory is a paradigm through which to approach historical studies.

Rüsen's work offers a great deal to both students and experienced historians. Within the pages of *Evidence and Meaning*, Rüsen is, at the same moment, teacher and historical theorist.

At times, he encourages his reader to think deeply about what historical research is. At others, he invites established historians to drink deeply from the wells of historical research and writing. Rüsén's metahistory is grounded in more traditional methods of historical research due to his concerns that modern trends in historical thought too easily dismiss past historical research as being inherently ideological or driven by culture. Current historical studies are becoming more diverse, bringing into the historical story the histories of traditions which are foreign to more traditional western narratives. Rüsén responds that those who desire to add such non-traditional voices to the historical narrative have legitimate concerns. History is a living discipline, and the way research is done, and the sources of information from which the study of history is drawn, is always changing. The more voices that contribute to the study of the history, the more useful the study of history will be. Rüsén cautions, however, against throwing the baby out with the bathwater. He asserts there is a right way to approach a historical event, and that the methods that have been used over the years remain useful. Rüsén suggests that non-traditional voices are needed correctives, but should not be considered outright alternatives to more traditional work.

Rüsén posits that the aim of any study of history, whether a singular event, or a sweeping story, is truth. It is this pursuit of truth that is at the heart of most of the volume. The question that drives his analysis is "what does that mean?" For example, what is meant by history? What is meant by evidence? He forces the reader to think deeply about their methodological approach. As the master theorist, Rüsén encourages historians to examine historical phenomena in every way possible. The goal is truth, and to uncover the truth, every stoned must be overturned.

The theory of metahistory truly is an all-encompassing theory. It is big enough for the western historian and inclusive enough new and innovative perspectives. Rüsén views his theory as a bridge between historical works of the past and those that will be completed in the future. As

much as Rüsen wants his theory to be understood, it is sometimes heady and needs to be read carefully. In his desire to be a bridge in the discussions of historical research, Rüsen succeeds. This is a book for the student and the teacher, the traditionalist and the progressive, the western historian and the eastern historian. It is a book that should be on the shelf of every serious thinker about the study of historical research.

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