

Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis

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The debate that might have developed in Canadian historiography, about how new tools from social semiotics and cultural studies could be deployed both by socialist historians and by those asking newer, less class-based questions, never did happen. Instead, what appeared in print was invective. The impression was created that to be theoretical was to be anti-labour history and anti-Marxist, and young progressive historians tended to conclude that, if they wanted to ask the “old” questions about class power, women’s oppression, and imperialism or racism, there was no need to read any theory. The potential for a number of overlapping debates on key methodological issues was thus wasted. The new social history gave us a number of new tools to do research, but the sophistication in research methods was generally employed to explore some rather simple (if important) research questions. The basic question driving socialist feminist inquiries as well as Marxist ones was: whose interests are served? The author explains her conclusion that it may be more productive to put inquiries into interests temporarily on hold, and experiment with questions that focus on effects.

Le débat qui pourrait s’être développé dans l’historiographie canadienne, quant à la façon dont les nouveaux outils de la sémiotique sociale et des études culturelles pourraient servir aux historiens socialistes et à ceux qui posent des questions plus nouvelles, moins fondées sur les classes, n’a jamais eu lieu. Plutôt, ce qui a été écrit était injurieux. On a créé l’impression que le fait d’être théorique revenait à s’opposer à l’histoire de la vie ouvrière et au marxisme, et les jeunes historiens progressistes ont eu tendance à conclure que s’ils voulaient poser les « vieilles » questions sur le pouvoir des classes, l’oppression des femmes et l’impérialisme ou le racisme, rien ne servait de lire la théorie. L’on a donc gâché la chance de tenir un certain nombre de débats chevauchants sur des questions méthodologiques clés. La

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nouvelle histoire sociale nous a donné un certain nombre d'outils nouveaux pour faire de la recherche, mais la sophistication des méthodes de recherche a généralement servi à explorer des questions de recherche plutôt simples (bien qu'importantes). La question de base guidant les études féministes socialistes tout comme les études marxistes était : quels intérêts sert-on? L'auteure explique sa conclusion qu'il est peut-être plus productif de mettre les études sur les intérêts en veilleuse et de faire l'essai de questions axées sur les effets.

Situating Theory: Toronto 1976

HAVING SPENT most of my undergraduate years studying philosophy and having become — even before finishing my BA — dissatisfied with discussions of the logical consistency of this or that great man's ideas, I became increasingly drawn to the new social history: the materialist, loosely Marxist studies developed in the 1960s and 1970s as a challenge to old-fashioned nation-centred storytelling. In retrospect, it would be possible to see the particular way in which I came to the new social history as presaging my eventual discontent with it. The book that opened my eyes to the tremendous possibilities of critical and historically specific analyses of everyday ideas and habitual attitudes was not E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (which I did not read until I was into my PhD studies), but rather Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, which a quirky professor teaching intellectual history had dared to put on his third-year course list in 1974.¹ If I now wanted to construct a narrative giving coherence to what at the time seemed like gut feelings about what counted as interesting work, I could point out that, by approaching the study of everyday life through Bakhtin rather than Thompson or the *Annales* school, I would eventually realize that my talents for fact-grubbing, atheoretical history are limited. Despite all my efforts to become a proper socialist-feminist social historian (including a post-doctoral project to write a never-published book grandiosely entitled "Gender and the Making of the Working Class"), I am more likely to contribute to the world's supply of marginally useful works by forging a path including a great deal of historical research but fundamentally motivated by questions outside the historian's purview.

That the path I have traced in my work is interdisciplinary to an unusual degree is more a matter of necessity than of virtue. With a BA in philosophy I would not have been admitted to a doctoral programme in history even if I had found one that suited my inclinations. I was accepted into the McGill philosophy department and almost went there to study under Charles Taylor, but Social and Political Thought at York University, then a new, frankly left-wing programme that had not yet graduated any PhDs, was the exciting choice.

When I began graduate studies there in 1976, the new social history was

¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968).

flourishing in many places. During my first year of graduate school, George Rudé came down once a week from Concordia to teach a seminar on “revolutions” — in Social and Political Thought, not in the History Department — in which I was an eager student. Eventually Rudé, by then very elderly, acted as external examiner for my PhD thesis. He was less than happy, however, with the way in which my dissertation, which recovered the economic and social writings of the French socialists of 1848, ended with a critical reflection on orthodox Marxism’s parody of “utopian socialism”. “Why are you parading Engels across the stage and throwing tomatoes at him?” Rudé crankily asked during my oral defence. This meant that I left Social and Political Thought with no historians to regard as mentors or even as casual contacts, other than feminist friends who were all in the early stages of their PhD studies.

After my PhD I did, as mentioned, valiantly attempt to do “real” social history, courtesy of a SSHRC post-doctoral fellowship, but my heart was not as much in that work as in the local feminist organizing and populist writing which came to occupy the centre of my world in the mid-1980s. In engaging with feminism in Toronto’s lively community scene, I discovered the sort of work now called “Theory”. Seminar discussions in Social and Political Thought, which had been dominated by concerns directly imported from New York or the other American sites from which most of the faculty had come, now appeared strangely scholastic, by comparison to what was going on downtown in the bookstores and cafés and political groups. The Theory I favoured at that time (roughly from 1980 to 1985) was the kind of socialist feminism that speculated about whether patriarchy and capitalism should be thought of as layers of oppression or as strands in a sort of double helix. Michele Barrett, Mary McIntosh, Sheila Rowbotham, and their counterparts in the United States (Linda Gordon, Ros Petchesky, the *Feminist Studies* collective) were our intellectual heroines. A few particularly original minds — my friend Lorna Weir, for instance — struggled to comprehend the work of Michel Foucault, an author then unknown in any York syllabus, but it took me many years to realize the significance of his work.

