

Post-Structuralism and the Contexts of History

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I am very grateful for the opportunity, provided by a panel on “American History after Post-Structuralism,” to respond to such interesting papers by three historians of a new generation, an interdisciplinary exchange made possible because the AHA and MLA no longer hold their meetings at the same time. I am also happy to be hosted in print by *American Studies*, but I have chosen to maintain the focus of my remarks on disciplinary issues between literature and history—as complicated, rather than mediated, by “theory”—and not to address myself only to issues specific to Americanists.

Apparently, to judge from the three papers, poststructuralism has not yet made much difference to the writing of American History. That is, the papers, amidst quite copious citations, refer to only a few articles and no books that might be examples, whether for better or worse, of the change produced in American historiography by the impact of poststructuralism. There are, it seems, no landmarks yet. This leads me to a question: have there been any other intellectual developments or movements in American historiography, the impact of which has been, in this way, discussed in advance of its occurrence? Even psychohistory, which provoked a lot of fuss and small results, had from the beginning the remarkable interdisciplinary foray of Erik Erikson’s *Young Man Luther*.

This apparent absence leads to a further question: Is it possible that the pattern of citation in these papers indicates a change in what will count as the “field” of American history? Such a question (“how do you define the field or discipline . . . ?”) is the kind scholars in other fields, such as literary and philosophical studies, have been led to by the work associated with Jacques

Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others. In trying to answer it, I would note that on the one hand, the topic of “post-structuralism” has led these three American historians to refer to a wide range of writing that comes from other national and disciplinary traditions. I myself consider such developments wholesome for any field. On the other hand, I do not see anything in these papers to suggest that the most fundamental and familiar compartmentalization will be changed: the *nation* as the basic unit of historical understanding belongs to the old, but still effective, reorganization of knowledge that took place—roughly!—around 1800, an organization of knowledge that in many, various, ways Derrida, Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and others have tried to help us criticize and look beyond, through their challenges to “master narratives” such as those of “man,” “modernity,” “secularization,” and others. Whatever else Nancy Isenberg’s “women’s history” may challenge, it rests content as “antebellum,” and thus “American,” history.

This issue of moving beyond nationally-based limitations to new intellectual mappings is especially important to me because in my professional area, literary studies, the nation has been even more decisively influential than in history. At least historians are, for the most part, all in a single department, while, at least in universities, we are almost never in departments of “literature” but almost all segregated into units defined by national languages. My concern with the issue of the nation, as an often intellectually necessary focus for inquiry that can be terribly confining when made also the intellectual horizon of inquiry, means that I am uneasy with Saul Cornell’s eagerness to use the work of Richard Rorty, for Rorty’s liberal pragmatism takes its particular character from his frank avowal of “ethnocentrism” as an inevitable concomitant of the communal character of knowledge, and although himself an honorable person, Rorty may thus assist in legitimating some grim consequences of the current political scene, as I think he did in his *New York Times* Op-Ed piece a few weeks after the AHA panel.¹ Yet as I thus begin to turn from my overall response to the three papers together towards my specific assessment of some particulars, paper by paper, I should emphasize that none of these three papers deliberately reinforces the national definition of “American” history even if none highlights it as a problem that poststructuralism might alter.

Barry Shank’s “Conjuring Evidence for Experience” defines its standpoint apart from either “history” or “post-structuralism” in the space of freedom provided by the interdisciplinary field of American Studies. It is extremely promising for a new American Studies that such a fine theoretical speculation should emerge from within it. Shank proves highly successful in evading the temptations of powerful dualisms—above all the “real” (“experience”) and the “textual” (“evidence”)—and highly skilled in his analyses at recognizing the argumentative temptations that have led others, whom he cites, to a spiraling of counter-insistences on one or another of just such binaries (he names, as further examples, knowledge / power, language / life, and text / context—the very pair so crucial in Saul Cornell’s paper).

