

The Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' School

Occasional Papers Series in the Humanities



Occasional Paper Number Thirty-One

Postmodernism and History

Ian St. John

Stjohn_i@habsboys.org.uk

April 2020

Haberdashers' Aske's Occasional Paper Number Thirty-One

April 2020

All rights reserved

Postmodernism and History

Dr I. St John

Abstract

This article situates Postmodernist interpretations of the practice of History within the context of Postmodernist thinking as a whole. With reference to the ideas of Derrida and Foucault, it is explained how 'truth' is a construct, its meaning always situated within particular texts or systems of discourse, having no application to an objective state of affairs supposedly existing outside of discourse. As such, truth-claims are reflective of the presuppositions of those who produce them, and are frequently allied to the wish to exert power over others. Power is knowledge. The implications of these ideas for the writing of History are then discussed, it being pointed out that Postmodernists reject the idea of an authoritative account of the past, regarding all historical narratives as constructs, reflecting the agendas and assumptions of those who produce them, and based on written documents which are themselves the constructs of those who generated them. All sources are secondary sources. Historians, in other words, produce linguistic constructs on the basis of constructed texts and can never access the 'past' as it really was.

The Death of Truth

To understand Postmodernism it is well to begin with the word 'truth.' All of us are brought up to accord the 'truth' unquestioning respect. To tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, is an injunction early imbibed and retains self-evident claims upon us. For some, such as Plato, truth was the sublime essence of the universe, coalescing with Beauty and Goodness when understood aright. Now to understand what Postmodernism is about this most

central of our beliefs must be jettisoned. In so far as we deploy the word truth we must always associate it with another: power. And with power always comes oppression. From a word synonymous with virtue, 'truth' becomes a member of an unholy trinity – truth, power, and oppression.

For Postmodernists this link between truth and power arises because those seeking or possessing power appeal to the 'truth' to legitimise their programmes. There is one authoritative truth and they – whether church, state, party or newspaper – happen to possess it, rendering those who resist the exercise of their power in a state of error. A successfully asserted claim to the truth bestows authority, and authority yields power. The implication of this is that power and truth cannot be uncoupled. Truth is not an objective and neutral fact, the same for everyone to discuss and deploy at will. Truth is rather a tool in the quest for power by vested interests, and the Postmodernists wished to highlight this so as to undermine the foundations of such claims to power.

In this respect history represented a particular Postmodernist target. This is because historians, too, have routinely provided narratives of the past that have underpinned claims to power. The best example are the classic narratives of 'progress' like those of the Whig school, which see history as a process bringing about the creation of liberal states which are ethically superior to earlier states and to the societies existing in 'Third World' countries today. But Liberals are not alone in appropriating history in this way. Communists write histories involving the oppression of the masses and emphasising the liberating effects of Communism; feminists write histories about the suppression of women and their challenge to gender stereotyping; nationalist historians have glorified the struggle for national self-determination and supported, thereby, the claim to legitimacy of ruling elites; while fascist regimes appealed to history to reinforce their messages of anti-Semitism, the need for a strong leader, the greatness of war, and so on.

What gives history the capacity to utilise truth as a means to authority is the idea that there is indeed such a thing as objective truth to begin with. Thus, it is considered possible for the historian to access the past as it really was – to represent, through his writings, the life actually experienced by past people. This view is rejected by Postmodernists. From the very fact that different interest groups are able to present their own historical narratives it follows that there is not *one* recognised interpretation of the past but *many*. Where Liberals might write history as progress towards a modern civic society of rights and freedoms, Marxists might write of it as an ever more sophisticated system of capitalist oppression, or environmentalists might see it as the unfolding of environmental degradation. Why are such multiple and often incompatible accounts able to co-exist? The answer for Postmodernists is simple: there is not, and never can be, an authentic objective account of the past, or of anything else for that matter.

