

History and Post-Structuralism: A Primer

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The essays that follow, and the comment on them by literary theorist Jonathan Arac, were originally presented as a panel on “American History after Post-Structuralism” at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in January, 1994. As Arac observes, the essays most steeped in post-structuralism have surprisingly little to say about history. And one might add that the essay most concerned with history—Nancy Isenberg’s “Second Thoughts on Gender and Women’s History”—has relatively little to say about post-structuralism.

If these observations are at first unsettling, they may also serve as a starting point for understanding the troubled relationship between the practice of American history and the current of post-structuralism. What we have here is not exactly your love-and-marriage, horse-and-carriage sort of thing. History and post-structuralism have often behaved like Ralph and Alice Kramden of “The Honeymooners,” belligerent and accusatory.

On the surface, at least, this stance appears justified by the different methods and purposes of history and post-structuralism. While history values the document (the text) and seeks a “context” in which to interpret and give meaning to the document, post-structuralism (some versions of it, anyway) insists that the distinction between text and context is intellectually dishonest, in that it wrongly implies that there is a context—some reality—that is free from interpretation and, therefore, available to confer meaning. While history values the archive as a place to find texts, post-structuralism contends that the archive is not a place but a process—in effect, another “text” available for interpretation. While historians claim to be engaged in the re-creation and narration of historical “reality,” post-

structuralism insists on the infinite richness and complexity of the past and rebukes the historian for privileging one version above all others. While the historian reads the evidence in order to draw important conclusions, formulate general laws, and chart the path of progress, for the post-structuralist reading and interpretation are endless processes, conclusions so much quicksand, general laws chimerical, the idea of progress a socially harmful fiction.

In contrast, the pieces assembled here work to locate a position or positions that do not require the triumph of one view over the other. But how? By what sleight of hand? A checklist of major arguments might include:

—*Post structuralism is not as bad (as radical) as it seems.* Consider Saul Cornell's argument in "Splitting the Difference: Textualism, Contextualism, and Post-Modern History." When Derrida says that text meanings are infinite (a statement that would undermine the historian's confidence that there is a core meaning to, say, Sherman's Special Field Order #15), he is making a philosophical, not a "sociological," claim. Or Arac's contention that there is a "most productive" context for a particular text, an idea that sets significant limits on the post-structuralism critique.

—*History is not as bad (as conservative) as it seems.* Here Barry Shank's "Conjuring Evidence for Experience: Imagining a Post-Structuralist History" may be most effective. According to Shank, historians talk and write as if there were a "real" past, but they don't really believe it. The "real" functions like the rabbit at the dog races, i.e., as an ideal, an unreachable limit. Deep down, most historians appreciate just how tentative their conclusions are and must be, and how far from "reality" even the best history is. An occasional well-intentioned backslider—in this case, T.J. Jackson Lears, writing in *The Power of Culture* that Sherwood Anderson's quest for authenticity opens out to a space somehow free from textualism—proves the rule. On a more practical level, historians' recent attraction to social history, oral history, local history, and material culture has produced a multiplicity, fragmentation, and disdain for the grand narrative that most post-structuralists would see as movement in the right direction.

—*The historians may be right (partly).* If the pursuit of "reality" is heresy, the historians' time-honored goal of objectivity is, well, honorable. See Cornell's discussion of Thomas Haskell.

—*The post-structuralists may be wrong (partly).* All texts are not created equal. To use the example proffered by Cornell, poems are not death warrants. Some texts (poems) are simply more "rhetorical" than others (death warrants). Therefore, history can rest easy, knowing that it is not just a branch of literary studies. I feel better already. Unless a death warrant is a short story.

—*Let's be selective.* This approach treats post-structuralism not as a unified system that must be accepted or rejected in its entirety, but rather as a cafeteria of ideas, with freedom of choice the ruling principle. If everything is a text and begs for interpretation, historians can choose interpretation from the post-structuralist menu and still feel good about themselves; indeed, Cornell suggests,

historians have much to learn from post-structuralists about reading texts—so much, it seems, that they could reasonably contemplate giving up synthesis altogether. Arac agrees, suggesting that the “rhetorical” stance of post-structuralism may be healthier than the “scientific” one that underpins the discipline of history.

Isenberg’s work intersects with the idea of selectivity in two ways. On the one hand, she finds fault with some well-known women’s historians for having developed certain aspects of a post-structural approach (e.g., the role of marginalized and local groups) while ignoring others (the concern with power and ideology). On the other hand, Isenberg also seems selective, disregarding post-structuralism’s broad-based attack on the methods of history while emphasizing its foregrounding of questions of power and ideology, a la Foucault.

—*Let’s be practical.* Because the post-structuralists seem to hold most of the high cards, about all the historian can do is make the best of a bad situation. In Shank’s way of thinking, we should recognize the superiority of the theoretical perspective of post-structuralism, but at the same time acknowledge that we’re human (I was just beginning to enjoy being a text) and that we can’t live or work in the depressing world of high theory. Cornell applauds the pragmatic (one might say existential) impulse to participate in a “collective conversation,” even when theory says it can’t, or shouldn’t, be done. Arac adds his own slant: not that historians *should* be practical, but that they inevitably *are*—a setup for his astute observation that the essays deal too much in philosophy and too little in the realm of historical practice, where Eugene Genovese, Natalie Z. Davis, E.P. Thompson, and others have written about the past in innovative ways that extend our understanding of what the historian does and can do while remaining true to something recognizable as the historian’s craft. Perhaps, then, one last possibility:

—*We are all post-structuralists.*