Shank's emphasis is rhetorical; he underlines the need for persuasive argument and locates the appeal to the "extra-textual real" precisely as an argumentative move. His emphasis recalls to me an observation from literary study: the split between "poetry" (as "imaginative") and "science" (as "empirical") is yet another version of Shank's key binary, and in the nineteenth century this split was exacerbated by the diminished role accorded to rhetoric in educational and intellectual life. It was only at this time that the study of poetry, even as it was educationally democratized, became a spiritual discipline of appreciation rather than a practical technique of production. The recovery of a rhetorical perspective is one of the ways, although by no means straightforward or uncomplicated, that poststructuralism may promise an enriched politics and culture.

Shank understands that interpretation is an interminable process (not that no one ever concludes their own act of interpretation, but rather that no one person's interpretation assures that no other person will take up the task again), and yet he is not at all dismayed by this endlessness. This optimism, this feel of happy communalism, links Shank more with C. S. Peirce than with Nietzsche, whose perspective is more agonistic. Perhaps Peirce and Nietzsche, these two still living ghosts from a century ago, could have provided an overall frame for thinking about these three papers, except it would not now seem right to cast the whole issue so simply "between men."

Nancy Isenberg in "Second Thoughts on Gender and Women's History" makes vigorous use of Foucault in her critiques of influential work on and in women's history by Joan Scott, Linda Kerber, Nancy Cott, and Suzanne Lebsack. (And I note that all the other works Isenberg discusses were familiar to me, but I was not aware of even having heard of Lebsack's, which evidently has become highly standard. Does this suggest that what Isenberg calls "U. S. antebellum women's history" has achieved the status of a full subfield, possessing its own literature important to those inside but no longer to those beyond?) Even as a woman participating in the project of women's history, Isenberg finds that women's historians are still historians like any others. Therefore, as she shows, they are open to question in light of Michel Foucault's critiques of historical theory and practice, for they "rely on identity and self-recognition as a stable anchor of their narratives" and will "use the strategies of originality, creativity, and continuity . . . as accepted parts of their scholarly practice." All these key categories have been challenged by Foucault, yet Isenberg herself wants to employ another key category that, as she recognizes in passing, Foucault judges no more effective, no less to be discarded than these others; nonetheless, she holds fast to the problem of the "concealment of ideology."

Isenberg's strong concern with the "politics of women's history" is important to her paper, and it is to me, too, but I find it still somewhat obscure. Isenberg evidently holds a political analysis by means of which to criticize Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis" more rigorously than seems to me

warranted. According to Isenberg, the problem is with Scott's "unarticulated political assertion that gender (carefully distanced from a less appealing feminist past) is the foundation on which to rebuild the field of women's history." I recognize that as an outsider to a field, I may be missing nuances and may simply not know key codings, but to my reading, Scott does not engage in gingerly political trimming but appears committed to a feminist future, in which *gender* will help what had been the restricted field of women's history transform the whole discipline.

From the beginning of her discussion, Scott, I find, allies herself with transformative feminist politics, an alliance signaled by an early parenthetical comment about those who wish to distance themselves "from the (supposedly strident) politics of feminism." So where Isenberg finds Scott taking a distance from feminism, I find Scott taking an ironic distance from those who fret about feminism. Although Scott grants that the use of *gender* as a term to replace *women's history* forms one "facet of . . . the quest of feminist scholarship for academic legitimacy in the 1980s," she further observes, with an edge like that of her earlier parenthetical "supposedly," that the term *gender* "seems to pose no critical threat": to my reading the term *seems* indicates the divergence between Scott's view and the view of the threatened establishment. Early in the second part of the essay, in setting her constructive agenda for the term *gender*, Scott very explicitly identifies herself with feminists, I would say as a feminist, and not just intellectually. She claims that in the space opened by a shift "from scientific to literary paradigms" in the social sciences, "feminists have begun to find not only a theoretical voice of their own but scholarly and political allies as well." She continues, making crucial use of the first-person plural, "It is within this space that we must articulate gender as an analytic category." And the last sentence of the essay envisions the new history opened up by the analytic category of gender as providing "possibilities for thinking about current feminist political strategies and the (utopian) future."²

