Splitting The Difference: Textualism, Contextualism, and Post-Modern History

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Text, Discourse, and the Demise of Meta-narratives

One of the distinguishing characteristics of post-structuralist theory is its radical claims about the textuality of human experience. In the view of philosopher Richard Rorty, the theoretical writings of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are both characterized by a new theory of textuality that Rorty designates strong textualism. Derrida, Foucault, and other strong textualists, Rorty comments, "write as if there were nothing but texts."[1] A number of scholarly approaches to the past, including literary new historicism and some variants of post-modern history, have accepted some form of strong textualism.[2] The problem of textuality is central to the entire movement of post-modernism and has serious consequences for the practice of history.[3] Strong textualism effectively deconstructs the conventional historical categories of text and context. For strong textualists, context is not a fixed background against which texts are read. Foreground and background are each textualized and the connections between them must be read inter-textually.

Opposition to Derrida's radical theory of textuality has been voiced by historians on both the left and right of contemporary academic politics. For critics on the right, Derrida is cast as the most recent in a long line of neo-Nietzschean nihilists, while on the left Derrida is cast as the author of the latest narcissistic French intellectual fad. Derrida's radical claim that "there is nothing outside of the text" has been mistakenly interpreted to mean that there is no material reality, literally nothing outside of language.[4] It makes more sense to interpret this claim

as a statement that it is impossible to interact with the world without the mediation of some language rooted in a particular culture. Everything is a text because everything experienced by human beings must be decoded and interpreted. Thus, philosophical systems and political systems are each capable of being read as texts. In response to his critics, Derrida has asserted that when he argues that everything, including an oppressive political institution such as apartheid, must be read as a text, he is not avoiding the hard realities of politics but directly challenging the existing politics of meaning that support oppressive systems such as apartheid. "I found it necessary," Derrida writes, "to recast the concept of text by generalizing it almost without limit .... That's why there is nothing '*beyond* the text.' That's why South Africa, and *apartheid* are, like you and me, part of this general text, which is not to say that it can be read the way one reads a book. That's why the text is always a field of forces."[5] In Derridean terms, all human interactions are mediated by the pervasiveness of textuality. Individuals, the state, and apartheid are all part of a more general text, a meta-text, in which we are all inscribed. Although less poetic than Shakespeare's suggestion that all the world is a stage, Derrida's textualist model, resembles earlier dramaturgical models of reality, but restates the notion of the social construction of reality in especially forceful terms.[6]

In contrast to dramaturgical models, Derrida's understanding of textuality places greater emphasis on the mutability of the many texts that constitute our world. Historians are probably most familiar with Derrrida's claim that meaning of texts can not be anchored by authorial intent or context. His belief that the meaning of texts proliferates endlessly, it is important to note, is a philosophical assertion, not a sociological claim. In specific situations various forces work to actively constrain this process of iterability.[7] Thus, while asserting that meaning is slippery, Derrida also affirms that a variety of ideological forces actively constrains this process. What Derrida's radical approach to language seeks to do is de-naturalize language precisely so that the force of ideology can be brought into focus. A death row inmate may choose to read his/her sentence like a poem if he/ she chooses, but what he/ she can not do is enforce this reading.

A different approach to textuality informs the work of Foucault. Abandoning the structuralist search for a set of general laws governing history, Foucault's early work elucidated the discontinuities and ruptures that undermined both traditional political narratives and the new more scientific narratives of historians such as those of the Annales School.[8] The Enlightenment, typically associated with progress and emancipation in most narrative histories, is for Foucault the source of a new set of discourses and practices designed to limit and control the body and mind.[9] While treating many subjects that historians of mentalities would find congenial, including the history of psychiatry and penal reform, Foucault explicitly rejected the methods of French historiography. His archeology/genealogy sought to distance itself from both the history of ideas and the history of mentalities. Historians, he argued, had mistakenly sought an objective

reality, a total history. In opposition to this ideal, Foucault insisted that history "must turn away from all projects that claim to be global." Genealogy would not aspire to objectivity or completeness, but would instead accept that it could never be more than a "partial and local inquiry." Foucault attacked traditional historians for their deceptions, noting that they invariably took "unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place."[10] This method was self-consciously "slanted, being a deliberate appraisal, affirmation, or negation" of the past. What Foucault sought in his history of systems of thought was not truth, but problematics; his inquiries were designed to expose the way particular discourses ordered and constructed the "reality" of the past.[11] Foucault eschewed any vantage point from which a historian could actually "know" the truth of a past "reality." "Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men." For Foucault, there are no stable objects of historical analysis, not the human body, the means of production, or the realm of the spirit. "The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past," he writes, "must be systematically dismantled. . . . knowledge is not made for understanding."[12] In place of the ideal of disinterested scholarship or objectivity, Foucault substitutes a form of engagement. "One's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to that of war . . . . relations of power, not relations of meaning."[13]

Rather than begin with the text as an object of study, Foucault treats particular texts as the products of larger structures of meaning and power which he labels discourses. Foucault sees all human activity shaped by discourses which become the means by which various fields of human knowledge are constituted, organized, and enforced. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes his project as the analysis of "a corpus of knowledge, techniques, 'scientific' discourses . . . entangled with the practice of the power to punish." Seen in Foucauldean terms, authors, texts, and prisons are all constituted by discourse. The "micro-physics of power" charted by Foucault cannot be "localized in a particular type of institution or state apparatus" or in "the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes."[14] In contrast to the materialism and idealism of traditional historical inquiries, Foucault focuses on discourses that are simultaneously omnipresent yet not rooted in any particular social location.

At the risk of simplification, one might say that Derrida expands the text to encompass all areas of human activity, while Foucault effectively shrinks the text to a mere affect of discourse. At one level, then, Derrida and Foucault stand at opposite poles on the continuum of post-structuralist theory. Yet, at the same time each of these theorists shares a commitment to a form of strong textualism. Literary theorist Edward Said views both of these thinkers in terms of their distinctive approaches to the problem of textuality. Said contrasts the slippery approach to textuality embraced by Derrida with the more deterministic view of

textuality found in Foucault's work.[15]   The approach to textuality found in each of these thinkers effectively challenges the conventional division between text and context essential to virtually all traditional forms of historiography.

The work of Foucault and Derrida are essential to understanding the emergence of a distinctively post-modern view of history.   In the *Postmodern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard defined the essence of modernism as an appeal that "legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . appealing to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth." In contrast to the modern, the post-modern is defined by an "incredulity toward metanarratives." In Lyotard's view, "the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great voyages, its great goal." In place of metanarratives, Lyotard envisions a multitude of "different language games—a heterogeneity of elements."[16]

Derrida's deconstruction of western philosophy and Foucault's method of archeology/genealogy each have helped undermine meta-narratives.   This challenge to modern historiography is most clearly articulated in Foucault. In contrast to the grand historical theories of Hegel, Marx, the Whigs, or even Ranke, Foucualt asserts that "history has no 'meaning,' though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible to analysis down to the smallest detail."[17] Truth and knowledge are not set against the distortions of either power or ideology, both are manifesta-tions of power. The critiques of meta-narratives, both in Derrida and Foucault, take aim at grand systems of interpretation, the search for universal truths, and the ideal of scholarly neutrality or objectivity.[18]

A number of scholars have attempted to conceptualize how these new post-structuralist approaches to textuality might alter the practice of history, creating the possibility of a post-modern history. Given the impact of post-structuralist thought on contemporary literary criticism, it is hardly surpris-ing that the most ardent calls for a post-modern history have come from literary critics who argue that the past is knowable only in a textualized form. Literary critic Catherine Belsey captures the central, animating impulse of this post-modern historiography when she declares confidently, "history is not offered as objective, authoritative, neutral or true . . . . on the contrary . . . it is irreducibly textual, offering no place outside discourse from which to interpret or judge."[19] Belsey's stance is closely related to the views espoused by proponents of the new historicism in literary study. In the view of one of its leading advocates, Louis Montrose, the new wave in literary study affirms the "historicity of texts" and the "textuality of history." In the view of Montrose, "we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question."[20] For new historicists, the opposition between text and context is itself a subject for deconstructive criticism. Contexts are treated as discursive constructions since they are assembled from texts that are

themselves the products of the power/knowledge schemes that caused certain texts to be created and then preserved in various archives.