Politically, I have perhaps not moved very far from that socialist feminism of the early 1980s. For example, I now am on the *Feminist Studies* collective myself, in which position I read and approve articles for publication, often by Third World authors, which provide more concrete and sophisticated analyses of what are largely still the same “old” issues: the interaction between sexual oppression and job ghettoization; the way in which imperialist forces are in various fragmented ways challenged or evaded by those who can never hope to enjoy any “disposable income”; the international division of labour. While teaching at York (from 1989 to 1992), I also found that, despite my growing intellectual differences with the “old socialist” crowd, they were in a sense my family, my reference point.

Although continuing to attend all the demos, I became dissatisfied with the tools of socialist feminism and materialist historiography fairly quickly

after resuming academic work (as opposed to movement-based writing) around 1986 and 1987. Given that both my political practice and my intellectual work had slowly shifted to sexual politics and, more broadly, to what came to be called “moral regulation” (mainly after Philip Corrigan, whose brief stay at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education had a profound effect on local socialist feminism²), it was not surprising that I felt alienated from labour history and related enterprises. My first two substantial refereed journal articles, both published in 1988, dealt with old socialist feminist questions: labour legislation affecting women, on one hand, and prostitution on the other, both largely in the context of nineteenth-century Britain. The articles tried to ask non-socialist and non-labour questions, however, particularly the *Victorian Studies* article of which I am still fond, significantly entitled “The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Late Victorian British Social Discourse”.³

This brings me, finally, to the issue of discourse analysis. I came to discourse analysis by two quite independent processes. First, my dissatisfaction with materialist, class-focused history’s tools for analysing moral regulation led me to explore other potential sources of insights and research methods. As has been the case for many people studying sexuality and moral issues, semiotics in the broad sense — the study of signs and of the constitution and circulation of meanings — was particularly intriguing. In the mid-1980s a number of British and Australian scholars borrowed the humanities-based, text-focused tools of semiotics for the purpose of analysing social relations, in the process building the important fields of cultural studies and social semiotics. These new, inherently interdisciplinary literatures allowed me to recontextualize and thus redefine my own work. My PhD thesis had been a work of intellectual history; now, however, I was able to link my previous background in philosophy and history to cultural studies and related enterprises, something that enabled me to go beyond intellectual history and eventually find a home in a sociology department. (This was by no means a unique experience; a good number of other people with PhDs in Social and Political Thought have gone on to jobs in sociology departments, even though many of us had avoided sociology as undergraduates.) Sociology proved to be more friendly, institutionally, to these new intellectual trends

2 Some departments at OISE pioneered socialist-feminist and radical feminist intellectual work that was not then deemed acceptable in most other Canadian universities. Thus, when the noted British historical sociologist Philip Corrigan was hired in OISE’s sociology department in the early 1980s, he immediately found a place that was unusually receptive to his neo-Marxist approach to “moral regulation”. Corrigan’s doctoral students, including Kari Dehli, Gary Kinsman, and Debi Brock, went on to disseminate and modify Corrigan’s “moral regulation” approach, pursuing historical sociological studies of Canadian practices of moral regulation.

3 Mariana Valverde, “‘Giving the Female a Domestic Turn’: The Legal, Social and Moral Regulation of Women’s Work in British Cotton Mills, 1820–1850”, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1988), pp. 619–634, and “The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Late Victorian Social Discourses”, *Victorian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1989), pp. 168–188.

(cultural studies, feminist theory, and later postcolonial theory) than either philosophy or history.

Second, and probably more important, was that I taught in three or four disciplines but never in history departments, not even a single course. The closest I came was teaching a Women's Studies course in the history of feminism to students who, by and large, cared little about history. My teaching work (before my current incarnation as a criminologist) involved "theory" and historical sociology rather than history proper. And I am sufficiently materialist to think that the curriculum one teaches — especially when, as a junior professor, one is always deferring to real or imagined canons — has a great impact on one's development.

In the late eighties, historians came to be my main work-based friends: the "informal economy" group that eventually produced the *Gender Conflicts* anthology⁴ was my chosen family over a period of several years, during which I taught in six departments spread among three universities. The other group members defined themselves as historians, whereas for me the historian label never quite fit — an unease that would eventually result in my pragmatically calling myself a sociologist, since sociology seemed to have the most room for someone who is philosophically trained but likes to root around in archives.

Discourse Analysis and Canadian History as Institution

The label "sociologist" meant that I could experiment with "discourse analysis" more freely than those young feminist historians who, while interested in new ways of analysing archival and published documents, nevertheless felt constrained by the practices of history departments and of "proper" history journals. People working on imperial or Third World history may possibly have more freedom to try out new tools, but Canadian history is a small and highly conservative field, especially at the level of methodology. I was not in the running for Canadian history jobs, however, and went to the Canadian Historical Association as a mere fellow traveller. This meant I had the luxury of experimenting with new tools, and this I did, both in a book published as "Canadian social history" and in related theoretical articles in sociology journals that I did not send to my historian friends.⁵ The tools of semiotics and rhetoric — techniques for examining how everyday metaphors and allegories change people's consciousness and construct the world without ever having to be translated into "rational" statements — held particular fascination for me, since, in the course of researching the social purity move-

4 Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

5 Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1880s–1920s* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991); "As if Subjects Existed: Discourses and Social Subjectivity", *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 3 (May 1991), pp. 173–187; and "The Rhetoric of Reform: Tropes and the Moral Subject", *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1990), pp. 61–73.

