

FOUCAULT, WHITE AND THE 'LINGUISTIC TURN' IN WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The linguistic turn constituted an important intellectual development in the late nineteenth century and is one that continues to have purchase in the early twenty-first century. This article outlines the various critiques in this branch of historiography by giving special attention to the methods of Hayden White and Michel Foucault as they argued about the kinds of 'explanatory effects' and 'creative disorderings' historical study can offer.

Introduction

The 'linguistic turn' refers to the influence of theories of language on twentieth-century philosophy and historiography. However, in many ways the phrase is so imprecise that it can disguise more than it illuminates. For example, there is a significant difference between the Annales School's attempt in the early 1970s to integrate insights from linguistic structuralism into historical analysis and a post-structuralist historiography that draws heavily on Derridean deconstruction. Richard Rorty believed that post-war Anglo-American analytic philosophers were debating whether philosophical problems could be solved by either studying (Ordinary Language Theory) or reforming (Ideal Language Theory) language through clarifying conceptual confusions. For Rorty, the main stake in this turn, this "philosophical revolution," was whether traditional philosophy was even possible (1967, 3).

Another branch of the linguistic turn is *postmodernism*. The latter term is not without problems either. In one of his sourer articles, Arthur Marwick described postmodernism as a "useful, though unsatisfactory label, taken to include post-structuralists, cultural materialists, new historicists, etc." (1995, 5). Likewise, the Marxist geographer, David Harvey, has shown that the term has currency, but not necessarily congruency, with a constellation of intellectual positions, aesthetic

movements, and sensibilities that emerged in the early 1970s (1990, x, 40–65). This sheer diversity can be overwhelming. Nevertheless, for historians, postmodernism typically integrates several different lines of criticism, including, for example, critiques of logocentrism, empiricism, and final vocabularies, as well as of the ideas of periodization and totality. These combine to reject the so-called neutrality and sovereignty of reason, pointing to its gendered, historical and ethnocentric features, which in turn culminate in what Lyotard saw as “incredulity towards metanarratives” (1979, xxiv). This development dramatically shifted the philosophical and historiography terrain in the post-war period creating intense debates that still have purchase in the early twenty-first century.¹

Given the critiques postmodernists marshal, they specifically challenge what Gertrude Himmelfarb, a leading conservative historian, once defended as the “classic paradigm of historiography” (1989, 661). Currently best exemplified by Richard Evans (1999) and Margaret MacMillan (2008), classicists advocate that historians can produce fair and accurate representations of past events in part because evidence shapes how a particular history can be presented. Conversely, Oliver Daddow (2005) argues that while the classic paradigm depicts history as a discipline which is tolerant, liberal, and pluralistic (in that several competing interpretations of the same process, event, or individual can legitimately co-exist), the unproblematic belief that use of evidence guides conclusions does not resolve the deeper issues of judgement, accuracy, balance, and credibility that come to comprise the assessment of evidence. And indeed, evidence is fraught with irresolvable complications.

Metahistory

Multiple and diverse historiographies can and do co-exist, and each displays different goals and expectations. Pluralism is present because histories are not chronicles which merely itemize and record events and information; rather, as the historian Hayden White proposes, histories are designed to have an “explanatory affect”. Histories amount to “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose

¹ One reason for this intensity is that historiographic struggle is proxy for altercations between competing theories of consciousness and ethics. At its most esoteric, the debate concerns what is an event, what can have meaning, and what could have been otherwise.

discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them” (2014, 2). So practically, when historians write they impose a meaningful form on a meaningless past and, in so doing, reveal a style of historical thinking and concordant historical imagination. But more than that, White argues, history provides:

...the theoretical basis for the ideological position from which Western civilization views its relationship not only to culture and civilizations preceding it but also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with it in space. (2014, 2)

To substantiate his argument, White conducted a formalist comparative literary analysis of several key nineteenth-century historians to identify “family characteristics” of answers to questions like “what does it mean to think historically” and “what is the unique character of a specifically historical mode of inquiry”. Unfortunately, too often nineteenth century thought is caricatured as—or reduced to—nothing but Whig or Hegelian historiography and their particular understandings of modernity as a recording of the progressive advancement to an ever more ideal set of relations. Yet this manoeuvre flattens many of the diverse developments in the era. As White points out, some historians are diachronic, others synchronic. Some seek to invoke the spirit of the age; others seek to find causal laws which create the spirit. Some attend to local issues, while others seek to transcend the local. Yet all have some “explanatory affect”. For White, the ‘historical’ emerged during the nineteenth century as modern scholarship took shape and was struggled over. In this scholarship history was considered a “specific mode of existence”, while historical consciousness was a “distinctive mode of thought”, with historical knowledge being an “autonomous domain in the spectrum of the human and physical sciences” (2014, 1-5).



Hayden White (1928 – 2018)

http://www.staff.amu.edu.pl/~ewa/Hayden_White_History_Memory_Problem.htm

In his book *Metahistory* (1973), White identified consistencies of classification, complexity, emplotment, tropes, and narrative. The arrangement of these structural elements predisposes a history to certain ideological positions. As each historical account is a formalization of poetic insights created in the historical imagination, there are, however, no grounds upon which to determine which account has more fidelity to the past. Rather, preferred historical accounts appeal to morality and aesthetics, not epistemology as classicists propose.