It is not, therefore, that there exists something called the 'truth' which can be manipulated and utilised by some over others, as was implied by Bacon's famous dictum: 'Knowledge is power.' Postmodernists would rather turn this upside down: power produces and determines knowledge. Knowledge or facts or the truth don't simply exist, awaiting discovery by diligent researchers. *Knowledge and truth are constructs and have no objective claim to validity outside of the particular discourse within which they are expressed.*

To understand how this can be so we must reflect upon what it means to think and express truths. All truths, and indeed all consciousness, is embodied in language. To think is to construct sentences under certain rules and conditions. From this it follows that all reality beyond language is literally inconceivable. We cannot, to use Wittgenstein's phraseology, step outside of all language games to comment upon language games as a whole or to reflect upon a world external to all language. To think and talk and write is to take part in a certain language game, be it a language game of science or theology or economics or politics. There is no thinking or talking outside of all language games for then there would be no agreed rules by which to make our discourse meaningful. This essentially is the Postmodernist position. There exists, says Derrida, 'nothing outside of the text.' The meaning of a text is its relationship to other meanings. *Texts don't refer to reality; they refer to other texts.* You can never step outside the web of meaning and ideas – i.e. outside the world of language and texts.

Derrida and Deconstruction

Postmodernism, then, has denied the possibility of language or texts meaningfully applying beyond themselves to some kind of real world since we can never be conscious of a world beyond language. But Derrida went on to argue that texts themselves have no one or fixed meaning at all. Since language does not mirror reality in any way, the meaning of a word cannot derive from some relationship to a signified object.¹ The meaning of words must be explained in terms of their relationships to the varying systems of which they form a part. It depends, in other words, upon its relationship to other words in the system, even though these other words are not immediately present at that moment. For example, when we say someone is *furious* we are also saying they are not irritated, angry or upset. The word furious can only be understood relative to these other words. So, when we use one word or concept we are **deferring** or pushing away the use of some other word or concept. This is Derrida's idea of **differance**: *a word or concept signifies a difference by deferring other words and concepts.* There is no meaning of one word independent of all the other words – as we try to understand one word we are led, step by step, from word to word. Furious takes us to angry, angry to agitated, agitated to irritated, and so on.

One general consequence of this is that no word has a fixed meaning as the meaning of a word keeps spilling over into other words and meanings. A more specific corollary has to do with the role of what Derrida called **Transcendental Signifiers**. These are privileged concepts that we use to organise our discourse: God, reality, justice, nature etc. We put these signifiers into hierarchies: man-woman; natural-unnatural; western-oriental; just-unjust; God-Devil and so on, each such hierarchy reflecting our underlying ideological presuppositions. But, as the

¹ This was the essential insight expressed by de Saussure, the father of structuralism, in his *Course of General Linguistics* (1916).

concept of difference shows, really these concepts depend upon each other, so the meaning of one depends upon the meaning of the other. A good example of this process comes from Edward Said's analysis of the western idea of the oriental. As Said shows, imperialists saw (and still see today) the west as ordered, peaceful, law abiding, and non-corrupt. By contrast, the East or Orient was (and is) regarded as the opposite of this – corrupt, disordered, indulgent, and irrational. Such an ideology of imperialism served to justify and legitimise imperial rule.¹

Thus, Derrida emphasised the inter-relatedness and inter-dependence of all concepts. When we assert or assume the priority of one concept or meaning over another, this is not a reflection of degrees of truthfulness of the concepts, but rather a reflection of our presuppositions or our purposes, as in the western versus oriental example. The dominant signifiers of an age reflect and reinforce its dominant ideologies and the interest groups who use them to legitimise their authority.