The challenge presented by post-modern history has prompted a number of reactions, including indifference, skepticism, anger, and, in a few cases, enthusiasm.[21] While few historians have eagerly embraced post-modernism, a few prominent figures in the historical community have been receptive to the project of writing a post-modern history. One of the most ardent supporters of the new approach to textuality within the historical community is Dominick LaCapra, perhaps the most influential Derridean teaching in a history department. He has vociferously attacked the dominant "documentary model of knowledge" within the historical profession. LaCapra's critique of this approach to history contains two related components. First, he rejects the archival fetishism which holds that "the only significant historical questions are those that can be answered by empirical (preferably archival) research." Another problem with contextualism is its reductionism. "The notion of context may even serve as a way to get around texts and the problem of interpreting or reading them other than in reductively documentary ways. . . . it diverts attention from the way 'documents' are themselves texts that 'process' or rework 'reality' and require a critical reading." Such a view ignores the way in which "the documentary record is itself always textually processed before any given historian comes to it."[22] Drawing more on Foucault than Derrida, historian Hayden White argues that "the text-context relationship, once an unexamined presupposition of historical investigation, has become a problem, not in the sense of being simply difficult to establish by the once vaunted 'rules of evidence,' but rather in the sense of becoming 'undecidable,' elusive, uncreditable."[23] White endorses literary theorist Fredric Jameson's strong texualist stance, asserting that historical interpretation requires some version of "texualist theory." From White's point of view, the virtue of strong textualism is that it forces historians to examine the unstated textualist assumptions that already shape their work.[24] Another enthusiastic supporter of both Foucauldean genealogy/archeology and Derridean deconstruction is women's historian Joan Scott. She recognizes that the new techniques are not the only method of critical reading available to historians. Post-structuralist interpretive strategies move beyond traditional historical efforts to expose the hidden meaning or the ideological significance of texts. The notion that everything may be read as a text, as complex social constructions laden with hidden meanings, has been especially useful to feminist scholars eager to expand the range of sources and questions central to historical inquiry. One obvious advantage of this approach for historians interested in gender is that it makes it possible to challenge the materialist bias of so much traditional historiography. Social history, both in its Marxist and non-Marxist forms, is effectively deconstructed by Scott. While the problem of gender can not be reduced to language, it is, for Scott, inextricably bound up with the problem of language. Post-structuralism therefore provides a powerful set of tools for women's historians eager to insure that gender is given

comparable weight to the analytical categories so often favored by materialists, particularly class or race. The new techniques also provide a means to challenge the masculinist biases of traditional intellectual history. If every text must be treated as a complex literary production, then the exclusion of women from the traditional literary and philosophical canon ceases to present a problem. Conduct books and cook books can take their place along side epics and philosophical treatises. Perhaps the most important benefit of the new approaches is that they force scholars to confront the silences and omissions in any symbolic/ideological system—gaps that are every bit as revealing as the positive record found in the archive.[25]

The views of LaCapra, White, and Scott have hardly become typical of most historians. Still, as historian David Harlan observes, "the basic distinction between text and context may not have collapsed everywhere, but even among epistemological conservatives it seems to have become a problem."[26] A number of post-modern assumptions have been particularly influential in the writings of historians associated with the new cultural history. Lynn Hunt, one of the leading proponents of the new cultural history, endorses the post-modern belief that "there is no such thing as history in the sense of a referential ground of knowledge." Hunt's stance is one measure of the success of the new textualism in re-orienting historical inquiry.[27] A similar approach informs recent writing in American cultural history. The impact of post-modernism is also evident in Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears's introduction to *The Power of Culture*, which argues that semiotics and critical theory have become central to the project of the new cultural history. "An emphasis on the inescapable textuality of all sources," Fox and Lears assert, has "freed historians from a positivist conception . . . and focused their attention on the fundamental task of interpretation."[28]

Deconstructing Text and Context

One of the most lucid discussions of the emergence of strong textualism can be found in literary theorist Stanley Fish's analysis of the problem of rhetoric in contemporary humanistic inquiry. While history and many other disciplines have long acknowledged the indispensable role of interpretation in the human sciences, Fish identifies a new, more radical "interpretive turn" that starts with "the realization . . . that the givens of any of field of activity—including the facts it commands, the procedures it trusts in, and the values it expresses and extends— are socially and politically constructed."[29] If Fish's characterization is correct and there is no escape from rhetoric, then the proponents of a radical theory of textuality will have largely succeeded in deconstructing the division between text and context, since both text and context will have been shown to be mere rhetorical constructions.

Fish surveys a number of theorists in his discussion of the new rhetorical turn in humanistic inquiry, including the works of thinkers as diverse as J. L. Austin,

Thomas Kuhn, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Jacques Derrida. Perhaps the most important aspect of Fish's treatment of rhetoric deals with the tension between the work of Austin and Derrida.[30] From the point of view of practicing historians, this argument is particularly relevant since Austin's speech act theory is the basis for the most sophisticated efforts to ground historical contextualism, most notably the early theoretical writings of Quentin Skinner.[31] Austin's speech act theory can be characterized as a form of strong contextualism. Meaning, Austin argued, was determined by the illocutionary force of an utterance, what an actor was doing by making a specific utterance in a particular context. The difference between Austin's view of context and Derrida's, is in Fish's scheme, "the difference between thinking of a context as something *in* the world and thinking of a context as a construction *of* the world." Fish and Derrrida both claim that context can no more settle the meaning of a text than a text could establish a single unproblematic historical context.[32] "One can no longer have any simple (that is non-interpretive) recourse to context in order to settle disputes or resolve doubts about meaning, because contexts, while they are productive of interpretation, are also the products of interpretation." One of the most important philosophical points of contention between Austinians and Derrideans deals with the effort to distinguish between a promise delivered on stage and a promise delivered in the market place. For traditional historians, the line between fiction and history, between statements anchored by context and those of a more literary nature, depends upon drawing distinctions between these two types of speech acts. By separating ordinary language situations from literary speech, Austinians are able to support their belief in a form of strong contextualism. Derrideans have challenged the effort to distinguish literary speech from ordinary language. Promises made on stage are, in Derrida's view, exactly the same as promises made in the market place. The market place is merely another stage, one in which an equally artificial set of rules is in place to constrain the process of interpretation. The fact that promises are often kept in the market place is not a challenge to Derrida's theory. For a successful speech act to occur, for a promise to be understood, the two parties must share the same assumptions about what context will define the nature of the exchange. This is precisely the sort of ideological constraint that Derrida seeks to expose. "The contextual features of a simple exchange," Fish asserts, "are no less 'read' and therefore no more 'absolutely' constraining than the contextual features of a stage performance or of a conversation reported in poem."[33] One can interpret an electricity bill with a good deal of poetic license if one chooses, but it is unlikely that the power company will accept a deconstructive reading when the bill is due. The fact that the lights go out at the end of the month does not mean that one reading was more correct than another, rather it means that one reader is able to draw on more coercive force to enforce their reading. This obvious "fact" presents no problem to the strong textualist stance. The "correct reading" of the power company is not grounded in an epistemological reality, but in a sociological reality. As Fish notes, an