ment in Canada, I found the usual left-history language of social control inadequate to explain the movement's success. Among other things, the social purity movement spent at least as much energy exhorting middle-class men and women zealously to guard their bodies and their minds as it did policing working-class leisure. Labour and working-class history, especially in Canada, had little to say about the practices of ethical self-formation of the philanthropic reformers.⁶

It is curious that the experiments undertaken by myself and by some "real" historians (Gareth Stedman Jones comes to mind) in the late eighties were generally regarded, by most left historians, as motivated by a philosophical commitment to the realm of "ideas" and by a political desire to avoid Marxism's revolutionary implications. Indeed, there was a slippage between accusations of idealist epistemology and intimations that one had gone conservative, as if an interest in the world of signs and meaning carried an inherent tendency to toryism. In 1988 I was in London over reading week and had the opportunity to hear a preliminary version of Stedman Jones's analysis of "the cockney".⁷ The lecture struck me as a brilliant demonstration of how tools from cultural studies could be brought to bear on the ever-elusive key question of English labour history: how was it that the revolutionary fervour of the 1790s and of the Chartist period gave way to a self-satisfied pursuit of status and privilege for union-protected masculine skills by the mid-nineteenth century? Stedman Jones's attention to music hall lyrics and other ephemera of popular culture was to me exemplary because, whatever the shifts in his own political commitments, such tools could suggest new answers to questions that had never been satisfactorily answered by labour historians whose gaze focused exclusively on the workplace.

Unfortunately, the debate that might have happened — about how new tools from social semiotics and cultural studies could be deployed both by "old socialists" and by those asking newer, less class-based questions — never did happen, at least in print. Instead, what we got was invective. Edward Thompson's brilliant polemic against Althusser was inappropriately used as a hammer against historians daring to use new tools, in English Canada as well as in the United Kingdom. Bryan Palmer, Thompson's self-styled Canadian son, ended up making a career of such invective.⁸ Since Canadian historians, even the young and feminist and/or queer ones, seem to be by temperament a timid lot, the vitriolic character of Palmer's attacks meant that people shied away from any discussion of theory for fear of becoming embroiled in polemics.

6 Some social historians such as Seth Koven have explored this problematic in recent years.

7 Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Cockney" (lecture, University of Sussex, 1988), later published in R. Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (London: Routledge, 1989), vol. 3.

8 Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

There were soapbox prophets on the other side, too. Joan Scott's snobbish dismissal of "women's history" in favour of a rather simplistic application of deconstructive textual methods to historical sources was met, in Canada at least, with silence rather than with reasoned argument.⁹ This may have been because few social historians had bothered to read even Foucault's histories, much less Derrida's turgid philosophical texts. But if some people stayed silent due to a becoming sense of modesty, my participation in numerous informal conversations and some formal panel discussions suggests a less flattering explanation, namely that most social historians felt no need to read theory: they could make up their minds about "discourse analysis" unencumbered by much knowledge even of the relatively accessible tools of cultural studies, much less the more recondite analytical techniques of deconstruction. One would not have expected established historians suddenly to take six months out of their lives to deal with totally unfamiliar theoretical debates, but one might have expected younger, more enthusiastic doctoral students to have sought ways to improve on the toolkits they inherited from their professors. But since the impression had been created that to be theoretical was to be anti-labour history and anti-Marxist, young progressive historians tended to conclude that, if they wanted to ask the "old" questions about class power, women's oppression, and imperialism or racism, there was no need to read any theory: theoreticians were, as a group, either conservative or antipolitical.

The potential for a number of overlapping debates on absolutely key methodological issues was thus wasted. Most Canadian historians continued to believe, all through the 1980s and 1990s, that to practise discourse analysis, even on an experimental basis, meant that one was a full-fledged Hegelian for whom only "ideas" were "real". One key source of this confusion between research methodology and philosophical commitment was the constant conflation of "ideas" and "texts". Few historians — and perhaps also few sociologists — realized that the famous "linguistic turn" was not inspired by nineteenth-century Hegelianism but rather by post-idealist literary methods focusing on texts and discourses, with these entities being regarded not as either individual Great Men's ideas or crystallizations of the *Zeitgeist*, but rather as contingent assemblages of textual relations whose logic could always be shown to escape the "intentions" of the author, thus separating the study of texts or discourses from the traditional inquiry into Ideas.¹⁰ My own book on social purity, for instance, which studies objects like Salvation Army matchboxes and soap bars sold by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union as "texts", was considered by some historians of my acquaintance as fundamentally the same as old-fashioned intellectual his-

⁹ Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

¹⁰ For present purposes I am not drawing the otherwise key distinction between Derridean "texts" and Foucauldian "discourses", but merely demonstrating how both of these post-idealist terms marked a fundamental departure from "the history of ideas".

tory. The actual and potential consequences of my methodological decision to put more energy into analysing matchboxes and soap ads than into reading S. D. Chown's sermons — though without ignoring the latter — passed unnoticed, if the reviews of *The Age of Light, Soap and Water* that I read are any indication.