Scott's positive positions, then, seem to me more closely allied to Isenberg's than Isenberg will grant, and as critics of certain kinds of women's history the two also seem to me quite close. Isenberg criticizes Lebsack for taking from Gilligan a "totalizing" form of "essentialism." Scott attacks Gilligan's work for its "ahistorical, if not essentialist, notion of woman," which promotes the traditional opposition of masculine and feminine "in all its tedium and monotony."³

Furthermore, part of the problem Isenberg has with Scott seems to arise from a generic misunderstanding. Isenberg wants Scott's essay to "explain how gender might replace such dominant paradigms as 'separate spheres' or 'the cult of true womanhood'." That is, it seems to me, Isenberg demands that Scott's polemical, theoretical essay, addressed to the largest scale of historiography, nonetheless also yield immediate, specific results for the categories of Isenberg's own specific subfield. But not even Isenberg's own paper achieves this! Moreover, while Isenberg shows powerfully that Scott has gone only a little way with Foucault's critique of history, and Isenberg pushes that critique farther, I do not see that

Isenberg herself has yet fully delineated, or even adumbrated, what we may envision as post-Foucauldian post-history.

Shank and Isenberg both exemplify and propose useful ways that recent theory helps in the critical evaluation of historiography. Saul Cornell more directly tries to set an agenda for future history-writing in “Splitting the Difference: Textualism, Contextualism, and Post-Modern History.” This substantial essay is full of sharp insights. I especially admire the recurrent, crucial distinction Cornell draws between the epistemological and sociological claims of deconstruction (that is, what is undecidable at the level of theoretical knowledge may nonetheless be determined at the level of social power). At the same time, precisely because it covers so much and makes so many judgments, this was the paper of the three that allowed me the strongest sense of the difference between the understandings I work with—even when I am writing what is explicitly defined as literary *history*—and the understandings, apparently, shared by historians.

Cornell’s most insistent theme, the necessary distinction between text and context, does not come clear to me at the theoretical level where he locates it. I acknowledge a distinction between text and context just as I acknowledge a distinction between “foreground” and “background,” but I think of both distinctions as wholly provisional, conjunctural: as matters of where you’re standing and what you’re trying to look at. Surely the historian’s greatest concern is not to defend the boundaries of what Cornell at moments tempts me to call “context as such” but rather to figure out which of the innumerable possible contexts that might be adduced will be most productive for interpreting a particular “text.” And what is text for one inquiry, of course, may be context for another.

The previous paragraph stands as I wrote it for the AHA panel, but over the summer, I turned to Quentin Skinner, whose work Cornell signaled as “the most sophisticated efforts to ground historical contextualism.” I was delighted to find that Skinner does not disagree with me. He sees the “positive task” of historians not as finding but as constructing a context: “we must seek to surround the particular statements . . . in which we are interested with an intellectual context that serves to lend adequate support to it.” He continues, “An understanding even of a received canon of major figures requires us to surround them with whatever intellectual context makes best sense of them.” And following J. G. A. Pocock, Skinner emphasizes that “there is no implication that the relevant context need be an immediate one.” The upshot of his approach, he considers it “perhaps worth underlining,” is in fact to challenge “any categorical distinction between texts and contexts.”⁴ Even in his early work, Skinner makes quite clear that he is not a strong contextualist: “I have not been concerned . . . to lend support to this very strong version of what [F. W.] Bateson has called ‘the discipline of contextual reading’.”⁵