"utterance in a play is not the same as the citationality of a philosophical reference or a deposition before a court; it is just that no one of these performances is more serious—more direct, less mediated, less rhetorical—than any other."[34]

Fish effectively captures the essential point of disagreement between traditional historians, strong contextualists, and most post-structuralists, strong textualists. To appreciate the difference between these two approaches to the past, it is important to distinguish strong textualist, epistemological claims from strong textualist, sociological claims. It is a caricature of post-structuralism to argue that because there is nothing outside of the text that all texts are equal, particularly with regard to their ability to draw on the resources of officially sanctioned interpreters. The most astute proponents of deconstruction have never denied that ideological forces constrain the free play of textual meaning or that ideological forces can be brought to bear to enforce an official reading of a text. This is precisely Derrida's point when he notes that apartheid is a text, but that it is a text that cannot be read like a book. New historicist literary critic Louis Montrose makes a comparable argument when he claims that "recent theories of textuality have argued persuasively that the referent of a linguistic sign cannot be fixed; that the meaning of the text can not be stabilized." Yet, Montrose recognizes "at the same time, writing and reading are always historically and socially determinate events." The appropriate response of scholars is to "simultaneously acknowledge the theoretical indeterminacy of the signifying process and the historical specificity of discursive practices."

Even if historians acknowledge that the view of textuality advocated by Derrida and the new historicist literary critics is more nuanced than many hostile commentators have suggested, one might still legitimately ask the question: is there no alternative to strong textualism? Is it true that if all knowledge of the past is mediated by a pervasive textuality and all texts are equally rhetorical, that history is merely another branch of poetics or literary criticism?

The Levelling of Genre Distinctions: Three Critiques

Several theoretical traditions provide an alternative to the strong textualism of French post-structuralism and the strong contextualism of traditional historiography. While conceding that all artifacts must be interpreted, these alternative theoretical traditions recognize that there are important differences between the many types of texts that historian use to constitute context. While some of these texts can, and ought to be, linked to other texts inter-textually, other texts require a different set of hermeneutic strategies to be decoded. By recognizing that the historian must employ several hermeneutic approaches, it is possible to preserve the distinctions between tax lists, death warrants, canon shells, and poems. It may well be that within certain contexts a death warrant may be read like a poem, and a poem may well, in some circumstances, be far more "real" than a canon shell. Deciding among these alternatives requires not strong textualism, but a

revised theory of contextualism. A number of theorists, some post-modern and others decidedly opposed to post-modernism, offer historians a variety of ways of recasting the contextualist enterprise.

One of the most vocal critics of post-structuralism and post-modernism is the German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas.[35] In the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas challenges the leading theorists of post-modernism and seeks to provide a new defense of Enlightenment rationalism. To achieve this goal, Habermas synthesizes German hermeneutics, American pragmatism, Austinian speech act theory, and Frankfurt school Marxism. One of the most important contributions of Habermas to recent theoretical debate is his critique of the controversy between Derrideans and Austinians. Crucial to this argument is his effort to re-establish a distinction between literary discourse and other types of utterances, which he labels as forms of communicative action. The latter concept is central to Habermas's philosophical project and refers to utterances designed to promote inter-subjective communication."[36] At the core of this critique is a challenge to the Derridean move to level the genre distinction between literary and non-literary speech, the belief that promises made on stage and promises made in the market place are equally rhetorical. "Language games," Habermas writes, "only work because they presuppose idealizations that transcend any particular language game . . . these idealizations give rise to the perspective of an agreement that is open to criticism on the basis of validity claims. A language operating under these kinds of constraints is subject to an ongoing test."[37] The effort to distinguish between ordinary speech and literary speech is sanctioned by its utility in solving real world problems. Habermas's disagreement with Derrida is ably summarized by Thomas McCarthy, who notes that "Habermas defends a position that while not denying the omnipresence and ineradicability of rhetorical and poetic elements in everyday discourse insists on distinguishing those contexts in which the poetic function predominate . . . from those in which it plays a subordinate and supplementary role."[38] From Habermas's point of view, and in contradistinction to Derrida and Fish, the argument that a poem and a death warrant might each use literary devices should not obscure the fact that one text is more literary than another. The claim that a poem and a death warrant each employ rhetorical/literary strategies does not mean that both types of texts are equally rhetorical. Historian Martin Jay's succinct characterization of Habermas's critique of both traditional hermeneutics and deconstruction reiterates the problem that the strong textualist thesis poses for historians. "Because certain social forms can be read as if they were languages, there is no reason to suppose their linguisticality exhausts their being."[39] From a Habermasean point of view, not only are all texts not created equal, but all texts are not equally rhetorical.

Another forceful critique of strong textualism from the modernist perspective has been formulated by Marxists, particularly neo-Marxists. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese employs a language similar to Habermas's when she

warns that the new textualism may confuse, rather than clarify, questions about power. "It is possible to classify price series or coin deposits or hog weights or railroad lines as texts--possible, but ultimately useful only as an abstraction that flattens historically and theoretically significant distinctions."[40] A similar challenge to the post-structuralist move to blur the genre distinction between literature and other forms of communication has been articulated by Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton, whose sharpest criticism is reserved for Foucault. In particular, Eagleton calls attention to Foucault's notion of power as a "pervasive, intangible network of forces which weaves itself into our slightest gestures and most intimate utterances." The problem with such an expansive view of power is that it ceases to have any analytical value as a tool for describing the different effects of power. "If there are no values and beliefs *not* bound up with power," the concept of power itself "threatens to expand to a vanishing point . . . . to stretch these terms to the point where they become coextensive with everything is simply to empty them of force." From the perspective of Marxism, such a move is especially problematic since it distorts the goal of radical liberation. In opposition to Foucault, Eagleton champions the more traditional Marxist concept of ideology, whose utility rests precisely in its ability to "discriminate between those power struggles which are somehow central to a whole form of social life, and those which are not."[41]

A concern with the problem of textuality is also central to the work of the Cultural Studies Movement. The Cultural Studies paradigm has challenged the base/superstructure metaphor so crucial to traditional Marxist theory, and with it, the rigid materialism of an earlier generation of Marxism. A number of common, intellectual themes unite this heterogeneous, theoretical camp. Cultural studies begins with Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. While Cultural Studies shows a marked preference for the study of popular culture, this methodology is easily adaptable to the study of high culture as well. Cultural Studies treats the textualized artifacts of the past as forms of cultural production—ideological texts—that must be decoded and analyzed in terms of their contribution to the struggle between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies of a particular society. As the emphasis on the term cultural production suggests, ideological texts have a material reality. Cultural texts must be produced and distributed as well as coded and decoded. For scholars employing this method, it is important to explore the production, distribution, and reception of cultural texts.[42]