The chain of assumptions — that to study meanings is to claim that ideas move the world and that there is nothing outside discourse — proved very hard to dislodge, partly because, like many other chains of associations, it was rarely articulated as a logical argument. Constructing the issue of method in time-honoured binary fashion (you are either an idealist or a materialist; you either study texts or you document people's experience; you are either against us or with us), people on both sides of the battle insisted on seeing people like Joan Scott as the true prophets of a gospel that one had to accept or reject in toto. Indeed, if Joan Scott had not existed, the labour left would have had to invent her. But since she did exist, the political economy crowd focused on her almost exclusively. This meant that little attention was paid to people like Judy Walkowitz, who used many tools from cultural studies to analyse how micropowers beyond class and gender work, but who never got on a soapbox to make general ontological claims about "what is real"¹¹ and who could never be construed as the witch of postmodernism. I tried to do my bit to rectify the situation and generate a more level-headed debate among progressive historians and other Canadian scholars in two long review essays for *Labour/ Le Travail* commissioned by Bryan Palmer.¹² I cannot, of course, judge whether these had an effect independent of similar arguments made elsewhere. Insofar as these interventions had any impact, I think it was confined to making some younger historians feel that it was all right to use just a little bit of discourse analysis when a text they encountered in research seemed particularly "rhetorical". Moralistic discourses on sexuality and overtly racist statements found in archival sources tended to become the only materials for which any tools from cultural studies were thought to be appropriate.

This points to one of the most unfortunate features of the non-debate on discourse. It is of course easier to see how the Salvation Army's metaphor of "fire" might serve to invoke several different and equally powerful feelings and desires than it is to analyse the discourse of federal tax-cutting or the administrative details of municipal licensing schemes. If discourse analysis is to be more than a passing fashion, however, we will have to learn to use it to analyse both texts that are not obviously "rhetorical" and information formats that are not textual.

My own interest in discourse analysis was always focused on the social

11 Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

12 Mariana Valverde, "Poststructuralist Gender Historians: Are We Those Names?", *Labour/ Le Travail*, vol. 25 (Spring 1990), pp. 227–236, and "The Making of a Gendered Working Class" [review essay of Christine Stansell's *City of Women*], *Labour/ Le Travail*, vol. 22 (Fall 1988), pp. 247–258.

effect of discourse. Unlike literary analysts who stop at the internal workings of meaning, I saw my task as understanding the way in which symbols and rhetorical tropes act to change the world even while purporting merely to describe it, to invert Marx's dictum.¹³ This dictated a careful and limited use of literary tools, as I outlined in some theoretical articles published between 1988 and 1990. This interest in social and historical analyses (rather than in the study of the internal organization of texts) also determined the path I took in the face of a "fork in the road" that, although rarely discussed or even recognized in English Canada, could be regarded as a major turning point in recent intellectual history. This fork or switch point — an image that I use with much hesitation, since the choices were neither clearly marked nor mutually exclusive — could be called, for the sake of convenience, the difference between structuralist, systematic discourse analysis uncovering the hidden rules of cultural systems and the sort of poststructuralist, historical discourse analysis that emphasizes breaks, ambiguities, and instabilities, both in social contexts and in meaning.

**Foucault and the Writing of History:
The Myth of Foucauldian "Discourse Analysis"**

I was introduced to structuralist discourse analysis through the work of Roland Barthes. While I admired his brilliance in establishing the codes and rules forming the semiotic systems of everyday cultural experience, I did not want simply to analyse signs as I found them: I wanted to see how they had come into being, what they had replaced, and how exactly they had an effect on their audience. That is, my interest in semiotics was thoroughly social and historical. Barthes and other "high structuralist" literary scholars were for me exciting but not sufficient. I had read Louis Althusser years back, in the late seventies. Since I was thoroughly trained in Hegelian dialectics (and was in fact then one of the few living fans of Georg Lukacs), my attitude to Althusser's writings was, predictably, a mixture of horror and contempt: horror that anyone should place oneself in a "theoretical" heaven above and beyond the "ideological apparatuses" that supposedly shape everyone else's subjectivity, and contempt for Althusser's own contemptuous attitude toward history.

Foucault's early writings, although not falling squarely within either literary or Marxist structuralism, were profoundly shaped by the powerful intellectual currents of structuralist Marxist theory and structuralist literary and cultural analysis. One way to construct a common denominator linking the very diverse intellectual practices that all went under the umbrella term of "structuralism" is to point out that structuralism tried to overcome the old nineteenth-century debate about whether subjectivity or objectivity is primary by focusing on relations rather than on either objects or subjects. Structuralist linguistics, for example, saw meaning as constituted relationally,

13 Valverde, "As if Subjects Existed".

rather than inherent either in the object itself or in the subjective intentions of the sign's user. While Foucault was resolutely opposed to structuralism's antihistorical tendencies, nevertheless he retained this fundamental insight about the importance of relations as sites of analysis (an insight that one could, if one wanted, trace back to Marx ... but that's another story). As Paul Veyne explains, "Foucault's philosophy is not a philosophy of 'discourse' but a philosophy of relation. For relation is the name of what has been called structure."¹⁴ The fact that Foucault — as was perhaps inevitable in the France of the 1960s — drew heavily on some structuralist insights may have contributed to the unfortunate and mistaken belief that his works were trying to substitute "discourse analysis" for history writing, since discourse analysis was at one level a structuralist invention that Foucault modified and borrowed for his own idiosyncratic use in his work of the 1960s.

Whether or not Foucault's early work can, without grave injustice, be described as structuralist (a question that need not be considered here since Canadian historians were not asking it), the fact remained that many people thought that the simple use of the word "discourse" sufficed to convict Foucault not only of practising discourse analysis but even of holding the ontological belief that discourse is the only reality. It is indeed amazing that this odd belief still persists in the face of Foucault's own subsequently published methodological writings and such "testimonials" by proper social historians as those found in the anthology of Foucault-positive historians *Foucault and the Writing of History*.¹⁵ But while the myth of Foucault-as-discourse-analyst that circulated among left historians in the late eighties is simply wrong, since the most cursory reading of *Discipline and Punish* shows an author obsessed with tracing the genealogy of practices of punishment and keen to decentre "ideologies" and discourses, it may be that this false impression was supported by the lingering whiff of structuralism in such works as Foucault's *The Order of Things* and the inaugural lecture "The Order of Discourse".