To apply this idea of the inter-relatedness of all concepts to a particular text or image is to **Deconstruct** it. Meanings or understandings are always *constructed* by their use in language. Hence when we assert the priority of a certain meaning, we at the same time create and subordinate other meanings which are inherently linked to *that* meaning. So this meaning implies another meaning which contradicts that meaning and thereby undermines its claims to universality or authority. All texts are constructed out of such contradictions and deconstruction highlights this. So, when the imperialist writes a text justifying western governance of some colonised country he will make reference to ideas like rationality, freedom, democracy and so forth. In so doing he will tend to suggest that these qualities are absent from the colonised people, who embody their antithesis in, say, the character of the oriental. But in the very act of setting up this dichotomy he calls into question the very values he is endorsing. To be specific, he will tend to claim that all men are by nature rational happiness maximisers – and then go on to say that this is not true of the oriental, thereby contradicting the idea of an essential individualist human nature. And in justifying western rule he will acknowledge the legitimacy of absolutist government – thereby undermining his trumpeted belief in democracy and self-government, and so on. The effect of these inconsistencies is to deconstruct the original argument or proposition, so that it collapses under the weight of its inherent contradictions. The task of the critical reader of texts is to tease out these deconstructive practices, which may be obvious, but which often be subtly concealed. In either case, the end result is to subvert and call into question the meaning initially claimed for a text and to render it unable to sustain the claim to authority it originally sought to make. Deconstruction dissolves claims to power.

Postmodernism and the Practice of History

The arguments developed above evidently apply with special rigour to history. It is important to distinguish between the past and history. History is a type of discourse whose object is the

¹ E. Said, *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient* (1978)

past, which may be defined as all those things that have happened prior to now. As such the past is doubly inaccessible to us – as ‘lived reality’ and as ‘past.’ We cannot study the lives of past people; all we can engage with are the fragmentary texts left by such people. *All historians can do is write texts about texts.* They can never break through the texts to the reality beyond. As Jenkins remarks, ‘if you start a course on 17th century Spain, you do not actually go to the 17th century or to Spain; you go, with the help of your reading list, to the library.’¹ In terms of evidence there are no primary sources. All sources are secondary; they are linguistic constructs about the past. As such they are narrative constructs produced by other people – they are not the past itself, only interpretations and perspectives on the past. Historians are hence located within a perpetual loop: they generate linguistic constructs from linguistic constructs, secondary accounts from secondary accounts.² And since there is no objective standard or point of reference then there can be no check upon the linguistic constructs that can be generated and each historical account has an equal claim to authority – or lack of it.

Historians could not find in the body of linguistically mediated evidence any guidance to the true representation, only an invitation to choose one of many possibilities for construction, all of them of equal truth value. The standard in truth-finding could no longer be the closest (objective) approximation to the actuality of the past ... As for the traditional concept of objectivity, it was replaced by its postmodernist counterpart, the demand for ‘self-reflexivity.’ Historians must be ruthlessly honest in laying bare how their accounts were constructed.³

Historians produce stories which compete with other stories. When we wish to check the accuracy or validity of an historical account of the past we do not hold it up and compare it with the actual past – for, as we have said, this actual past is unthinkable and unknowable. What we in fact do is compare this historical account with the accounts given in other accounts. It is for this reason that a writer like Jenkins recommends replacing the word ‘history’ with ‘historiography’ as the name for the discipline of historical study.

In developing their interpretations of the past historians are influenced by the assumptions implicit within the intellectual, social and cultural context within which they operate. Where some write stories which emphasise the bourgeois idea of the capacity of the individual to make history, others structure their narratives according to the theme of national liberation, or Marxist accounts of the struggles of the proletariat. These ideologically conditioned stories are called by postmodernists ‘master’ or **meta-narratives**. Postmodernists reject all such metanarratives which argue that history has some underlying principle of movement, usually in some upward direction, whether they be those of Christianity, Marxism, national liberation, Liberal enlightenment, or Hegelianism. Postmodernists contend that all such metanarratives have no claim to be the ‘truth’ and are, in fact, intended to legitimise the power or quest for power of some group. In the 20th century countless millions have found themselves sacrificed in the name of some metanarrative or other, whether it be fascist or

¹ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (1991), p. 7.

² Breisach, *Future of History*, p. 119.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

communist or imperialist or Islamicist or nationalist. And this is not surprising since one of the chief corollaries of truth is closure. The truth shuts down possibilities. It is, after all, *the* truth and by its nature becomes restrictive, privileged and hegemonic. He who possesses the 'truth' possesses the power to control and shut down debate and argument. For Postmodernists the idea of a closed future determined by an extrapolated 'truth' of history is anathema: there is not and can be no fixity in meaning or anything else, all is in perpetual flux, and the future one of infinite possibilities. As Francis Lyotard said in *The Post-Modern Condition*: 'I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives.'