In contrast to the modernist critiques of Habermas and Eagleton, Richard Rorty challenges strong textualism from the perspective of post-modernism. The neo-pragmatism articulated by Rorty accepts the strong textualists' challenge to the western metaphysical tradition. Such a challenge, however, can not provide an adequate grounding for modern morality, politics, or history.[43] Against the claims of strong textualism, Rorty affirms the point of view of a group of weak textualists who include proponents of the hermeneutic tradition, both in its German and American incarnations.[44] "The weak textualist" recognizes "that

there is a great difference between what scientists do and what critics do." For weak textualists, "the fact that the former often agree and the latter usually don't shows something about the natures of their respective subject-matters, or about the special epistemological difficulties encountered by their respective methods." Neo-pragmatists have no trouble accepting the Derridean critique of western metaphysics; philosophers can never hope to escape from the web of culture and hence the problem of textuality. "The pragmatist reminds us that a new vision and a useful vocabulary is just *that*, not a sudden unmediated vision of things or texts as they are."[45]

Consider a neo-pragmatist response to the problem of how to handle the differences between poems and death warrants, or promises delivered in the market place and promises delivered on stage. An anti-foundationalist would reject the effort to ground this distinction philosophically as an illusionary quest. At best, such distinctions can be grounded historically and politically. When we agree to treat poems and death warrants differently or accept the difference between promises made in plays and those made in economic transactions, we also accept that these diverse texts are not equally rhetorical. Accepting these sorts of distinctions is part of the price we pay to participate in a collective conversation that is our only hope to preserve and perfect our liberal values. For Rorty, the goal of philosophy is to insure that particular language games work as fairly as possible. A more inclusive and just pluralism is the goal of Rorty's vision, not some form of radical liberation. In this sense, Rorty is receptive to Derrida and Foucault's epistemological critiques at the same time that he rejects the explicit radicalism and the implicit pessimism arising from their epistemology.[46] Rather than abandon liberal humanism, Rorty merely seeks to perfect it in a gradual, evolutionary manner. Rorty provides a liberal vision shorn of traditional pragmatism's optimistic faith in the inevitable progress of enlightenment.

This perspective has been championed by a number of American intellectual historians, and Rorty has himself contributed to an important volume on the history of philosophy co-edited by Quentin Skinner and Jerome Schneewind. At a time when many influenced by post-structuralism have rejected intellectual history as another outmoded form of historical analysis, Rorty has championed intellectual history, the effort to describe "what the intellectuals were up to at a given time, and of their interactions with the rest of society."[47] Rather than move in the direction of radical textualization, Rorty moves in the opposite direction, broad contextualization. Rorty's brand of anti-essentialism seeks to expand the range of contexts in which particular texts might be interpreted. Rather than seek the essence of a text, its true meaning, Rorty advocates a "polymorphous " position, one which would encourage us to "desire to dream up as many new contexts as possible."[48] In place of Derredian free play, Rorty substitutes a form of contextual pluralism. Historians, political philosophers, and social critics ought to explore the way ideas can function in new and unexpected ways in

different contexts. The impact of this type of contextual pluralism is evident in the most recent writings of J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, both of whom have recast their earliest theoretical statements in a manner more sympathetic to a Rortyean perspective. Pocock's early invocation of Kuhn's theory of paradigms has been replaced by Stanley Fish's notion of interpretive community. Pocock now casts his approach to the history of political thought in terms of the dynamic interaction between the authors of texts and their readers. Similarly, Skinner, while continuing to stress his own interest in authorial intent, has recognized the importance of reader-response to intellectual history.[49]

Rorty's brand of pragmatism has also been championed by a number of American intellectual historians, including David Hollinger and James Kloppenberg. Hollinger is undoubtedly correct when he asserts that there is a "continuity between what intellectual historians do and what Rorty wants philosophers to do."[50] The approach favored by Hollinger and Kloppenberg seeks a middle ground between strong textualism and strong contextualism. Hollinger and Kloppenberg advise historians to explore the connections between particular discourses and distinctive discursive communities.

Rorty also takes up the challenge to meta-narratives associated with the work of Lyotard. He accepts the claim that there is no neutral ground upon which different narrative claims can be adjudicated. The rejection of meta-narratives, should not, however, prevent historians from continuing to defend the validity of local knowledge and first-order narratives, specific stories about specific peoples at specific times.[51] The critique of meta-narratives has served a useful function by facilitating the recovery of the histories of marginalized groups. Yet, having conceded this point, Rorty continues to believe in the efficacy of particular local narratives. To validate this strategy, Rorty invokes Dewey as an alternative to either Foucault or Lyotard. As Rorty notes, "Dewy thought that we could have a morally uplifting historical narrative without bothering to erect a metaphysical backdrop."[52] Local narrative, in Rorty's view, is precisely the form of historiography appropriate to liberal pluralist democracy. Every culture needs stories, and it is the job of historians to tell the best stories that embody the liberal pluralist values of our culture.[53]

How should historians respond to the challenges presented by strong textualism and post-modernism? Philosopher Richard Bernstein's observations about the reaction of American philosophers to post-structuralism also accurately reflect the typical range of responses that have characterized the American historical profession:

> "(1) total ignorance and uninformed silence
> (2) polemical attacks
> (3) endless internal commentary and textual analysis"[54]

It is understandable that historians would grow impatient with the suggestion that recent theory will render all historical inquiry obsolete. Resistance among

historians is even more understandable given that relatively little scholarship has emerged that applies the new methods in a concrete and compelling fashion. What has been most lacking is an actual agenda for research, one attuned to the notorious problems associated with the archive, both in Foucault's sense of the term and the more conventional empirical sense in which historians use the term. Historians, in contrast to theorists, need to grapple with the existing documentary record while remaining sensitive to the silences and omissions in the archive. The practical problems faced by historians seem to have prompted little if any useful speculation on the part of theorists.

The Dialectic of Text and Context

Rather than reject all theory as so much sound and fury, ultimately signifying nothing, it makes more sense for historians to draw on a range of theories compatible with the trajectory of modern American historiography. A number of the theoretical perspectives outlined in this essay suggest the basis for thinking about a post-modern history that would not only be compatible with recent American historiography, but which might improve the practice of history. While there are important theoretical divisions and points of conflict separating Rorteyeans, Habermaseans, and Neo-Marxists, a few points of commonality do exist and might provide the basis for constituting a post-modern historiography.

Meta-narratives

The debate about the status of meta-narratives resembles historical debates about the need for synthesis. American historians have been troubled by the fragmentation of the field for some time. The contemporary crisis of American historiography is, in large measure, a result of the success of the new social history. This crisis hardly comes as a surprise to post-modernists. The proliferation of empirical data demonstrating that no single narrative can account for the diversity of the American experience resembles the post-modern claim that all meta-narratives engage in a politics of exclusion that stigmatizes and marginalizes subaltern groups.[55] Thus, from both Foucault and Derrida's point of view, both the consensus history of an older generation and the heroic counter narratives favored by many left-leaning historians are each objectionable, because they seek a uniform, homogenous, subject and employ linear models of change and causality. One of the reasons that post-modernism has drawn the ire of both the left and the right in the contemporary academy is that it has challenged both the idea of history from the top down and history from the bottom up. Each of these perspectives is dependent on a questionable meta-narrative.