This, however, seems like another overly flattering and rationalist explanation. *The Order of Things* has been read by a negligible number of social historians, so is not likely to have been the source of misunderstanding. Even "The Order of Discourse", with its structuralist-sounding lists of rules for the formation and reorganization of discourses, is very rarely cited in historical works, even historiographical ones. Foucault's undeserved notoriety as promoter of vulgar discourse analysis more likely rests not on a thorough critical reading of his work but rather on social historians' distaste for some of the quasi-intellectual history produced by some enthusiastic social scientists claiming to be doing Foucauldian history or genealogy.

14 Paul Veyne, "Foucault Revolutionizes History", in A. Davison, ed., *Foucault and his Interlocutors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 177.

15 P. Rabinow, ed., *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity, Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997), vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*; J. Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

My own view, for what it may be worth, is that “The Order of Discourse” is not very helpful because its list of rules is too abstract and static to be of much use in historical investigation. Although Foucault would not have subscribed to the rigid Althusserian scheme in which monolithic capitalist subjectivities are constituted by ideological state apparatuses, nevertheless his writing of the 1960s shows a certain structuralist style of reasoning that does not easily lend itself to historical investigations. Poststructuralism, with its interest in the ambiguity and instability of meaning and the consequent fragmentation of subjectivity, is more suited to historical analysis, particularly if one wants to emphasize the ways in which the projects of authorities are constantly at risk of failure. For heuristic purposes it may be useful to classify Foucault among poststructuralist thinkers, but this is not “the truth” about his work. He consistently stayed away from cultural studies and from the philosophical debates, to pursue a path that in his more “structuralist” days he called “archeology” and that he later called, after Nietzsche, “genealogy”.

In some places (Britain especially), poststructuralist social theory tended to be practised by people in “cultural studies” who studied signs and meanings, especially from popular culture, without doing any sociological or historical research about the biography or the social effect of those signs. In Britain, Foucauldian sociology developed as a more or less materialist answer or counterweight to the growing influence of cultural studies in sociology departments. In North America, however, where social science research had by no means been displaced or shaken up by cultural studies, it was not uncommon for scholars of my generation to combine the poststructuralist analytic methods learned in the late eighties from “cultural studies” and philosophy with an increasing reliance on the tools developed both by Foucault and by those who followed in his wake: the tools of genealogical studies of history of the present. History of the present and governmentality studies were exciting for many of us precisely because we became increasingly aware of the limitations of discourse analysis — although, as just stated, we tended to be more eclectic and occasionally to integrate the analytic tools and research questions of cultural studies with governmentality perspectives. The “history of the present”, however, seemed to have very little impact among historians, perhaps because of the prevalence of the mistaken belief that to use Foucault meant, automatically, to pursue idealist discourse analysis. Even today, the international History of the Present e-mail list run out of York University seems to have very few subscribers who are historians, and historians are conspicuously absent from the highly interdisciplinary History of the Present local Toronto research group.

For me, discovering the English and Australian “governmentality” literature produced mainly by Foucauldian sociologists enabled me to begin to find a way out of what I felt was the impasse of “discourse analysis”. Discourse analysis had enabled me to show that an apparently harmless box of matches or bar of soap was marketed with images that constituted particular

imperial and colonial subjectivities,¹⁶ but it alone could not tell us what historical weight one should assign to those particular symbols, since it could not show where else and by what other means those same subjectivities were being constituted.

After Discourse: From “Interests” to “Effects”

That discourses, however powerful, are never auto-effective was the great lost insight of the non-debates on discourse of the late 1980s and early 1990s. If we had collectively discussed that insight — and by “we” I mean a significant grouping of both old-fashioned and poststructuralist historical researchers — we might indeed have generated more fruitful insights than our more polemically oriented British and American counterparts. Opportunities for debate are few and far between in the English Canadian context, however; when debates do happen, a sort of Gresham’s law of intellectual discourse seems to prevail by which the self-aggrandizing polemics of the few preclude the flourishing of reasoned arguments among the many.

The state of affairs after the discourse debates does not lend itself to generalization, since no particular paradigm or even debate seems to have emerged to replace the never resolved discourse battles. It may be that, although the non-debate did not do my generation any good, it has benefitted younger scholars. Younger historians do sometimes use bits of discourse analysis or the odd theoretical tool in their history dissertations. But recent and current history dissertations of which I am aware still seem to be written with a fundamentally conservative epistemology, in which cultural analysis is used largely as a supplement and usually very tentatively.

For work that takes place wholly within the discipline of history, this band-aid solution — keep using traditional epistemology but indulge in occasional discourse analysis of texts or symbols that seem obviously rhetorical — may be an excellent one. Most historians do not feel any need to have extended discussions about epistemology. In some more novel and interdisciplinary areas, however, for example, in what has come to be called “historical epistemology”, there are interesting theoretical developments that would likely repay attention.¹⁷

I will not attempt to describe the variety of post-discourse analysis methodological innovations that have emerged, since such a description could only be carried out from some godlike place above the fray. There has been a fragmentation of politically progressive work in all the disciplines with which I am familiar, such that people are no longer even having “major debates” that everybody knows about. People seem now to be going about

16 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

17 Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 1998); and Ian Hacking’s numerous works.

their business, seeking like-minded companions but avoiding staging grand debates along the lines of yesteryear's spectacular shows of E. P. Thompson versus the Althusserians. Thus, all that I can do here is simply describe some of my own recent methodological preoccupations, in the hope that they serve to stimulate a sharing of worries and enthusiasms about how we do research and how we write it, a sharing that goes further than one can when chatting with one's best friend or putting a short message on an e-mail list.

