

Dialectical Historicism:

Charting the Ebb and Flow of Meaning-Making Systems

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“If we endow a canon with the moral prestige of truth we blind ourselves to its nature and become slaves of a lifeless dogma” --Calinescu

Recording history in an orderly, linear way can poorly reflect the actuality of lived-experience. In reality, life is messy and unresolved, and attempts to capture its proceedings in a neat, sequential package prove all but fruitless. Historically, issues of how individuals and cultures selected certain events, rendered them important, and interpreted their significance largely remained a matter of who was in power. Until quite recently, shaping history was a highly subjective, selective process, despite the insistence by traditional historians that observations should be recorded through a detached, objective sense of equanimity.

Many 20th century textbooks showcased westernized models of historiography and assumed that European history served well in organizing data--to the virtual exclusion of crucial events happening elsewhere. By the fourth quarter of last century, controversial issues regarding art v. science, determinism v. relativism, or secular humanism v. religious historicism reached mainstream audiences, while providing endless hours of debate among scholars and lay-persons alike. Pop media found its way into every living-room, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of current events that extended far beyond the confines of academia.

Today, of course, living-room televisions have been transformed into entire “entertainment centers” with full internet capabilities, web cams, free global communication systems, and a thousand news channels from which to choose. Postmodernism has morphed into Post-humanism, with its eye on the micro-historic offerings of virtually anyone who so desires to contribute to the Information Age.

Individual podcasters’ challenge to powerful media corporations has proven invaluable to the outcome of the 2008 Presidential campaign of the eventual winner. Likewise, young Iranians are among the leading examples of a widespread blogging network, which stands as a direct challenge to totalitarian state authority. These two examples are but a preview of things to come.

The following essay will provide a brief skim of key contributions by noted historians on the evolution of the New Historicism, which has led to the latest developments in the sharing of information in the first decade of the 21st century. An emphasis will be placed on the present development of global, dialectical interaction. My working hypothesis is that the ancient practice of psychosocial dialogue--dialectical discourse--can be considered the linchpin between antiquity, modernity, and the emerging Post-Humanistic worldview.

Charting the Beginnings of Western Thought

In early western thought, Greek theosophists concluded that an objective, pure form of understanding the world and its mysteries could be realized through intellectual processes (Mautner, 1996). Socrates is among the best known examples of the early philosophers who believed that idealized forms of understanding were attainable through the complex, orderly processes of rational thought. Although Socrates claimed to know not one single fact for certain, he nevertheless believed that there existed a set of absolute Truths to be recognized and understood at their deepest, core level through a process of dialectics (Mautner, 1996). Socrates' elective "martyrdom" served as testimony to the level of conviction of his claims. Opposing forces (pundits who objected to Socrates' abject dismissal of certifiable 'truths') were ultimately responsible for his demise. His death served as a precursor to the many repeated incarcerations and executions of individuals who persisted in offending those who held the power to dictate written history or shape moral authority.

Neo-Platonic Historical Essentialism

History has largely been written by those who won key battles, and thus purported to have obtained a stronghold on what was considered truth at the time. Interpretations of historical events were left to the academic vanguard. Plato, Socrates' student, developed a set philosophy that held sway over a wide ranging conglomerate of civilizations (Mautner, 1996). In fact, Platonic thought has been so widely influential, historians are able to trace various manifestations of Platonic thought to both ultra-liberal and right-wing philosophical camps (Mautner, 1996). Iggers (1997) notes that both Socrates and Plato claimed that an objective truth existed which was not "tied to the subjectivity of the thinker", but this belief has been vehemently denied by

Nietzsche and others, who considered such a notion highly untenable (Ackermann, 1990). In this vein, Nietzsche found supposed historical truisms to be more related to a fictionalized literature than to pure science (Ackermann, 1990), and thus, the battleground for ideological posturing had seemingly reached a new line of demarcation. It is precisely this type of debate--the difference between essentialist and relativist thought--which has come to loggerheads in the post-human era. This debate serves as the focus for this study

Historical Applications of Occidental Dualism

First, the mechanics of how these differences have been deduced and reformulated will be examined in order to indicate specific lines of ideological development. Forms of essentialist, deterministic thought found their full expression in the philosophical foundations development during the Enlightenment Era. Kantian and Cartesian dualism served as the mainstay of western belief systems. Descartes' focus on binary systems stressed rational, intellectual pursuits. He forged a school of thought that eventually found its expression in a form of pragmatism that influenced a plethora of social, political, and cultural norms. In the process, classical historicism eventually nestled into two dominant traditions (Iggers, 1997, p. 23). Western historicism originally found its place primarily among the academic elite, who claimed to harbor a vast knowledge of antiquity as their personal realm of expertise, and consequently recorded history through their own ideological 'filter' of choice (Iggers, 1997, p. 23). More often than not, this process involved a resurgence of classic Greek thought, which led to a neo-Platonic refiguring of northern Europe's supposed superiority over other cultural perspectives (Tinker, 1995). Secondly, forms of historical analysis found a home within high-profile literary circles, and with this link, resulted in a prolific outpouring of written material. Once accepted into popular folklore, these historical records attained a certain intellectual stability not unlike that of the realm of the sciences (Iggers, 1997, p. 23).

