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Introduction: The Postmodern Project in History

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THIS VOLUME OF THE *UCLA Historical Journal*, on “The Postmodern Project in History,” is the third that addresses a special topic in order to highlight an important issue of interest to today’s historians. The essays in this volume should help clarify some of the prominent ideas and terms, but they certainly do not begin to address all of the relevant issues. Many historians find postmodernism intimidating, in no small part because of the difficulty of the texts themselves. Others resist an interpretation that seems to reduce or negate the importance of material circumstances as causal factors. Part of the problem arises from the fact that many different and sometimes competing schools of thought are grouped under the term “postmodernist,” thus obscuring their variations and leading to overarching assumptions that many of the practitioners themselves reject. The word “postmodernism” itself covers a variety of different ideas and theories, but a consistent theme is an emphasis on language and its constitutive power. In our view, this approach does not eliminate the need for other types of analyses, but rather allows for a more sophisticated way to look at how different historical actors shape, and are shaped by, their world views. With this issue we have made an effort to demystify postmodernism and show how it can help illuminate the dynamics relevant to specific historical problems.

As editors, it has been interesting to us that while our call for papers requested articles explicitly addressing the question of historical research and postmodern theory broadly defined, the majority of articles we received were devoted to the possibilities and limitations of the conceptual apparatus and theoretical constructs of Michel Foucault. The fact that Foucault receives so much attention, both positive and negative, hints at the salience of his ideas to

historians concerned with how relations of power are constructed and perpetuated in people's minds and in their lives. Foucault's work, which is more historical than that of most postmodern theorists, reflects his own debt to Friedrich Nietzsche in emphasizing that truth claims based on supposedly objective knowledge are actually human inventions that disguise the operations of power. Rather than a smooth, diachronous, causal process, human history reflects the discontinuous but reciprocal nature of power and knowledge. Foucault's most famous works, including *Discipline and Punish* and the multivolume *The History of Sexuality* demonstrate how the ubiquitous nature of power actively creates and defines subjects for study. The resultant forms of knowledge then operate to further reinforce and legitimate those systems of power relations by creating institutions and professions that objectify and reduce other human beings to the status of "subjects." Residual illusions of shared humanity among subjects are destroyed by isolation, individualization, evaluation, and eventually by internalized self-discipline. The capacity to judge others, to make truth claims about them, is a terrifyingly potent form of power and control over others. Foucault's insistent focus on human bodies demonstrates that the very idea of "man"—not simply human habits, licit or otherwise—is constructed by manifestations of this dynamic.

Because of his attention to powerful knowledge structures with significant real-life consequences—not to mention scholarly complicity in the process—it is not surprising the many of the authors in this special issue address the Foucauldian formulation. As graduate students with diverse intellectual backgrounds and research agendas in the fields of European, United States, Middle East and Chinese history, these authors analyze both practical and conceptual issues raised by Foucault's work, postmodern theory, and the practice of history. The first article in this issue, written by J.B. Shank, assesses postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment project as too rationalistic, universalistic, and overfond of binary oppositions. Suggesting that postmodern thinkers fundamentally misread the Enlightenment when they locate within it the "root of our current dualistic pathology," Shank attacks the postmodern notion of a "totalitarian Enlightenment" through a close reading of the work of French philosopher Denis Diderot. Arguing that Diderot shares with postmodern thinkers a profound opposition to dualistic rationalism, and that Diderot specifically, and the French Enlightenment more generally, must be understood as "an ancestor of much postmodern discourse," Shank's essay raises important questions about how we define modernity, and the problems associated with uncritically accepting the definition of modernity promoted by its postmodern critics.

Articles by Michael Latham and Jasamin Rostam-Kolayi return our atten-

tion to the issues raised by using Foucault's historical work as a model for historical inquiry. Inspired by Foucault's conception of "power/knowledge," Latham explores the possibilities of this perspective as an aid to understanding the emergence and impact of modernization theory on public policy in the United States after World War Two. Latham begins with the question of why modernization theory remained such a powerful paradigm for the understanding of international development despite sustained assaults on its intellectual foundations from both the academic left and right. Using Foucault's "archaeological" method to dig deeply into the foundational principles of modernization theory, Latham is able to argue that its longevity lies less in the fact that its proponents were right than because the language of modernization theory was part of an "episteme," or knowledge system, with deep roots in the Enlightenment. Drawing on "unconscious yet essential discursive rules . . . that make particular types of knowledge possible," Latham links modernization theory's success to "a long-standing discursive pattern of social analysis based on the concept of progress." While Latham finds Foucault's archaeological method useful, he remains critical of the "epistemic" conception of historical change as a profoundly revolutionary "rupture" because it is unable to help him construct a causal explanation with any historical specificity.

Rostam-Kolayi shares Latham's frustrations with Foucault more than his enthusiasm. In her work on women writers in early twentieth-century Iran, Rostam-Kolayi is interested in locating the roots of women's resistance to, and cooperation with, multiple projects of nationalism, modernization, and secularism. Her interest in women's collective activism and individual women's agency signals a deep concern with the postmodern dismissal of the subject and the inability of those working within an "epistemic" framework to identify the origins of oppositional politics. Rather than reclaim the modernist subject, however, Rostam-Kolayi suggests that historians focus their work on efforts to redefine subjectivity, which in the Iranian context can include both nationalist and women's movements. Rostam-Kolayi's work represents a middle position in which postmodern critiques of the universal subject are integrated with historical questions that still recognize individual actors. Thus Rostam-Kolayi's essay addresses both the important question of how Iranian women acted to define their subjectivity at different historical moments, as well as the specific content and force of individual women's writings.