Looking back, not only at my own work but at the intellectual and political context in which it has developed, if I had to choose one theme or insight to serve as emblem of the differences between the work done before discourse analysis and the work done after discourse analysis, I would highlight the difference between research that asks about interests and research that asks about effects. (Discourse analysis is here in between, with my own book on social purity serving perhaps as a good example.) The new social history gave us a number of new tools to do research, but the sophistication in research methods was generally employed to explore some rather simple (if important) questions. The basic question driving socialist feminist inquiries as well as Marxist ones was: Whose interests are served? Who benefits? This question is of course rooted in the "critique of ideology" paradigm developed by Marx, Gramsci, and later feminist and anti-imperialist writers.

Interests are real enough, and they of course shape social processes including epistemological developments. The problem, however, is that the critique of ideology paradigm tended to explain every little development, from the invention of double-entry bookkeeping to the rise of the Internet café, by reference to a grand narrative about bourgeois (or patriarchal, or colonial) interests, without actually explaining how this or that little innovation was in fact related to the quasi-transcendental interests that supposedly drove it. What exactly is to be gained, in terms of our understanding of the actual, empirical relations of ruling, by immediately proceeding to explain every little thing as "due to" or "explained by" this or that macro-level interest?

Like others, I believed for some time that discourse analysis might give us tools for filling in that middle space between the often trivially contingent details of everyday life and the macro-level interests that lurk underneath. An increased sophistication in the tools available to examine specific cultural constellations and processes does help to explain how capitalism and male domination can be at the same time universally powerful and yet so chameleon-like. But coming up with ever more sophisticated tools to demonstrate what we already know — that large-scale material interests do shape history — is, for me at least, increasingly unattractive as a way to spend my time. Inspired by Foucault, by Paul Veyne, by Deleuze, and also by Mary Poovey, Ian Hacking, and other practitioners of historical epistemology, who trace the development of knowledge formats through history without constantly asking about "interests", I have come to the conclusion that it may be more productive to put inquiries into interests temporarily on hold. Instead, I am experimenting with questions that focus on effects. Let me try to explain.

When asked to explain Foucault's method, his fellow philosopher and admirer Gilles Deleuze observed that the metaphor for analysis that Foucault might have used is one drawn from Paul Valéry's remark that "le plus profond, c'est la peau".¹⁸ The Valéry-Deleuze metaphor of dermatology can help us to understand the shift that I am discussing here, from interest-based inquiries to inquiries about effects. The dermatological approach is not positivist: it does not declare *a priori* that explanations need to remain at the surface level, since changes on the skin are after all related to changes elsewhere in the body. Dermatological analysis is genuinely interested in what can be seen, however, and is to that extent empirical in the most direct sense, as is (contrary to popular opinion) most of Foucault's historical work.

Let us turn for a minute to the famous opening pages of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, which recount in nauseating detail the particular way in which a particular criminal was put to death. Whereas Marxist social history discusses executions in terms of class interests served, state power upheld, and so forth, Foucault's tremendously detailed description of one particular execution did not immediately jump to the level of unseen "interests" and invisible processes of state formation. It asked questions about the significance of choosing this method of torture and execution rather than a different one — questions raised neither by political economists nor by Thompsonite social historians.

The new Thompson-influenced social history was more interested than Marxism had been in the details of what actually happened. Yet, in keeping with the critique-of-ideology paradigm, social historians tend to assume that, however fascinating the details, the meaning of what can actually be seen is to be found somewhere underneath appearances. The state, capital accumulation, bourgeois morality ... these are the real "truths". The rich detail about executions, about clothes, about body gestures and adornment, about jokes and songs, about labour processes was regarded as ultimately worth recounting only if it pointed to (or even, in the more Marxist-idealist versions of history, "illustrated") deeper processes. In the area of leisure, for instance, information about drinking habits and about the regulation of drinking found in most social history works tends to be provided by way of "illustrating" some largely invisible process of class control. Why English pubs are regulated through licences granted by justices of the peace, while the consumption of alcohol is regulated through state monopolies in Ontario and Finland, at the same time that alcohol has not been historically differentiated from other drinks in yet other jurisdictions — this sort of question was left unasked. The actual governance of drinking is of little interest in its own right: it becomes interesting only when regarded as a sort of surrogate variable for class relations. The social historians of leisure, in other words, are not really interested in drinking and its governance. They regard the practices of drinking and its regulation as a cabinet of curiosities that can be used

18 Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1990), pp. 119–120.

to liven up one's books but that have no more theoretical significance than the particular methods of executing criminals.¹⁹

The little technologies used to constitute and govern everyday practices — the way criminals are executed, the way that beer is poured, dispensed, and drunk — lie at the dermatological level. They are “on the surface”. One of course has to make a judgement about which particular practice to regard as worth analysing in detail, and that judgement will obviously be produced with the aid of a number of different sources, many of them theoretical. The point of all the philosophical and historical reading, however, is to help us to understand what is in front of us rather than to spin stories about the “underlying” processes.