Foucault and the Discourses of Power

These ideas are best approached through the work of Michael Foucault. In the earlier stages of his career, Foucault operated within a broadly structuralist tradition. Structuralists argue that to understand a particular phenomenon it must be situated within an overall system of determining relations: the one can only be understood in the context of its relationship to the many. Accordingly, Foucault set about laying bare the unconscious structures and systems of knowledge which, he believed, shaped the way people in a wide range of disciplines saw the world. Each system of thought, which Foucault labelled an *episteme*, is discrete and distinctive and determines how we talk and think about any subject. Over time epistemes follow one another in succession. Each, while it lasts, dictates how the world is to be rationally understood, only to find itself displaced by another episteme with its own laws of reason and ethics and so forth. Evidently this view of history is itself a kind of metanarrative and therefore falls foul of the Postmodernist injunction against such attempts to order history according to some overarching pattern. On the other hand, in true Postmodernist style, it destroys the idea of history as the linear advance of reason: what counts as reason is defined relative to each particular episteme with no claim to validity beyond that context. Similarly, by thus subverting any claim to absolute authority it does not serve as a legitimising tool for any given elite – rather it exposes the parochial and limited foundation of any such claim.

More relevant to Postmodernist perspectives is a more specific aspect of Foucault's work which became more pronounced over time: namely his analysis of the **discourses of power**. Discourses are interlocking systems of statements used to define and describe a subject matter – for example law, history, medicine, insanity, criminality, education. Such discourses reflect the ideological paradigms of the users and they are used as forms of authority. Think of the language of law: judge, jury, criminal, inmate, accused etc. Each word brings with it an association of authority, justifying the power of some and vindicating the subordination of others.

It was Foucault's contention that all types of discourse have this effect; they all reinforce the claims to power of some people over others. The dominant discourse of an era will be the discourse of the dominant groups and institutions. This applies to the concept of truth itself. The established truths of a given discourse will express and sustain the dominant position of

the ruling elite, allowing that group to justify its oppression, suppression and exclusion of other groups and other claims to truth – which are thereby marginalised as ‘the other.’ To quote Foucault:

Truth isn't outside power...it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint ... Each society has ... its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true ... ‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked ... with systems of power which produce and sustain it ... A ‘regime of truth.’

These systems for the production and distribution of ‘truth’ statements are embodied in institutions like schools, universities, scientific academies, courts, intelligence services, government bureaucracies, medical professions, and so on. Through such mechanisms a distinction is enforced ‘between “proper,” reasonable, responsible, sane, and truthful discourse, on the one side, and “improper,” unreasonable, irresponsible, insane, and erroneous discourse, on the other.’¹ In this manner the ‘truth’ is always and everywhere constructed as a means for the legitimisation and enforcement of power, and more particularly the power of the established elite, the *status quo*. Like Nietzsche, Foucault sees language as a reflection, not of reality, but of the will to power.

For Foucault this nexus between knowledge and power is not to be located primarily at the level of the state. Rather, power relations are to be uncovered at the micro-level, that is, within specific local contexts and social situations where knowledge is constructed through systematised discourses and applied in ways which produce social control and domination. We must, therefore:

conduct an ascending analysis of power, starting, that is, from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been – and continue to be – invested, colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc. by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination.’²

The particular *loci* of knowledge-power discourses studied by Foucault included the history of concepts of madness in western civilisation, the origins of clinical definitions of sickness, and the emergence of the ideas of criminality and punishment. Thus, in *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961) he sought to show how the meaning of madness changed in the course of the 17th century as new ideas of human rationality emerged. In the Middle Ages the mad were seen as spiritually possessed, partaking of both demonic and

¹ H. White, *The Content and the Form: Narrative, Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), p. 112.