Advocates for the perspective of excluded groups have expressed reservation about new calls for synthesis. Historian Nell Painter have wisely called attention to the dangers that new calls for synthesis pose to groups traditionally

excluded from older narrative historians. Perhaps the time is right to abandon the goal of synthesis and accept the fragmented nature of local knowledge. It might be time for historians to recognize that it is impossible to write a single narrative that includes the life of the Maine mid-wife Martha Ballard and the creation of the American republic without establishing some sort of hierarchy. [56]

Abandoning older conceptions of narrative need not be the occasion for lament, or lead to another round of angst-ridden jeremiads in leading historical journals. Post-modernism opens up a number of new and exciting possibilities for historians. Chaos theory and nonlinear dynamics might provide a new set of organizing metaphors for historical scholarship. It is important to recall that historians have barely adjusted to the epistemological crisis of modernity, let alone the crisis of post-modernity. Historian Peter Burke is undoubtedly correct when he observes that modernist literary, and cinematic techniques are only just beginning to have an impact on historical narrative. Montage, flashback, cross-cutting, standard modernist literary and cinematic techniques have been embraced by relatively few historians. Since historians have not yet caught up with modernism, it is hardly surprising that they have not yet grappled with post-modernism.

Perhaps the emergence of CD-ROM technology may make it possible to create a truly post-modern narrative. Hyper-text makes it possible to generate a non-linear narrative structure in which readers can jump from one place in the text to another and create their own counter-narrative. Hyper-text creates the possibility of an interactive mode of reading in which the author self-consciously relinquishes considerable control over the narrative to the reader. The possibilities of a post-modern narrative, American history in the age of MTV, have barely been hinted at by the most avant garde historians. A CD-ROM history would allow readers to choose which narrative line to follow, that of Martha Ballard, or the more traditional political history chronology culminating in the ratification of the Constitution. Readers might also deconstruct an interpretation by calling up both the primary sources materials and competing interpretations of other scholars. It might even be possible to have readers interact with authors via the Internet.[57]

While technology may solve some of our problems as scholars, daunting epistemological problems remain. The post-modern critique of meta-narratives, while liberating in some ways, does present new problems for historians. The prevailing liberal assumptions that guide most historians can easily accomodate the notion that no single narrative might encompass the diverse experiences of African-Americans, women, and gays. What can post-modern history do about Holocaust denial?[58] After Foucault, is it still possible to justify the exclusion of any paradigm? Post-modern history must formulate a coherent response to this political and epistemological challenge if it is to survive as a viable historical enterprise.

Rortyeans, by contrast, are less troubled by the implications of Foucault. Historian Thomas Haskell's defense of a "moderate historicist point of view"

might well be the best epistemological alternative available to historians at the moment. In terms that Rorty and Habermas might each find compelling, Haskell affirms "mankind's persistent effort to achieve impersonal and inter-subjective knowledge about morality, even in the face of perpetual and predictable disappointment." This effort, Haskell notes, "to be 'objective' constitutes a very deeply rooted practice, and it therefore deserves the respect of all who claim to appreciate in a balanced way both the strengths and the limitations of theoretical reason."[59] It may well be true that another generation of scholars will expose our model of persuasion as yet another exercise of power designed to exclude and marginalize legitimate forms of historical analysis. Ultimately, there is no response to Derrida or Foucault that can provide assurances that the exclusion of some idea will not later be shown to have been merely a brute exercise of power, precisely the form of domination that French Post-structuralists have sought to expose. All we can do is try to establish rules that favor persuasion over force and which seem at the time to embody principles of procedural neutrality. For the moment, Rorty and Habermas may be the best that historians can hope for in their effort to ground historical inquiry.

A Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Strong textualism, particularly deconstructive readings, have been especially effective in revealing how particular ideas and social groups have been marginalized or rendered invisible by particular historical discourses. Various techniques for "reading against the grain" have been developed to identify the ideological forces that have stigmatized particular groups or ideas and that have either rendered their experiences aberrant, or in some cases, invisible in earlier histories. Even if historians reject strong textualism, the utility of reading against the grain continues to merit further consideration. The strong readings of many post-structuralist literary critics provide models of sophisticated textual exegesis and could well help historians improve their textual skill.

No group within the historical community has been more directly engaged with both the problems and promise of deconstructive reading than have women's historians. For some, deconstruction threatens to erase the achievements of women's history by depriving women's history of its claim to accurately represent the reality of women's lives in the past. Social historian Louise Tilly's reaction to deconstruction is typical of this response. For Tilly, deconstruction questions "the existence of a real world and the possibility of knowing it and explaining." Others argue that opposition to deconstruction itself needs to be deconstructed to expose the current hierarchies governing the writing of all history, including women's history.[60] Is it possible that Tilly's invocation of the real is just another rhetorical construction designed to empower a certain type of social historical inquiry at the expense of other alternative discourses? This is precisely the sort of argument that Joan Scott has used against the critiques of deconstruction that invoke a reified notion of the "real" to attack post-structuralist theory.[61]

The application of deconstruction to historiography may ultimately turn out to be the most useful application of post-structuralism to historical problems. Deconstructive techniques were developed to read the complex texts of the philosophical and literary canon. Even if it makes little sense for historians to embrace strong textualism when interpreting the past, the writing of history in the present is undeniably a textual enterprise. Deconstructive readings of historiography do not pose the same sort of epistemological problems that deconstructive readings of the past pose for historians. Historiography is a good candidate for the application of such techniques, since the goal of scholarship is not necessarily the reconstruction of the mind or beliefs of an author. Historiography is already a meta-historical commentary on the literary and rhetorical structure of history. Deconstructive readings of historiography might help historians understand how particular discourses order and invariably distort our understanding of the past.

A good example of how such readings strategies can improve the writing of contemporary history may be found in Bruce Cumings's analysis of counter-revisionist scholarship in diplomatic history. Admittedly, Cumings's deconstructive reading owes more to Foucault than to Derrida. Still, his effort to read against the grain is designed to expose the underlying rhetorical/ideological structure of counter-revisionist scholarship. In particular, Cumings demonstrates how counter-revisionist John Gaddis's rhetoric employs a "hermeneutics of censure and exclusion" that uses a series of rhetorical tropes, not traditional historical evidence, to link revisionist scholarship with a variety of unacceptable historical practices: political posturing, monocausal interpretations, narrowness, and insufficient archival research. As Cumings observes, regarding Gaddis's discussion of revisionism, the "treatment is purely discursive, designed rhetorically to malign the enemy, close off debate." While Cumings's conclusion that ideology has shaped the writing of diplomatic history is hardly novel, his shrewd explication of the rhetorical strategies by which those ideological debates were conducted owes much to the hermeneutics of suspicion associated with recent critical theory. Cumings concludes his study of recent historiography with a plea to recognize the centrality of textuality to the historical enterprise. "History is not a narrative of . . . 'what actually happened'; nor is it a Jack Webb quest after ' the facts.'"[62] In place of the dominant empirical model of historical inquiry, Cumings proposes a hermeneutic approach shaped by recent critical theory.