It was Nietzsche, not Foucault, who most thoroughly attacked the assumption — made by socialist feminist historians as much as by metaphysicians — that truth, or at least the important truths, are somewhere beneath appearances. Nietzsche argued that the deeds studied by history and the other human sciences ought not to be immediately ascribed to transcendental entities — the free will, in the case of metaphysics, or the dialectic of labour and capital in the case of Marxist history. Social actions are best regarded as subjectless effects — subjectless because the (free) subject is the biggest of all fictions, the most important invisible, transcendental, reified object. What humans do, therefore, ought not to be regarded either as a series of discrete acts of will (as is the case not only in philosophy but in many social history eulogies of working-class “agency”) or as the inevitable aggregate result of large historical forces (as in the Marxist structuralist tradition). Nietzsche invites us to analyse social relations in terms of “deeds”, which are neither actions in the Weberian sense nor “events” in the positivist sense. Deeds can be studied without much reference to the tired dichotomies of agency and structure, freedom and constraint, and what is to be studied about deeds is precisely their effects.

This approach needs to be differentiated from another that originates in the same Nietzschean critique of metaphysics but has very different effects, namely “postmodernism”. Postmodern writing typically states that causality is a fiction, that everything is in chaos, that the universe is a flux of subjectless deeds and meaningless events. Postmodern writers share Foucault's sense that “the subject” is a fiction, and they also share his rejection of grand narratives *à la* Marx, the narratives that underpin structuralism. Foucault does not commit the postmodern fallacy of writing grand narratives about

19 Paul Veyne argues that Foucault's approach to history is more empirical than that of the new social history because Foucault's detailed descriptions of particular practices of governing do not presuppose “the existence of any goal, object, material cause (the governed masses, relations of production, an enduring State) or type of behaviour (politics, depolitization). It consists in judging people by their actions and in eliminating the eternal phantoms that language arouses in us. Practice is not some mysterious agency, some substratum of history, some hidden engine: it is what people do” (“Foucault Revolutionizes History”, p. 153).

the decline of grand narratives, however. Rejecting the surface-depth binary opposition does not mean rejecting causality as such. Foucault famously said, "Let us lighten the weight of causality;" he did not say, "There is no causality." In keeping with Foucault's misunderstood advice, the approach I advocate here does not refuse causality altogether; it only refuses to look for causes *underneath* events. That particular events have particular causes, as old-fashioned non-Marxist historians like to remind us, is hardly a new thought: the suspicion of underlying logics is not unique to "history of the present" approaches. The history of the present is perhaps characterized by arguing that it is possible to do theoretically informed historical research while looking around, sideways as it were, rather than looking downwards into the nether regions populated by such spectral entities as "capital", "the state", and "patriarchy". In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argued that Bentham's panopticon could be regarded as a diagram for a kind of power/knowledge that proliferated in a whole array of institutions from the early nineteenth century onwards. Foucault chose to use the concrete image of the panopticon as the emblem for "discipline", rather than providing a tight, Weberian definition of an "ideal type" of power/knowledge. The methodological effect of this is to highlight the similarities among various institutions, rather than describing jails and schools and mental hospitals as "instances" of some ideal-type. The similarities highlighted by history of the present studies, furthermore, tend to be at the level of *techniques* of governance: the panopticon is literally a technique for observing. And in looking sideways to find correspondences and to document movements by which techniques of governance are devised at one locale and borrowed for a different purpose elsewhere, we may never be able to say with authority just what weight is to be ascribed to one particular "cause" among a set of converging causes. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* certainly does not refuse to investigate antecedents, alternatives that failed, and other causal-type relationships, the processes that are the bread and butter of all history writing, but neither does it claim to tell us exactly what caused the modern penitentiary to triumph over other practices of punishment, unlike social-control historians who tell us that this process of class formation or that larger ideological current was ultimately determining. Thus, without making metaphysical statements against causality as such, as postmodern philosophers like to do, Foucault manages to "lighten the weight of causality" by emphasizing transfers of techniques of governance across different sites, transfers that are often *ad hoc* and motivated by local pragmatic requirements rather than by grand ideological currents or class interests.

Just as Deleuze has speculated that we may do well to think of "the inner self" as the inward folding of a surface, a fold in what we see rather than something beneath or beyond, I think we can say that what is a cause and what is an effect is a matter of context and perspective. If I am trying to explain the demise of the debates on discourse, for instance, I need not look somewhere below: I am simply redescribing the debates, in part moved by a

knowledge of what has happened since and what has become important now. The point about “now” as starting point for history writing is liable to be misunderstood as a simple case of “presentism”. I do not think that it is presentist, however, to look back and acknowledge, for example, that Joan Scott’s intervention into the discourse was ended up having a stifling and silencing effect rather than provoking articulate sophisticated responses and that this effect, which only became visible as the years went by, is an important — though of course not the sole — dimension of the “meaning” of “Joan Scott” as a historical personage. Examining the subsequent contingent effects of contingent events is the sort of genealogical inquiry that proceeds on a totally different terrain than that in which one might discuss the unprovable claim that the whole debate on discourse was “caused” by some macro process, like the defeat of the traditional left by the forces of “identity politics”.

From this perspective, inquiries about effects are bound to be, first, historically and culturally specific; secondly, focused more on the “how” of governance than on “who” or “why”; and finally (a point not made in all histories of the present, but which I happen to think is crucial) reflexive, that is, undertaken with close attention to the inquirer’s own situation. In Donna Haraway’s famous phrase that fits nicely with the genealogical approach, there is no “God’s eye view”. There are only particular, situated, always somewhat personal accounts of events that are always particular and at least to some degree contingent — hence this article’s first-person style. Paying attention to our own history is, I would argue, an antidote against the sort of unconscious presentism that we all dislike about “Whig” histories. Thus, history of the present is not presentist history; it is history that acknowledges that we who write history live in the present. Or, to specify a little more: it is a kind of history that first looks for effects, then and only then investigates possible causes, without ever claiming certainty about them, and only after that considers factors such as “intentions” and “interests”. Furthermore, history of the present tends to be more reflexive than traditional social history, since it begins by acknowledging the situatedness of the historian. Research aimed at documenting effects necessarily proceeds from a particular place, since what counts as a significant effect will vary depending on one’s standpoint, and of course what counts as an adequate account of the causes of some event will also depend on the social organization of the audience for whom the account is intended.