Indeed, if in Cornell’s terms it is strong *textualists* for whom “context is not a fixed background” but rather “foreground and background are each textualized

and the connections between them must be read inter-textually,” then Skinner may even be a strong textualist, for in a programmatic self-definition, he specifies his “approach” as “historical” but also as “intertextual.” For Cornell, Foucault’s strong textualism places “particular texts” in relation to “larger structures of power and meaning” called “discourses.” Likewise for Skinner “the idea of discourse, not individual authors, becomes the main focus of attention” in following out the implications of his position.⁶ Skinner, however, clearly does not take pleasure in the kind of company I am surrounding him with as a context that may make good sense of his positions. For, contra Cornell’s claim that Skinner now recognizes “the importance of reader-response,” Skinner himself sees reader-response analysis as “purely consumer-oriented” (with a reference to Fish), and he finds Derrida’s concern with free play “interesting to connoisseurs of the more decadent forms of individualism” (with a note speaking more bluntly of “anti-historical rot”).⁷ Skinner is a tremendously learned, intelligent, and influential student of ideas in history, but I do not see that he has treated significant thinkers of his own time with anything like the care he would require of an undergraduate studying any text of political theory. To find individualism the point of Derrida’s *jeu* is an error comparable to finding chastity the point of Machiavelli’s *virtù*.

If Skinner thus proved more comforting but less instructive than I had hoped in my attempt to make real to myself what Cornell calls “the conventional division between text and context essential to virtually all traditional forms of historiography,” I looked to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Surely here I could find good, old, explicit, banal citations from stodgy, recognizable authorities. But what I found suggests instead to me that the discourse within which Cornell is writing may well be that of current historiography—for example, I was amazed to discover in another ambitious recent encounter between historians and current theory the claim that “postmodernists efface the distinction between text and context.”⁸ Yet no matter how widely shared by three academic generations of current historians, the terms of that discourse may be rather more limited and specialized, a much briefer and smaller tradition, than Cornell believes.

In the *OED*, all the primary senses given for *context* are what Cornell would call instead “textual.” The earliest, now obsolete, meanings include: (1) “the weaving together of words and sentences; construction of speech, literary composition” and (2) “the connection or coherence between the parts of a discourse.” The still current sense given is: (4) “the whole structure of a connected passage regarded in its bearing upon any of the parts which constitute it; the parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or ‘text’ and determine its meaning.” Only in what the *OED* calls “transferred” and “figurative” usage do the citations begin to approach Cornell’s usage, but all in ways that still make felt the *con* of context, that is, the way text and context form a single whole, broken up only by the specific focus of attention on a particular part. Most of the added range of the word registered in the recent *Supplement* to

the *OED* comes in uses from linguistics and philosophy of language, except for an amazing definition of *contextualism*: “the policy or practice, in literary criticism, of setting a poem or other work in its cultural context.” In fact, the 1955 citation for this sense of *contextualism* discusses the “Batesonian sense” newly given the term. This refers to literary critic and historian F. W. Bateson, whose “discipline of contextual reading” I quoted Skinner as not supporting and whose 1953 “The Functions of Criticism at the Present Time,” from which this phrase comes, was cited by Skinner, in the second footnote of his pathbreaking 1969 “Meaning and Understanding of the History of Ideas,” to exemplify the emerging contextualist “orthodoxy” from which Skinner himself dissented.⁹

If the key distinction that Cornell judges fundamental to preserving the secure identity of the traditional study and practice of history comes from textual uses and literary studies, then I ask why should all three papers choose to ignore literary studies (literary criticism and literary history, as distinguished from the extradisciplinary area called *theory* that is nowadays more often a concern for people in literature than for other kinds of scholars) in considering good or bad examples of practices that historians might now wish to turn to?

The special virtue of literary studies, in the context of Cornell’s concerns, is that our facts, the basic materials of our historical research, are also fictions. In other words, we have long had to live with the situation Shank defines, in which the “real” is already “textual.” Hamlet may speak, to use Cornell’s terms, on a “stage,” but Shakespeare was writing in the “market-place,” and any study of *Hamlet* must eventually take account of both these dimensions. The several-decades-long movement that I sloganize as “new literary history” (using the title of the journal founded by Ralph Cohen in 1969) has been trying to develop analytical and compositional techniques to bring together the split disciplines of what had become by the 1960s purely interpretive literary criticism and purely documentary literary scholarship.

