A Brief and General Overview of Jonestown Historiography

by Jason Dikes

The Father of History – or one of the fathers, depending on your point of view – is Herodotus who opens his work *Histories* with these lines: “Herodotus of Halicarnassus, his *Researches* are here set down to preserve the memory of the past by putting on record the astonishing achievements both of our own and of other peoples; and more particularly, to show how they came into conflict.”[1] In this simple introductory sentence, we see the dual purposes of history, to explain both what happened and why events happened as they did. However, the explanation and interpretation for events often changes as more information becomes available or as existing evidence is re-examined and re-interpreted.

Historiography at its simplest definition is the history of history, an examination of how the sequence, impact, and importance of events in the past change from one generation of scholars to the next. For example, the “historiography of the Civil War,” has cast the Civil War as a moral conflict (Wilson, 1872-1877 and Rhodes 1893-1900), economic conflict (Beard, 1927), and a cultural conflict (Foner, 1970), among others. Historiographies encompass the whole range of historical events, and after 35 years, a sizable historiography of Peoples Temple exists as well. This body of work surrounding the Temple has changed dramatically, even as, for the general public, the history of the Temple, to paraphrase McGehee, begins and ends on November 18, 1978.

Before examining the historiography of Peoples Temple, it might be useful to examine how historiography has changed in another field: Nazi Germany.[2] From the end of World War II through the late 1950s, most books about Nazi Germany fell into the first school, the “Intentionalists.” The premise was that, by his sheer willpower and charisma, Adolf Hitler had seduced an entire nation into following his dark path to the Holocaust and the war. This dovetailed with both the great interest in Hitler as an individual and the desire for most of the German people to assuage their feelings of guilt and move Germany back to normality as quickly as was possible. Eventually, this school reached an extreme point when it held that Hitler’s brainwashing of Germany was so effective and his grip on the nation so complete that even a nation full of Quakers would have rounded up Jews and invaded Poland[3].

A reaction to the Intentionalists sprang up in the mid-1960s through the work of Hans Mommsen and others who initiated the second school, the “Functionalists.” This school focused on what problems within Germany itself allowed someone like Hitler to come to power. What followed were many works on German social history, economic history, cultural history, military history, and so forth. This school of history also went too far in that they eventually wrote Hitler completely out of the picture. For some of the more extreme members of this school, even had Hitler died in 1936, the war and the Holocaust still would have occurred.

Since the 1980s, the two schools have been integrated into a new, unnamed, school with a focus on Germany’s dire situation but also emphasizing the unique talents and personality of Hitler within a
larger structure.

Similarly, the first works[4] written about Peoples Temple after the events of November 1978 focused largely on Jones and the effect he had on his followers. Written primarily by journalists to cash in while Jonestown was a hot story[5], the titles alone jump off the bookshelf at the reader with words like “suicide,” “massacre,” and “die.” Writing for Library Journal in 1979, James Levine reviewed, specifically, Kilduff (The Suicide Cult, 1978) and Krause’s (Guyana Massacre, 1978) which “dwell on the ghoulish glamour of the Jonestown tragedy rather than to supply new data or sound analysis.” He further laments that Kilduff’s book, “emphasizes the sensational aspect of Jones’ story,” while Krause’s “analytical material is sensational and superficial.”[6] Levine also notes that, in the rush to get the story out, basic copy editing and grammar were also lacking.

This trend continued to dominate publications for the first two years after the tragedy. Titles include the terms “demon,” “holocaust,” “cult,” “tomb,” “deceived,” and “poison.” Book covers feature pictures of bodies at Jonestown or images of Jones in his trademark sunglasses, sometimes colorfully mixing the two images in juxtaposition.[7] Even insider accounts by Jones’ “daughter” (The Broken God, Thielmann, 1979), defectors (Six Years with God, Mills, 1979), and survivors (Awake in a Nightmare, Feinsod, 1981), largely focused on the tabloid aspects of Peoples Temple – Jones’ role as mad messiah – and warned of the dangers of “cults” and “brainwashing”[8] while offering little analysis or attempt to place the group within the larger picture of American history. As Hall (1988) put it, these books treated Peoples Temple and the massacre at Jonestown as something completely and totally alien to American values and culture.