One important insight that I borrow from Nietzsche’s work — that human beings are constantly imagining that event X or Y is “really” determined by the position of the stars, by the dialectic of capital, or by some other grand process, thus avoiding the need to think through contingency itself — has been implicitly taken up by history perhaps more than by any other discipline, but still in a very incomplete and often untheorized manner. Historians, especially progressive, from-the-bottom-up social historians, have excelled in documenting the contingency of events, of course, but they have rarely paid attention to the contingency of their own accounts of such events.

(Anthropologists are by and large better trained, these days, to attend to the way in which their own gaze and even their own body affects what they observe.) All historians, whether traditional or critical/leftist, agree that their own accounts are not infallible and that later research may prove them wrong: but this admission of fallibility is nothing but the reassertion of the old positivist scientific method, a method which, as Nietzsche also pointed out, acts as a psychological defence mechanism against the fear of everlasting flux, situatedness, and contingency.

Reflecting upon how the tools with which we do our research and our writing were themselves produced historically is not something that is much encouraged in history departments, or in social science departments for that matter, where “methods” are reified and presented as if they had no temporal and spatial coordinates and no cultural baggage. Of course it is possible that reflecting upon the historicity of our basic tools (such as the very notion of “cause” or the assumptions about intentionality and human agency that suffuse most social history) might lead to anxiety and writer’s block. But one could argue that Canadian historians might benefit from moderately increased levels of theoretical and methodological anxiety. The fear that paralysis will be their fate if they stop along their professional road to get acquainted with theoretical debates in anthropology or philosophy, while not completely unfounded, is vastly exaggerated: it is a theoretical version of the old domino theory. Postmodern theorists of course play right into this fear, by putting themselves forward as latter-day Antichrists and declaring that, since there is no objective truth, everything is equally subjective and equally good or bad. Relativism is, after all, the obverse of vulgar positivism. Those of us who prefer historical inquiry to grand philosophical claims might do well to be sceptical of Antichrists as well as of more conventional prophets; we might remember that just because there is no absolute truth does not mean that there aren’t any lies.

For me, what is exciting about the current state of historical sociology today is not, as postmodern types would have it, that we have declared that God/objectivity is dead. That, after all, was done by Nietzsche a good 100 years ago. What is exciting about our own present is that God has now been dead long enough that we have started to learn to mistrust not only Hegelian stories but all manner of God-substitutes, including Antichrists. On my good days, I believe that we are now in a position to do something more constructive than to go around, like Nietzsche in his crazier later life or like Lyotard, prophetically proclaiming the end of grand narratives. We are now in a position to try the admittedly difficult task of taking contingency and historical specificity seriously, while remaining interested in larger questions about governance and about forms of power that go beyond the local and the particular.

This may look to some like a return to historical sociology — but although the questions animating genealogical inquiry bear a family resemblance to those posed by historical sociology, the analyses produced tend to

look very different, since genealogy attempts to make do without the generalizations and “ideal types” that have populated traditional historical sociology. “Diagrams” of power rather than “ideal types” of power; horizontal inquiries into the dissemination and articulation of apparently minor techniques for counting, seeing, and governing rather than “downward” inquiries into interests: historians of the present, while remaining a very diverse lot, tend to share some intellectual habits that do not amount to a new theory or a new historiography but that provide a very loose basis for companionship.

Since much of this argument has sought to differentiate history of the present approaches from those of labour and working-class history, it may be useful to conclude by noting one commonality that lies more at the level of ethics and politics than at that of “method”. Much left history has been motivated by a desire to rescue from “the condescension of history” modes of life and modes of political action that, while ultimately unsuccessful, can inspire us in the present to continue challenging the taken-for-granted values of late capitalism. This ethical-political force is also at the root of Foucault’s own inquiries and continues to motivate at least the more left-wing currents of “history of the present”.²⁰ Of course, history of the present does not glorify past movements or failed revolutions, and it emphasizes that even the oppressed manage to do a fair bit of governing. Nevertheless, historians of the present of my acquaintance are not content merely to describe this or that process of governance. We hope that by documenting and describing and mapping we will manage to make clear that the societies in which we live did not have to take the course they did; while sceptical about “revolution” and even about “resistance”, we nevertheless remain keen to expose the contingency of our present. Contingency means that things did not have to proceed as they in fact did. Derrida recently wrote that philosophers have not yet followed Nietzsche’s invitation to stop thinking about and through necessity and begin thinking about and through contingency, Nietzsche’s ringing call for us (“free spirits”) to become “philosophers of the perhaps”.²¹ It may be that those of us who do historical work are in a better position than philosophers like Derrida to take contingency seriously, to try to work as historians not of labour or of capital or of imperialism, but, more modestly and empirically, as historians of “the perhaps”.

20 Some “historians of the present” use genealogical tools to praise liberal methods of governance and denounce the work of socialist and feminist intellectuals (particularly in Australia), but the Toronto History of the Present group as well as the London-based network have a distinct, if amorphous, left and feminist orientation.

21 J. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997). See also Mariana Valverde, “The Personal is Political: Justice and Gender in Deconstruction”, *Economy and Society*, vol. 28, no. 2 (May 1999), pp. 300–311.