To my understanding, and in disagreement with Cornell, Juergen Habermas, for all his many virtues, has no fundamental contribution to make to this project because his understanding of literature is impoverished, compared to many of his important models such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse.¹⁰ Habermas remains committed to a radical Kantian separation of spheres that doesn’t allow literature the seriousness readers and writers alike often wish to claim for it. To give force to such seriousness, I wish I could discuss at length *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) by Edward W. Said, cited by Cornell as a “literary theorist,” but about whom there is much more to say. Briefly, however, just because this scholar and long-time public advocate of Palestinian national independence is not “for” imperialism does not mean that he is “against” a culture that is nonetheless inseparable from imperialism. The “contrapuntal” mode of critical writing that Said has devised to recount and analyze instances of this inseparability over two centuries will bear long meditation by anyone trying to imagine “history after post-structuralism.”¹¹

What we may call “philosopher’s examples,” such as Cornell’s distinction between poems and death warrants, or the stage and the market, operate to clarify our unexamined, ordinarily operating assumptions. But in the actual process of doing innovative intellectual work, we exceed our everyday assumptions. This is true of Foucault’s work from the 60s into the 80s, and it is no less true of the work by the great social historians, living and dead, of the last thirty years. E. P. Thompson, in rescuing the unemployed stocking-loom weaver or the follower of Joanna Southcott from the “enormous condescension of posterity”; Natalie Z. Davis in finding women’s history in archives where it had been invisible; Eugene Genovese in using Gramsci’s theory of hegemony against the grain to show that slaves, too, had *made* their world: all these figures offered examples of work accomplished which have inspired scholars in other disciplines, such as my own. I can testify that masterpieces of social history helped prepare me for the long, hard work I put into studying poststructuralism in the hope that it would make me a better literary historian.

As a result, in my just-published book-length contribution, on mid-nineteenth-century prose narratives, to the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, three major features differ from any earlier instance I know of the genre.¹² First, and most emphasized in my overall structuring of the materials, I treat the *literary* not as a given, by which I may measure and evaluate the materials I study, but as the object of my historical inquiry: the plot of my history is the emergence in the United States of literary narrative as one among an array of discourses. Second, I choose as my fundamental unit of intelligibility not the *author* but the generic system: although I discuss authors and their careers, every major author is split among several chapters, no chapter is exclusively on a single author, and all chapter titles refer to modes of writing. Finally, I make of the *nation* a problem, rather than both a presupposition and a goal. Too often the voice of American literary historiography has seemed to say, “We are already American, and this history reveals to us what this means.” I hope to be doing something different, by making national narrative and its role in political formations a topic for analysis rather than a given.

All of this, I hope, makes a work worth consideration by other kinds of historians for its attempt to construct an explicit metanarrative even while exercising suspicion against the great modern figures of wholeness,¹³ such as author, nation, and literature itself. It is not “history from below,” but it tries to achieve a disquieting distance from the usual narrative forms of high-cultural history. Let me urge historians, then, not always to seek the highest level of theory in looking to other disciplines. Especially for what Cornell calls “pragmatic historians,” one may learn more by studying how poststructuralism has affected practice than by looking at manifestoes, polemics, and overviews.

I would like to conclude, then, with a few observations on an example of new practice: James Livingston’s remarkable book, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940*,¹⁴ published since the AHA panel,

which may actually stand as a major work of US history in full dialogue with the developments discussed in these papers as “theory” and “post-modernism” and “post-structuralism.” It speaks to Isenberg’s concerns because it is part of a larger project explaining “how and why pragmatism and feminism raise the same questions for political philosophy” (382 n. 24). It combines just the elements recommended by Cornell—metanarrative, neo-Marxism, pragmatism, and a concern with the public sphere—to propose a reorientation of intellectual and cultural history deeply in touch with advanced work in social and economic history. I cannot do justice to the work’s bold and subtle constellation of materials but can only bring out elements in its procedures that resonate with the topics already under discussion.