This first school of Temple historiography fed the public’s appetite for a simple, lurid, and – frankly – exploitive explanation of events. All of the blame was placed on Jones and the “crazy religious nuts” who were brainwashed into following him to self-destruction in a foreign land. The idea that Peoples Temple might reflect problems with American society or that perhaps some outside pressures might have even partially contributed to the final White Night (Hall, 1988) were ignored. These and other overlooked issues – due in part to the lack of availability of primary sources – would drive the development of the second school of Temple historiography.

New schools of historiography are typically birthed out of the older ones, with “linking” books often providing the transition between them. Examples would include: Feinsod (1981) who, despite some exploitive aspects, attempted to begin assessing Peoples Temple through the lens of religion, sociology, and psychology; Reston’s Our Father Who Art in Hell (1981) which incorporated primary sources, specifically the tapes and documents seized by the FBI to paint a more detailed picture; Wooden (1981) who focused on how the Temple used child protective services and other welfare agencies to take in children; Yee’s (1981) zeroing in on how the Temple affected one specific family, the Laytons; and Reiterman’s Raven (1982), a straightforward narrative of events which became the best-selling book on Peoples Temple ever written. All of these books greatly expanded our knowledge of Jones and the Temple and they were not as exploitive or anti-cult as earlier works. As transition books, however, they did not always ask the hard and difficult questions, a trademark that would eventually define the second school. Even a glance at titles demonstrates a change in focus from sensationalism to serious. Rather than containing words like “suicide” or “holocaust” or “massacre,” they focused on “implications,” “sociological,” “politics,” and “comparative analysis.” Levi (1982) published a reader of scholarly articles and Weightman (1983) wrote the first full-scale sociological work. Essentially, these were the years that Peoples Temple went to college.

A seminal work, in this author’s opinion, of the second school is John R. Hall’s Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History. First, Hall set the Temple within the historical structure in which its narrative events took place, spanning the rise and fall of the New Left and the stirrings of what became the neo-conservative movement, while documenting how these
larger cultural forces changed it (Hall, 2004, p. x). Specifically, Hall did not submit to the simplistic notion of the first school that saw the Temple as a morality tale about “cults” and evil men. Although the Temple movement cannot be considered countercultural, it certainly attracted those countercultural elements who were attracted to the Temple’s combative stance towards racism and the failure of capitalism. Hall also is noteworthy for asking a hard question: did, and to what extent, Peoples Temple and the events of Jonestown reflect American society?

Other works published during this time included numerous collections of scholarly articles, several edited by Moore and McGehee (1989), and Melton (1990), an examination of the theological and religious ideology of the Temple (Chidester, 1988), and its inclusion in notable works of comparative analysis by Ahlberg (1986), Smith (1988), Endleman (1993), and Wessinger (2000). Another trend in the second school was the publication of primary sources by those who had been part of Jones’ inner circle, including numerous works by Moore (1985, 1986) whose late sisters had been Jones’ confidantes and at least one of them who had been his lover. These works fit with the second school in that they broadened a “behind the scenes” view of Peoples Temple and reveal the thoughts of its members, who – unlike the Concerned Relatives, reporters, and budding conspiracy theorists – were no longer alive to offer their own rebuttals.

This is not to say that the first school of Temple historiography stopped publishing. Rather, it evolved in a strange new direction, one whose precedents were found in the literature surrounding the assassinations of JFK, RFK and MLK. As the voices of the dead began to reveal themselves as sane, intelligent people who sincerely believed in the struggle against racism, sexism, classism, and the failures of a capitalist society, and as scholarly analysis began to overtake the heretofore dominating narrative, the conspiracy theories also began to flourish. Instead of simply focusing on Jones, the transition to connections between Jones and the CIA, FBI, or MK-ULTRA (choose one) began. Even without the second school, the conspiracy theory shift would still have occurred. Peoples Temple itself believed it was the victim of a conspiracy, a view reinforced by the outrageous claims of Mark Lane and Joe Mazor. Combined with the shocking revelations of what the CIA and FBI had been up to in the 1960s and 1970s, this would have provided enough fuel for this evolution.

These are the two groups that continued to publish throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century. One smaller school focused on Jones, sometimes abetted by various, nefarious government agencies, and the other school emphasized a broadening of our understanding of why people joined Peoples Temple, what they found there that gave them so much hope. Both battled for attention and purchasing dollars, and the anniversaries of the last White Night increased the number of new works published by both sides.

What was still missing became the focus of the third school of Jonestown historiography: the voices of the rank and file who made up the majority of Peoples Temple, as well as those who were only marginally connected to it. While others had brought these voices forward, no one had committed whole books to their stories. A prominent “linking” book for this new school was Maaga (1998) who considered especially the role of women in Peoples Temple. This trend slowly built momentum in the 21st century with works by Stephenson (2005), and autobiographical works by Kohl (2010), Wagner-Wilson (2008), and O’Shea (2011).