Another twentieth-century historian, Michel Foucault, came to roughly the same conclusion. Foucault's thinking was wide-ranging and so impossible to capture in a short paper like this one, nevertheless what is important for present purposes is his analysis of how discourses operate and how historians create and perpetuate certain kinds of power by reifying linguistic protocol. For this reason, I shall focus my discussion on Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966), the book that White considers to be Foucault's "most important" and "the most interesting to historians" (1978, 232).

Post-Structuralism

Much like his structuralist peers, Foucault was interested in the deep structure of human consciousness and believed that the study of that structure had to begin with an analysis of language. The basic tenet of this approach was that human thought and action cannot be separated. Wittgenstein's remark in the *Philosophical Investigations* that "you learned the concept 'pain' when you learned language" (1953, 384) illustrates that understanding social actions requires first an understanding of the deep structure of their linguistic protocol, its formation, and its grammar. Foucault's primary achievement was to advance the structuralist project by applying its logic to structuralism itself. The result was to suggest that structuralism is also captive of linguistic modes and protocols; that structuralists' efforts to posit an ahistorical science of deep structures were misguided as they missed the historical currents of which they themselves were a part. In the sense that structuralism sought to create a rigid epistemological system of universal consciousness, a system of thought which claimed to represent their objects precisely, so too Foucault sought to show that rigidity was impossible and an unattainable ideal that rendered necessary a critique of this approach. His major contention was that a system in which there are precise representations of objects in thought precludes any role that language could have in the formation of that knowledge.

Although Foucault did applaud structuralism as being an expression of a moment in which humans become aware of the infinite captive limitations of expression and interpretation, he did think the theory was naïve as there could never be ideal correspondence between description and action, and therefore analysing how a person expresses actions would always be incomplete. The rationale for arguing for the non-existence of ideal correspondence were that there was no basis upon which someone could assess which particular reality was better than another because there were no criteria by which such an assessment could possibly be made.



Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) <http://frenchculture.org/books/events/bernard-harcourt-michel-foucalt>

A critic could suggest that language is a constantly refining process which could generate more approximate models, better concepts, and a better grammar. To this Foucault pointed out that such a conception was based on the ill-conceived notion of progressive change. Obviously change occurs, languages shift, but these changes do not unfold in predictable lines, let alone superior sequential development. Foucault went to great lengths to avoid discussing causality, and instead confined himself to 'shifts' and 'transcriptions', identification and discussion of points of ruptures, discontinuities, and the suppression thereof. His conviction was that where there had been a history where one event had apparently naturally and predictably led to another, suppression of evidence must have occurred.

The accumulative effect of this line of argument is that languages are figurative modes which do not merely signify but also constitute the objects to which they refer and that it is impossible to tell whether they bear any resemblance to reality. This relates back to what White thought was the key problem in modern philosophy, that of representation—the question and application of what Rorty referred to as the appearance-reality complex—beginning with the recognition that representation should not be mistaken for, or be identified with, thought as such. Foucault was in agreement insofar as he believed that thoughts are more than the mere means to

employ ideas to represent the objects of those thoughts. In one way the argument is a modified extension of the Saussurian sign system, but in another it is a rejection of the notion of material and ideal correspondence as well as the radical rejection, not only of the transcendent sign, but also of transcendental thought. And Foucault was relentless in mocking metaphysical systems wherein formal epistemology claimed to precisely represent their objects.

Foucault insisted that all conceptions of reality were based on some axioms, and that this provided a mythic quality to all systems of thought. These axioms, Foucault argued, were syntactical strategies that presumed the existence of certain things. However, this is not to suggest that things do not exist, but rather that humans presume certain characteristics about them and, by not acknowledging this, simply indulge illusions. For this reason, Foucault's work can be thought of as seeking to break down a project seeking ideal correspondence.

Foucault's approach consolidated while he was conducting research for other projects like *Madness and Civilization* where he famously argued that madness is more about the obsession of the West to see itself as not mad. And apart from various developments in the understanding of madness, he found that medical practice involved applying discursive templates to conceptualize abnormality, deformity and variation. In other words, science is not adjacent to the social world, but within it. But more to the point, his project examined the changing structure and relationship between the sane and the insane—and the various silences about things that are not conventionally known or remarked upon. This relates back to the problem of representation, for sciences involve the reification of linguistic protocol.