Take this passage from near the end as focusing Livingston’s ambitions: “to grasp in the rise of corporate capitalism and its attendant forms of solidarity the possibility of transcending the antinomies of modern subjectivity, and accordingly to recognize the prototypes of a postmodern subjectivity in the ‘social self’ and the ‘artificial person’ sanctioned or validated by corporate capitalism” (278). To work through this agenda, Livingston, like Shank, challenges the “tragic,” and spectatorial, stance of Jackson Lears, and other late-twentieth-century “young intellectuals.” Invoking Kenneth Burke, Hegel, and Hayden White, Livingston proposes a revisionary metanarrative: “we might interpret the completed transition from proprietary to corporate capitalism as the first act of an unfinished comedy rather than the residue of tragedy. We might cast ourselves as something other than its audience or critics” (98).

Against this influential, probably dominant, tragic tendency within current American “left” historiography, Livingston interprets pragmatism to argue that the end of “modern subjectivity” (81) need not be identical to “the loss of selfhood itself” (81), but that this changed understanding is only possible if historians change “the form in which they have cast their historical narratives” (80). In Livingston’s reading of pragmatism, “the change we know as the transition from proprietary to corporate capitalism loses its pathos” (200). For pragmatism instead allows us to find “this change as significant of new possibilities” (201). The change is no longer construed as an “ending” but as “a transition *to* a social order and cognitive regime in which neither self nor knowledge can be located or stabilized by reference to external necessity” (201).

And yet I felt a certain disappointment in Livingston’s ending, which the papers of this panel have helped me to understand. In Livingston’s redefinition of the self, through his understanding of William James, a new key term emerges on the book’s very last two pages: “the self . . . is the context within which changes and choices become intelligible and meaningful”; the self “constructs, *or rather becomes* . . . this historical context, this unfolding relation between here and there, now and then”; in James, as opposed to Kant, the self is “not a substance removed from the vicissitudes of time” but is instead “a social relation or context” (293-4). Apparently despite metanarrative, neo-Marxism, and pragmatism, when a

historian wants to speak of what really counts, the disciplinary signature term will be *context*.

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, "The Unpatriotic Academy." *New York Times* (February 13, 1994): A15.
2. Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 31, 42, 50.
3. Scott, "Gender," 40.
4. Quentin Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics," in James Tully, ed. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton, 1988), 247-48, 275, 276.
5. Quentin Skinner, "Motives, Intentions, and Interpretation" (1976), in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 76.
6. Skinner, "Reply to My Critics," 232, 276.
7. Skinner, "Reply to My Critics," 272 and 338 n.171.
8. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1993), 303.
9. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" (1969), in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 29 and 291 n. 2; 59 for Skinner's dissent.
10. After writing this for the AHA panel, I was gratified to encounter the same view in Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London, 1990), 237: "it is clear that the aesthetic—the third realm in Habermas's conception of modernity: he follows Kant fairly closely on this point—is a kind of sandbox to which one consigns all those vague things we have enumerated above under the heading of the irrational: but this is the proper place for them, because here they can be monitored and, in case of need, controlled."
11. See Jonathan Arac, "Culture, Imperialism, Narrative," *Social Text*, no. 40 (1994), 10-14; and Paul A. Bové, "Hope and Reconciliation," *boundary 2* 20.2 (1993): 266-82. I am grateful to Paul Bové for his scrupulous attention to my first version of this essay.
12. Jonathan Arac, "Narrative Forms," in vol. 2 of *Cambridge History of American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge and New York, 1995), 605-777.
13. In an earlier book, I devoted much metacritical attention to the figures of wholeness that formed literary study from romanticism through modernism. See Jonathan Arac, *Critical Genealogies: Historical situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York, 1987).
14. James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill, 1994). Page references to this work will be given parenthetically in my text.