² Quoted in D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), p. 45.

divine characters, mediating, thereby, between the human and the spirit world. It is with the emergence of the concept of reason and rationality that the mad begin to be categorised as insane, as deviant and dangerous beings who threatened rationally acceptable codes of behaviour and who needed, accordingly, to be incarcerated in prison-like asylums. It is significant, for Foucault, that these early asylums were often converted leper colonies. Where the leper had once been the emblem of the outcaste from society, the ‘other’, his place was now taken by the insane.¹ Thus subject to centralised control the mad were now amenable to scientific study and treatment: to be studied by the very rational processes that had created them in the first place.

What this example illustrates is the manner in which society evolves new ways to categorise and stigmatise sections of the population on the basis of new forms of discourse – in this case the discourse of rationality, insanity, and deviance. It is this discourse of reason that justifies the oppression of one group by another. Foucault believed that if one wished to understand the dominant thinking of an era and the contradictions to which it was subject one was best advised to go to those who existed on its margins, to those who challenged and resisted its assumptions – the mad, the criminal, the sick, the sexually deviant.

To find out what our society means by sanity, perhaps we should investigate what is happening in the field of insanity. And what we mean by legality in the field of illegality. And, in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations...opposition to power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live.²

Postmodern History

How, then, ought we to do history in a Postmodern context? First, the Postmodern historian will recognise that all centres of authority and legitimacy in historical discussion have no inherent claim pre-eminent status within his writing. The narratives we inherit, be they of the constitutional evolution of states, the rise of the west, the growth of reason, the forward march of Labour, the quest for civil rights, must all be viewed as constructs assembled by persons seeking to order the ‘past’ in some way and for some reason. This applies not only to the themes attributed to the historical process but the subjects of study: the doings of western males have no greater claim to consideration than those of women or non-Europeans. That these have not, hitherto, formed the locus of the historical canon is a reflection, not of their secondary significance, but of the interests of the western males who have created and sustained that canon. To all such Euro-centric progressive metanarratives the Post-modern historian will exhibit, as we have seen, incredulity. Now this collapse of an organising centre to historical study is not something post-modernists have merely argued for. It has been a fact of the culture

¹ R. Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (1994), p. 292.

² Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, quoted in Kearney, *European Philosophy*, p. 297.

within which contemporary historians operate. While metanarratives of liberal progress retain virility (one need only think of the Blairite vision for Iraq), they have been joined by a whole host of over-lapping and rival narratives as newly self-conscious groups have constructed their own stories of the past. ‘Today,’ writes Keith Jenkins, ‘more people than ever before are willing things’ and the result has been the:

multiplicity of histories that can be met everywhere...historians’ histories...teachers’ histories ... children’s histories, popular-memory histories, proscribed histories, black histories, white histories, women’s histories, feminist histories, men’s histories, heritage histories, reactionary histories, revolutionary histories, bottom-dog histories, top-dog histories etc., all these varying constructs being affected by local, regional, national, and international perspectives.¹

Postmodernists will not be surprised by this development. They will welcome it as contributing to the richness of historical perspectives. They will consider it the best possible argument for the rejection of any idea that there might be any such thing as *the* truth about the past. But they will see each variety of history for what it is: a story reflecting the assumptions and agendas of those who produce it – no more, and no less.

Second, the Postmodernist historian will recognise that what he is engaged in is the analysis and production of texts. Whether reading the works of other historians, researching in the archives, or composing his own stories, he will be conscious that he is not accessing ‘the truth’ about ‘the past’ but only engaging with and generating other narratives about the past. Accordingly, he will fix his gaze, not upon the past out there as it was really lived, but upon the assumptions and agendas which shaped the text he is reading. To this end his goal will be to deconstruct the texts he encounters, to reveal the hidden dichotomies, claims to authority, and shifting meanings that are present yet superficially concealed within the words, metaphors, and images that constitute them. In so doing he shall, of course, be reflecting the assumptions, methodologies and agendas within which he is operating and upon this he will reflect – he will exhibit ‘reflexivity’ upon his own activities. All histories, all perspectives upon past events – primary or secondary – are linguistic constructs and the Postmodern historian will partake in the so-called ‘linguistic turn’, utilising the insights of the likes of de Saussure, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Foucault to reflect critically upon the words used by historical actors and historians to elaborate stories about the world.

¹ Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, pp. 66-7.