The most recently published books by Scheeres (2011) and Fondakowski (2013) continue this trend, presenting stories from previously silent former members like Hue Fortson, Thom Bogue, Neva Sly, Michael Briggs, Jean and Tim Clancy, Garry Lambrev, Claire Janaro and others. These works brought forward stories and voices that had largely, though not purposely, been left out over the preceding decades.

Another significant development in this third school are works that have focused on sub-groups
within Peoples Temple, whether they be blacks (Moore, Pinn, Sawyer, 2004) or gays, lesbians and transgender individuals (Bellefountaine, 2011). The stories and accounts of individual members being collected by this website and a new oral history project are also part of this third school of scholarship as is the ongoing effort to transcribe all of Temple tapes still in existence. The transcription of Edith Roller’s journals and the future release of Dick Tropp’s oral histories, undertaken before his death at Jonestown, also add to the third school, as they feature interactions and stories from previously-unheard voices. As for those only marginally connected to Peoples Temple, notable work has been done by Knight-Griffin in his interviews with the Special Operations team who removed the bodies from Jonestown, and in various attempts to contact those in Guyana who interacted with Jonestown, some of which are being discovered as more tapes are transcribed. Fondakowski’s recent work also contributes to this through her interviews with Phil Tracy, Patricia Ryan, Melody Ermachild Chavis, and investigator Jack Palladino.

In 2000, Rebecca Moore asked whether the canon on Jonestown was closed. Based on the developments of the last ten years, I would say no. I don’t believe that there are any major surprises left to discover, but the growing numbers of oral histories and journals, the emergence of former members who are beginning to tell of their experiences, the unfinished tape transcriptions and the documents still held by the government despite a long-running FOI lawsuit still hold stories which will add to – and simultaneously, complicate – our understanding of Jonestown.

I don’t think the definitive history of Jonestown has been published, I don’t think it will be published for decades and indeed, the reality is that one definitive history may not be possible. As to the future of Temple historiography, if I had to hazard a guess, I would say that the revelations, past and future, of the third school will be subjected to academic scrutiny to birth a fourth school. While we move to that school and beyond, it is good to remember Dick Tropp’s final exhortation and instruction to us: “Collect all the tapes, all the writing, all the history. The story of this movement, this action, must be examined over and over. It must be understood in all of its incredible dimensions.”

Bibliography:


(Jason Dikes is an associate adjunct professor of US history at Austin Community College and Adult Services Librarian for the Leander Public Library. He may be reached at jdikes@austincc.edu.)

Endnotes


[2] I do not mean to imply here that Hitler=Jim Jones or that members of Peoples Temple=Nazis. I am only using this example because most people have at least a basic knowledge of Hitler and Nazi Germany, so a large backstory isn’t necessary to fill in.
This is facetious, but not by much.

A complete list of known books about Peoples Temple can be found here.

Think about this. The final “White Night” took place on November 18, 1978. By the end of that same year, a mere 43 days, four books had been published about Peoples Temple. One reviewer, Boyd Rice, on Amazon stated that he saw a book about Jonestown a week after the story broke.

A reader review on Amazon of another 1978 book, Knerr’s Suicide in Guyana makes note of the graphic images “…including Jones’ body after death.”

Marc Dem Le demon de Guyana does so quite effectively.

Mel White (1979) wins the award for this category, churning out a book, Deceived, and two documentaries, Deceived and Deceived II.

Some would argue that the conspiracy books should be in their own separate school of historiography, but seeing as how they place, to varying degrees, most of their emphasis on Jones, I see them as a mutation of the first school.

The last known print published title focused on a conspiracy was in 1998 (Kahalas). One reason that the conspiracy school or Jones as “mad messiah” leading brainwashed victims school has not published has been the introduction of the internet where their conspiracies have found a wider audience. Without the internet, I’m convinced paperback publishers would have filled this niche.

Four in 1988, four in 1998.

Neither Carolyn Moore Layton nor Annie Moore were common rank and file so I would not place R. Moore’s mid-1980s books squarely in this category, though they could be transition works. Nor, for the same reason would I place Layton’s book in this category.

Example: tape 202 (A) features interviews with several local Guyanese who had reached out to Jonestown for medical assistance of one kind or another.

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