The Critique of Marxism

For the reasons outlined above, Foucault became convinced that history was less a mode of thought or method than a means to account for the temporality of all things as they became commonplace in the nineteenth century. Hence all history writing was tainted by such a consolidated discursive formation during that period. For Foucault such a "great mutation" in the consciousness of Western thought was undoubtedly influenced by "our modernity" (1980, 219-220). This was connected to his critique of contemporary intellectuals which saw them act as a component of an

“apparatus of truth” that had a “class position” with “conditions of life and work” that shaped their intellectual pursuits and the politics of truth. As he wrote, “truth isn’t outside power” (1980, 131) For example, Foucault criticized mid-century European Marxists because, while “Marxism [had] a rational structure and...therefore its propositions [were] the outcome of verifiable procedures,” they still coveted the status of “scientificity” (1980, 85). Foucault further chided Marxist historians because they tried “to elicit the effects of power at the level of ideology” by simply referencing exchanges and contracts, goods and benefits “in the economy,” which in turn was seen as the “essential end and purpose” of that system, the “actual functioning” of “political power” which was “localized in the State apparatus.” By contrast, Foucault believed that Marxists had a narrow conception of power that “presuppose[s] a human subject on the lines of the model provided by classical philosophy” (1980, 58-60).

Foucault conceded that Marxists were aware of the power on the body during work, but that their conception of capital’s action upon labour was an abstraction, and therefore disconnected from individuals themselves. So instead he offered a materialism which would have studied “the body and the effects that power has on it” (1980, 58). This approach would “conduct a non-economic analysis of power” where power is exercised as a relation of force between the constructive and destructive forms with coercive and permissible elements (1980, 89). For him, relations of power relied upon the “production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse.” Moreover, what passes for truth was but an outcome of a discourse. Proving this requires looking at the extremities; “the points where it becomes capillary” (1980, 96). Power is something that circulates, “always already there”. For this reason, an “analysis should not concern itself with power at the level of conscious intention or decision”. Thus, questions regarding who held power and their aims were beside the point. Rather, the methodological imperative was to examine to whom or to what power was directed, and how action was accomplished. “Major mechanisms of power have been accompanied by ideological production”, Foucault wrote, but it is more often the case that power...

...is the production of effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge—methods of observation, techniques of registration, procedures for investigation and research, apparatuses of control. (1980, 102)

The implication is that Himmelfarb's classic paradigm is likely to produce repressive power.

As alternatives for the assessment of the past, Foucault proposed the dual methods of archaeology and genealogy.

Archaeology would be the appropriate methodology of [the] analysis of the local discursivities [while] genealogy would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the description of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play. (1980, 85)

Contrary to the Annales School's focus on continuity, an archaeological method proceeds with an identification of the discontinuities where events have not unfolded along predictable lines, stresses where suppression has occurred, and so on. The encounters between different modes of thought show the competition by different epistemic realms through the deployment of discourse in various locations—physical as well as mental. The conceptualization is analogous to Thomas Kuhn's model of scientific paradigms and their competing claims to grasp and represent reality. Moreover—and this point is key—Foucault argues that different epistemologies do not aggregate nor unfold in a dialectical manner, nor are they the product of historical forces.

For the reasons outlined above, Foucault's thinking had a profound effect on early post-colonial history writing. For example, in *Beginnings*, one of his earliest books, Edward Said drew upon the Foucauldian methodology. The same acknowledgment can be found in the initial pages of *Orientalism* (1978, 3). While Said later broke with these methods, towards the end of his life he remarked that Foucault had "largely disposed of humanism's essentializing and totalizing modes" (2004, 9). On reflection, this outcome makes Foucault's historiography valuable to the various branches of post-colonial thought, whether practised in Europe, the United States, the Middle East, or even the Caribbean.

Conclusion

To recap, philosophically Foucault argued that there is no ideal ontology, while sociologically there is no basis for a privileged ontology because there is no natural basis available even to make that assessment. Effectively, there is no inherent order

of things: What exists is what it is possible to conceive. This is a radical assertion that human agents can alter their worlds. It is for this reason that Hayden White writes that Foucault “celebrates the spirit of creative disordering, destruction, unnam[ing]” (1978, 233). To this end, ultimately, Foucault says

History has no ‘meaning’, though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail. (1980, 114)

Undertaking this requires an imagination based on “a ramified, penetrative perception of the present” (1980, 62). Practically this involves historians invoking a less rigid and more relaxed attitude in their accounts because evidence is skewed according to our ability to perceive it, this evidence itself figured in a certain fashion. Altogether, the conclusion is that facts are created because of their ability to fit into existing schema and that events have no meaning unless made intelligible by a pre-existing set of meaning-making apparatuses that exist for a particular age. “A system capable of explaining almost anything” is how White describes Foucauldian historiography (1978, 255). This is certainly advantageous, but the question then becomes whether Foucauldians inadvertently create some of the things they decry, for instance refuting one set of totalities while facilitating the rise of another.

GLOSSARY

Epistemology: Refers to a theory of knowledge, with its associated techniques to investigate beliefs.

Final vocabularies: Viewing beliefs as independent of their contingency.

Historiography: The study of histories, often written.

Logocentrism: A philosophical doctrine that holds that language is a fundamental expression of reality.

Metanarratives: An overarching narrative that serves as an interpretive framework for events.

Modernity: A way of experiencing the world predicated upon the development of extensive property relations, demographics shifts, and industrialization, as well as changing relationships to the supernatural.

Ontology: Sets of concepts that refer to what exists.

Reification: A fallacy which treats the immaterial as material.

Saussurian sign system: In semiotics, a sign system is the combination of verbal and nonverbal components of language that together convey meaning.

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