Culture and the Public Sphere

The publication of Habermas's important theoretical writings on the creation of the public sphere have sparked considerable interest among historians and literary scholars.[63] Habermas's work identified the emergence of historically specific discursive category which he labeled the bourgeois public sphere. The inter-related ideals of rational communication and open debate conducted among free citizens was, he argued, closely connected to the rise of bourgeois political

thought in the eighteenth century. One way of understanding Habermas's use of this term is to contrast it with the civic republican ideal of the public. The new bourgeois public sphere was tied to the growth of a distinctive sphere of literary production that allowed citizens to discuss politics in the medium of print. The notion of public opinion, the deliberative and rational will of the people, was therefore not identical to the classical republican ideal of a transcendent common good that could be ascertained by the assembled citizenry acting in a manner consistent with civic virtue.[64]

While the public sphere has generated considerable excitment among historians, an explosion of new studies of the public sphere will not solve all of the problems posed by post-modernism. Nor will simply turning our attention to the public sphere eliminate the fragmentation created by the new social history. Generating a new meta-narrative around the emergence and growth of the public sphere would merely substitute an older set of hierarchies for a new set. Still, the identification of the public sphere as a subject for historical inquiry has generated considerable interest among historians. The two most important historical trends evident in studies of the public sphere are the recognition of multiple spheres of publicity and a more systematic inquiry into the complex material and cultural factors that shaped the emergence and evolution of the public sphere.[65]

American historian Mary Ryan's critique of Habermas emerges from the perspective of social and women's history. Her work focuses on the multiple spheres of publicity in 19th century America and the contested nature of these different versions of the public sphere. Ryan finds that the study of the public sphere does not so much provide the basis for a new synthesis as suggest further avenues to explore the conflicts that shaped American political culture. Historian Geoff Eley finds that a large body of scholarship in eighteenth-century English history, particularly that of J. H. Plumb and John Brewer, essentially vindicates Habermas's theoretical conjectures. Plumb and Brewer provide a rich analytical narrative exposing both the ideological and institutional mechanisms facilitating the growth of the public sphere in Britain.[66] While recognizing the utility of Habermas's original formulation, Ely also concurs with Ryan about the need to explore multiple publics and further advises historians to connect studies of the public sphere with the questions of hegemony. Rather than view the public sphere as a neutral medium of rational communication, it is important to recognize that the public sphere functioned to both enable and limit certain forms of discourse and certain courses of action.

The notion of a public sphere does provide a useful tool for conceptualizing the cultural and political matrix that connected particular discourses and discursive communities to one another. What studies of the public sphere can do is help clarify the role of public culture as a medium in which particular political and social struggles are debated and sometimes resolved. Indeed, one way of understanding the public sphere is that it constitutes a meta-discursive space in

which specific discourses exist and more importantly, in which competing discourses vie for dominance.

Authors and Readers

Strong textualist claims about the death of the author are too extreme for most historians who still may have an interest in discerning an author's intent. It is, however, important to acknowledge that once published, texts often circulate in a public sphere in which an author's intent may not control the meaning of the text. When appropriated by particular interpretive/discursive communities, texts can be read in a multitude of different ways. Indeed, it is often the response of diverse readers, not an author's intent, that determines the most important historical meaning of a text. The historical application of reader-response theory is as yet fairly rudimentary. Historical studies of reader-response have not generally been sensitive to the problems of evidence historians routinely confront when they undertake empirical archival research. Still, text-oriented reader-response criticism can be of use to historians. The notion of implied readers, or ideal readers, do provide historians a useful starting place for analyzing various texts and the imagined audience they sought to address. Such inquiries must be supplemented with empirical evidence about the behavior of actual readers. A variety of different types of evidence, including marginalia, commonplace books, diaries, and letters, do provide potential sources for historical ethnographies of reading. In some cases, historians might well happen upon a cache of documents that reveal detailed information about the way readers actually interpreted the texts they read. One additional strategy suggested by post-structuralist theory that could be useful to historians is the concept of inter-textual reading. If every author is also a reader, and every text is also a reading of other texts, it is possible to use texts as proxies of larger patterns of reading. Uniting all of these diverse textual strategies together can help historians plot a map of the diverse interpretive/discursive communities of a given period.[67]

Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

American intellectual historians have borrowed theoretical and method-ological insights from Thomas Khun, Clifford Geertz, and more recently, Richard Rorty. The neo-pragmatism characterisitic of these thinkers has been most useful at providing models for studying discrete groups of intellectuals, particularly those functioning in a self-conscious fashion as an intellectual community.[68] This approach is less likely to work for political discourses such as republicanism, since political communities do not show the same sort of cohesion usually displayed by intellectuals. Political languages, unlike many of the discourses of intellectuals, are more likely to be composed of essentially contested concepts than formal paradigms. In the case of politics it is also important to recognize that texts circulate in public sphere in which authors can not always control the meanings attributed to their work. Politics seldom

resembles the free market place of ideas that liberal political theory so esteems: exchanges are never free from distortions created by the asymmetrical power relations that characterize all complex societies. The problem of hegemony, therefore, remains crucial to the task of analyzing the exchange of ideas between different discursive communities. Any effort to plot a map of the diverse discourses and different discursive communities in various periods of American history must invariably deal with questions of power. The central problematic of the Cultural Studies Movement, the analysis of the struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies, has not been central to the practice of much American intellectual history. Greater attention to questions of production, distribution, and reception will only improve the writing of intellectual history.

Conclusion

The perspective of Rortyeans, Habermaseans, and Neo-Marxists each have particular advantages for historians of American culture. Rather than embrace the strong textualist program associated with Derrida, Foucault, and literary new historicism, historians need to explore the range of alternative theoretical traditions that address the problem of textuality in ways more useful to the project of historical inquiry. Instead of rejecting all recent theory in the hope that, like the latest French fashion fads, these ideas will simply disappear if we wait long enough, historians need to formulate an informed response to the new textualism. Engagement with recent theory can, if properly conceptualized, provide historians with a variety of useful tools to carry on their craft in the post-modern era. [69]

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," in Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980) (Minneapolis, 1982), 139.
2. For a wide ranging survey of the impact of post-modernism on a variety of disciplines, see Pauline Marie Rosenau, Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions (Princeton, 1992). Rosenau identifies post-modernism with the critique of modernity and links it to a defense of local knowledge against transcendent truth claims and an effort to deconstruct notions such as truth, authorship, and narrative. She divides post-modernists into affirmative and skeptical camps; I prefer to cast the most important division within the post-modern camp between proponents of American neo-pragmatism, including Richard Rorty and Richard Bernstein and supporters of French Post-Structuralism, including Derrida and Foucault. Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (London, 1989) links post-modernism with a self conscious, usually ironic, effort to deconstruct discourses that claim to be about truth. She identifies two consequences of post-modernism

for history, the blurring of the line between fiction and fact and the preference for local knowledge vs. global statements. Her account also misses the importance of neo-pragmatism, particularly the work of Richard Rorty. A more useful account of post-modernism that deals with its complex relationship to neo-pragmatism and the work of Rorty is Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/ Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992). Bernstein focuses on the implications of post-modernism for politics and philosophy and hence the problem of post- modern history does not figure in his account.