The issue of subjectivity and individual agency also arises in the "conversation" between Elizabeth Covington and Elizabeth Townsend, in which they discuss biography as a postmodern methodology. Covington is working on the life of the nineteenth-century French novelist Rachilde; Townsend's project fo-

cuses on the twentieth-century writer and pacifist Vera Brittain. For Townsend, biography remains fundamentally a modernist project, its form and meaning “dictated by its subject,” and its larger purpose “to illuminate a common humanity.” For Covington, biography can be entirely different, serving as a means to isolate “ideas dominant in collective thought,” in which the individual is de-emphasized in order to listen to the discourses speaking through her. This wide-ranging dialogue between two historians attempting to explain their visions of biography to each other vividly demonstrates what it can mean to take the “linguistic turn.”

Articles by Eugenia Lean and Tamara Zwick address issues of truth, objectivity, authenticity, and the production of meaning. Lean’s essay explores the link between Chinese modernization in the early twentieth century and the selling of western medical science in the Chinese press. Arguing that modern medicine and scientific discourse acted to shape and define new cultural elites, Lean’s work, like Latham’s, documents the “constituting power of historical discourses,” while acknowledging her intellectual debt to poststructuralist thinking about the power of language to shape material reality. Lean also reflects concerns raised by such postcolonial critics as Edward Said who question the extent to which western epistemic systems were accepted by non-western cultures or were imperialist impositions. Her essay reflects the need for careful definition of concepts such as “science” and “gender” under specific historical and regional circumstances, as well as sensitivity to the ways that western paradigms were often modified in the process of their adaptation into other, nonwestern, epistemes.

Zwick’s study of preservation efforts at the site of the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau also engages the question of how “truth” is produced. Zwick’s essay explores the ways in which the “truth” of Auschwitz-Birkenau is “multivocal.” The site is one of historical catastrophe and holocaust, yet it is also also a part of the daily lives of the Polish Catholics who live in Oswiecim as well as a convent, a museum, and a cemetery. As a decaying architectural structure, Auschwitz-Birkenau is also a material artifact, a relic of the past endowed with a certain “authenticity,” or intrinsic truth value, by the museum curators, religious leaders, and state officials who have invested in its preservation, and by the host of visitors who make a “pilgrimage” to the site every year. For Zwick, however, this truth is ultimately a construction, selectively conceived and preserved.

What then does postmodernism offer historians: “powerful” new insights or nihilistic relativism? If we (the editors as historians) really believed the latter, we would find another line of work. Instead, we are not disturbed by the idea

that history is always a partial, limited reconstruction because we are interested in precisely the questions that give it significance. How *do* people invest their experiences with meaning? How do words and ideas connect to material circumstances and objects? What does it mean if conceptual value is created, rather than absolute? These are some of the questions people ask, often with hostility, thinking that “deconstructing” these meanings too far will lead into a nihilist void that precludes positive action. We contend, however, that what can be deconstructed can be reconstructed: that the strength of these ideas lies precisely in the recognition that human beings are not completely bound by any “natural” and inescapable essentialisms, but that within their specific historical conditions they have the freedom to challenge existing interpretations and create new ones.

Instead, we believe that postmodernist theory forces us to remember several key points. First, history is both an interpretive and an empirical discipline. Events such as war and genocide really do happen, resulting in death and destruction, but the meanings of those actions vary for the actors as well as for their interpreters. While subsequent historians can try to piece together those significances in order to approach a broader understanding of how things occur, the achievement of an absolute, objective “Truth” is probably impossible. Is it really necessary, however, when explanations can acquire power and resonance through their increasingly comprehensive sophistication? Second, this difficulty is compounded by the fact that we deal with incomplete evidential traces largely in the form of texts that are inevitably interpreted within the specific historical contexts of the interpreters. Historians do try to present their material in good faith, but beyond watching for and restraining their own biases, they rarely engage in self-critical methodological examinations. As the work of Hayden White has demonstrated, even when we reassemble our stories as best we can from the always partial available evidence, the narrative structure imposes certain pre-suppositions, particularly about cause and effect. When we tell stories, we need to be more sensitive to how these embedded assumptions affect our work, and to the ways different readers receive them.

Finally, as scholars we must recognize that we are at the center of a highly politicized power/knowledge nexus with important contemporary implications for public policy. Whether we like it or not, our cultural and scholarly priorities are intimately involved in the validation of contemporary meanings that can have profound repercussions on other people. This fact is not lost on the putative “subjects” who can and do challenge the dominant hegemonic discourses they view as oppressive. Agency is not the privilege of the few—we are all constantly involved in creative reconstructions of knowledge/power relations with

real consequences. Thus the postmodern project in history should, if nothing else, alert us to the responsibility we all have to understand these dynamics within our societies and to constantly question them with new ideas.