3. The tensions between textualism and contextualism are clearly visible in the field of American Studies, where the different trajectories of recent literary scholarship and history are quite dramatic. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., analyzes the tension between literary and historical scholarship in terms similar to Rorty. For Berkhofer, contemporary American Studies scholarship is divided between strong textualists committed to "textualist poetics" and strong contextualists committed to "contextualist politics." Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., "A New Context for a New American Studies," *American Quarterly* 41 (1989): 588-613.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, 1976). For examples of left attacks on Derrida's radical textuality, see Steven Watts, "The Idiocy of American Studies: Post-Structuralism, Language, and Politics in the Age of Self-Fulfillment," *American Quarterly* 43 (1991): 625-660; and Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent Into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); for a conservative critique, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling it as You Like it: Post-Modernist History and the Flight From Fact," *Times Literary Supplement* October 16, 1992.

5. Jacques Derrida, "But, beyond... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)," *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1986) : 167-8.

6. The consequences of dramatic and textual models for social inquiry are discussed by Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), Chap. 1.

7. On this aspect of Derrida's theory, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca, 1982).

8. For a good introduction to the method of the Annales, see Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, eds. *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology* (Cambridge, 1985). For a discussion of the Annales in the context of French Structuralist thought, see Stuart Clark, "The *Annales* Historians" in Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, 1985).

9. Foucault's counter-narrative is evident in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977) where the Enlightenment ideal is cast not as a form of liberation, but an expansion of a new and in many ways more insidious form of control.

10. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" and "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), 46, 47, 90

11. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations," in *The Foucault Reader*, 388-390.

12. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, 87-88.

13. Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader,* 56.

14. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 23, 26, 27.

15. Edward Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (Summer 1978): 673-714.

16. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), xxiii-xxiv.

17. Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, 56.

18. For a useful overview of the main currents in modern American historiography, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: 'The Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession.* (Cambridge, 1988).

19. Catherine Belsey, "Literature, History, Politics," in *Modern Criticism and Theory : A Reader* David Lodge ed., (London, 1988), 405.

20. Louis Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," in *The New Historicism* ed., H. Aram Veeser, (London, 1989), 20.

21. For a sample of some of these debates, see David Harlan,"Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," *American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989): 581-609; David Hollinger, "The Return of the Prodigal: The Persistence of Historical Knowing," ibid., 610-21; David Harlan, "Reply to David Hollinger," ibid., 622-26; Joyce Appleby, "One Good Turn Deserves Another: Moving Beyond the Linguistic; A Response to David Harlan," ibid., 1326-1332; Lawrence Stone, "History and Post-Modernism," *Past and Present* 131 (1991): 217-218 and "History and Post-Modernism" ibid., 135 (1992): 189-194; Patrick Joyce, " History and Post-Modernism," ibid., 133 (1991): 204-209; Catriona Kelly, " History and Post-Modernism," ibid., 209-213; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990), 59-86 and "History and Post-Modernism," *Past and Present* 135 (1992): 195-208; Steven Watts, "The Idiocy of American Studies"; Barry Shank," A Reply to Steven Watts' Idiocy," *American Quarterly* 44 (1992): 439-448; Nancy Isenberg, "The Personal is the Political: Gender, Feminism, and the

Politics of Discourse Theory," ibid., 449-458; Steven Watts, "A Reply to the Critics," ibid., 459- 462; for one effort to chart a moderate post-modernist stance shaped by a pragmatic hermeneutic strategy, see Saul Cornell, "Early American History in a Post-Modern Age," *William and Mary Quarterly* 50 (1993): 329-341 and "Moving Beyond the Canon of Traditional Constitutional History: Anti-Federalists, The Bill of Rights, and the Promise of Post-Modern Historiography," *Law and History Review* 12 (1994): 1-28.

22. Dominick LaCapra *History and Criticism*, (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 19, 35.

23. Hayden White, "Method and Ideology in Intellectual History: The Case of Henry Adams," in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 281.

24. Hayden White, "New Historicism: A Comment,"in *The New Historicism*, 297.

25. Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988); and "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 773-797.

26. David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," 595.

27. Lynn Hunt quoted in Stanley Fish, "Commentary: The Young and the Restless," in *The New Historicism*, 305. Hunt has expressed some reservations about recent theory in her most recent writing, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling The Truth About History* (New York, 1994).

28. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History* (Chicago, 1993), 2-3.

29. Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric," in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, (Chicago, 1990), 209.

30. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962); Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 172-97; John Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," ibid., 1 (1977): 198-208; Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc.: abc...," ibid., 2 (1977): 162-254 ; see also Jonathan Culler, "Derrida and Austin," *New Literary History* 13 (1981): 15-30; Stanley Fish, "With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 693-721.

31. For a useful introduction to the debates arising from Skinner's methodology, see James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton, 1988).

32. Stanley Fish, "With the Compliments of the Author," 708.

33. Ibid., 708, 708-9.

34. Fish, "Rhetoric," 215. Interestingly, Fish does not believe that this realization challenges the conventional historical distinction between text and context. For Fish, the epistemological challenge of the "rhetorical" turn, while relevant to meta-historical disputes, ultimately can have little bearing on the practice of history as an empirical enterprise. See his comments in "The Young and the Restless," in *The New Historicism*, 303-316.

35. For a Habermasean critique of Derrida, see Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Sructuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London, 1987). For a Derridean attack on Habermas, see Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Post-Modernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (Baltimore, 1990). An effort to treat both Derrida and Habermas in a manner sympathetic to each of their philosophical political projects can be found in Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation*.

36. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* trans. Frederick Lawrence, with an introduction by Thomas McCarthy, (Cambridge, Mass., 1987). The concept of mutual understanding in Habermas's theory is tied to his notion of an ideal speech situation in which communication is undistorted by asymmetrical power relations or ideology. Derrideans would, of course, argue that no utterance could ever approximate such an ideal speech situation. The best response is that all forms of communication, even those routinely employed by post-structuralists and post-modernists, operate as though they were engaged in precisely such an ideal form of communication. Habermas argues that even if such communication is never attained, all sincere forms of communication must act as if they approximated the ideal speech situation. For another critique of deconstruction that follows a similar tactic, see M. H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1977): 425-38. By affirming the possibility of truth, Habermas maintains a commitment to the Enlightenment ideal of rationality and rejects the anti-humanist agenda of Foucault and much post-modernism. Many deconstructionists and other post-modernists have taken to ironic detachment as a means of evading the charge that they must behave as if rational communication were possible to even formulate a deconstructive argument. The ideal speech situation is also open to critique from the perspective provided by Foucualt, who categorizes the Enlightenment pursuit of truth as merely another mask for the will to power. For a useful discussion of the conflict between Habermas and Focault on this point, see Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, 192-199, 220-244. Interestingly, Rorty follows Derrida and challenges Habermas's ideal speech situation as an effort to reintroduce a transcendental conception of truth. Rorty's defense of truth offers enlightened ethnocentrism, the inherited values of the west and the procedural safeguards of liberal democracy, as the only means to ensure a continuing conversation about those values. See his "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 160-175.

37. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 199.

38. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, xii-xiii.

39. Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate," in LaCapra and Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History* 108.

40. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism," in *The New Historicism*, 216.

41. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London,1991), 7-8. For Foucault's rejection of the traditional concept of ideology, see Michel Foucault, "Truth and Method," in the *Foucault Reader*, 60.

42. Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony is developed in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds., and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London, 1971). Good examples of neo-Marxist scholarship can be found in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977) and Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London, 1976). For examples of post-Marxism, see Catherine Gallagher, "Marxism and the New Historicism," in *The New Historicism*, 37-48; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983). A more general statement of post-Marxist theory can be found in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London, 1985). A good sampling of writings employing the methods of cultural studies may be found in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler et. al. eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York, 1992) and Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London, 1993).

43. Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 156.

44. For a good general introduction to the relationship between modern literary theory and German hermeneutic theory, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis,1983); on the relevance of this tradition to historical inquiry, see Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn?" in *Modern European Intellectual History*, 86-110.

45. Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 153.

46. Rorty, "Method, Social Science, Social Hope," in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 207.

47. Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1984), 68.

48. Rorty, "Inquiry as Recontextualization: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Vol 1* (Cambridge, 1991), 110.

49. Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980); J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985); for Skinner's most recent statement of his method and his response to deconstruction, see "A Reply to my Critics," in *Meaning and Context* 272, 276, 280-281.

50. David Hollinger, "The Voice of Intellectual History in the Conversation of Mankind: A Note on Richard Rorty," *In The American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas*, (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), 175; James T. Kloppenberg, "Deconstructive and Hermeneutic Strategies for Intellectual History: The Recent Work of Dominick LaCapra and David Hollinger," *Intellectual History Newsletter 9* (April 1987): 3-22.

51. Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-Francois Lyotard," in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. Critiques of Rorty have noted that his ethnocentric grounding of liberal values provides an anemic basis for constructing a cogent defense of liberal values. For Rorty's defense of this position and his response to critics, see in particular "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," and "On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz," in ibid.

52. Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation: A Response to Jean Francois Lyotard," in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 211.

53. Unfortunately, the ethnocentrism of Rorty's political philosophy reveals the weakness characteristic of all forms of anti-foundational humanism: there is no neutral set of principles which would provide a justification for favoring liberal values such as democracy and tolerance over tyranny and intolerance.

54. Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, 5-6.

55. On the role of the new social history in this process, see Alice Kessler Harris, "Social History," in Eric Foner, ed., *The New American History* (Philadelphia, 1990); for a more general discussion of the problem of fragmentation, see Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986): 120-36; although not informed by the post-structuralist critique of meta-narratives, a similar critique of the dangers of synthesis can be found in Nell Irwin Painter, "Bias and Synthesis in History," *JAH* 74 (1987): 109-112.

56. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, 1990); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*

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(Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969); Nell Painter, "Bias and Synthesis;" Alan Megill, "Fragmentation and the Future of Historiography," *AHR* 96 (1991): 693-698.

57. George A. Reisch, "Chaos, History and Narrative," *History and Theory* 30 (1991); Randolph Roth, "Is History a Process? Nonlinearity, Revitalization Theory and the Central Metaphor of Social Science History," *Social Science History* 16 (1992): 197-243; Alan Beyerchen, "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity , and the Predictability of War," *International Security* 17 (Winter 92/93); Charles Coleman Findley, "Bacon's Rebellion: A Case Study of Non-linear History," (M.A. Thesis in-progress, The Ohio State University); Peter Burke, "The History of Events," in Burke ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, Penn., 1992). MTV, the pioneer of music video, represents a distinctly post-modern sensibility in its distinctive use of montage, particularly its blending of the real and the fictive. Other examples of a post-modernism sensibility include the ironic, self-parody, associated with much recent television, including "The Simpsons" and "Late Nite with David Letterman." So far, efforts by historians to use CD-ROM technology has not yet grappled with the epistemological consequences of the new technology. The use of CD-ROM technology in history has largely been shaped by the imperatives of the college textbook market, where these products are designed to supplement traditional narrative texts.

58. For a discussion of Holocaust "revisionism" that links this movement with the larger epistemological crises brought about by deconstruction, see Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York, 1993): Lipstadt argues that deconstruction and post-modernism have facilitated an assault on truth and rationality and thus paved the way for Holocaust "revisionism." Lipstadt's caricature of recent theory actually obscures the more serious epistemological problems posed by recent theory. There is little compelling evidence to suggest that Holocaust denial can be linked to French post-structuralism. The willingness of student newspapers to publish the writings of Holocaust denial owes more to classic liberal defenses of free speech than to the effects of courses in literary theory. The controversy around literary critic Paul DeMan's contributions to anti-semitic pro-Nazi newspapers during WWII and the response of DeMan's students and colleagues to these disclosures raises troubling questions about the ability of recent theory to grapple with important ethical and political questions. See Werner Hamacher et. al. *Responses: on Paul DeMan's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln, Neb., 1989).

59. Haskell, "The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk In an Age of Interpretation," *Journal of American History* 74 (1987): 1012

60. Louise A. Tilly, "Gender, Women's History, and Social History," *Social Science History* 13 (Winter 1989), 452; compare the defense of Scott and deconstruction in Gay L. Gullickson, "Comment on Tilly: Women's History, Social History, and Deconstruction," ibid., 463-469.

61. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience."

62. Bruce Cumings, "'Revising Postrevisionism,' or the Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History," *Diplomatic History* 17 (Fall 1993), 551, 550, 568. For an example of deconstructive reading applied to European history, see LaCapra, *History and Criticism.*

63. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); for historical studies of the public sphere, see Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988); and the essays in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992). For another study of public sphere that invokes both Derrida and Habermas, see Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

64. Michael Warner stresses the continuities between the ideal of the public sphere and republican notions in *Letters of the Republic* but slights the important discontinuities. A useful corrective may be found in Keith Michael Baker, "Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere.*

65. Mary P. Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in the Nineteenth-Century America," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere;* Geoff Ely, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in *ibid.*

66. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1982); John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976).

67. James L. Machor, ed., *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response* (Baltimore, 1993) provides a good introduction to the current state of reader response criticism among scholars in American literary studies. In an effort to move away from modern formalist readings or critic-centered invocations of an idealized reader, these essays stress the need to locate reading in its actual historical context. The approach taken by the authors in this collection focuses primarily on the specific readings of particular texts generated by various historical elites, either eminent intellectuals or literary critics. While these historical readings are valuable, the absence of readings based on archival research is a serious weakness of this volume. Such research is essential to recover the reading habits of non-elite populations.

68. Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860-1930* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); idem., *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John*

Dewey (New Haven, Conn., 1985); James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (New York, 1986); Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of New York Intellectual Life from 1750 to the Begining of our Time* (New York, 1987); The influence of Thomas Kuhn and Clifford Geertz on recent writing in American intellectual history is evident in John Higham and Paul K. Conklin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore, 1979). On Rorty, see Hollinger, "The Voice of Intellectual History,"; Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 11-38. On the relevance of the idea of essentially contested concepts, see Terence Ball and J. G. A. Pocock, eds., *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (Lawrence, Kans., 1988) and Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson, eds., *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989).

69. Richard Rorty's comparison between strong textualism and nineteenth-century idealism suggests that the appeal of recent theory is rooted in an older philosophical debate among western intellectuals about the relative importance of the material and ideational. Indeed, the longevity of historical idealism as an interpretive paradigm among historians suggests that some variant of strong textualism will likely continue to appeal to historians for some time to come. The comparison between strong textualism and earlier traditions of idealism is developed in Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," *Consequences of Pragmatism.*