As a result, historical documentation, born of a widespread belief that sound, methodological rigor (coupled with intellectual proficiency), resulted in consummate truth, became canonized as a certifiable reality (Iggers, 1997). These historians shared with their philosophical predecessor, Thucydides, the distinction between myth and truth, and despite the non-rhetorical character of historio-scientific literature, nevertheless presupposed that historical

documentation was written as narrative (Iggers, 1997, p. 3). Iggers notes Hayden White's (1973, 1982, 1987) contention that, while historical writing "proceeds from empirically validated facts or events, it necessarily requires imaginative steps to place them within a coherent story" (White referenced in Iggers, 1997, p. 3).

It is precisely this understanding that fueled the inevitable opposing contention that such suppositions as subjective forms of narrative (i.e., being capable of expressing universal truths) served as a "means of control and manipulation" rather than a science (Iggers, 1997, p. 13). Such opposition was mounted through critical works produced through a lineage of twentieth century historiographers and philosophers that included Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and the Frankfurt School's Adorno and Horkheimer, among others (Iggers, 1997, p. 13).

Ranke's Modified Forms of Essentialism

Modest forms of empirical reform found support in the approach of Ranke, beginning in the 1820s. Wilson considers Ranke a pivotal figure who ushered in an early form of modernist, historical theory capable of expanding and broadening the scope of historical analysis (1999, p. 15). Ranke assumed a non-teleological, hermeneutic approach which placed emphasis on political institutions as a key to historical understanding (Iggers, 1997). He was noted for demanding of himself and his colleagues a "rigorous historical research" which, for Ranke, reflected a world of meanings and values (Iggers 1997, p. 25). In this pursuit, his methodology created a sense of historio-philosophical tension between his insistence upon a demand for "objective" research and the implicit assumptions responsible for determining the direction of his work (Iggers 1997, p. 25). He recognized the discrepancies between his efforts to produce value-free judgments and certain "metaphysical speculations" determined by his personal, subjective, critical methodology (Iggers, 1997, p. 25). Yet in doing so, he maintained a revulsion for positivistic approaches seeking "the establishment of facts as the essential task of the historian's work" (Iggers, 1997, p. 25). While rejecting Weber's belief that values were relative and therefore meaningless, Ranke aligned himself with Hegel's view that the results of historical growth constituted "moral energies" (Iggers, 1997, p. 25-6).

While Ranke's innovations certainly began to transform strict forms of historical positivism, he limited his historical vision to the rather myopic assumption that emphasis should be placed on European history. He had little use for data collection outside the historical parameters of the Germanic and Latin peoples (Iggers, 1997, p. 30). As with many of his colleagues, the influence of Hegel transformed many of Ranke's understandings, due to the comprehensive and almost overwhelming breadth of the Hegel's fields of study. In this regard, both men ultimately placed great value in the sovereignty of the state and an "enlightened civil service" (Iggers, 1997, p 26). Such a stance, adopted by two such high-profile and influential spokesmen, was to create ever-widening waves of repercussion for future explorations in European sociopolitical historicism.

Hegelian Dialectics

The stoic, pensive Hegel was widely known as a scholarly master of numerous disciplines (Plant, 1999). Although his lectures and writings were steeped in confounding rhetoric and dizzying, convoluted forms of idiosyncratic logic, he was nevertheless considered one of the most advanced, formidable thinkers of his time. He developed quite an entourage of disciples and was often quoted in literary and philosophical circles (Strathern, 1997). Diverse in his fields of interest, Hegel's Lutheran background surfaced in a variety of forms throughout his writings. Religio-philosophical idealism formed the basis for much of his thought, although, as Wilson (1999, p. 14) notes, Hegel "championed history as the ultimate knowledge". This focus on history as a frame for other domains was to have far reaching implications for those who followed his lead.

Perhaps Hegel's most important personal contribution to philosophy was his reliance upon dialectics as an effective means of coming to an intellectual understanding of 'ultimate' knowledge (Strathern, 1997). So much emphasis was placed on the intellect that, for Hegel, higher knowledge issued from "the philosophical understanding of the rationality of human experience" (Plant, 1999, p. 27). Certain similarities are apparent in the Socratic discourse practiced by philosophical descendents of the Greek tradition, and those of Hegel. Socrates had considered argumentation to be the vehicle for personal growth, cultivated through a series of questions designed to challenge the logic of his students (Strathern, 1997). In the same manner

Hegel asserted that, in Plant's words, "the process of dialectical development turns into another because contradictions are revealed in previous forms" (1999, p. 25).

Hegel employed a method which entailed a proposition or thesis, followed by an antithetical supposition to challenge the first premise, which then formed a new, hybrid understanding, or synthesis. This new thesis was then challenged by a new antithetical proposition, and so on. Through these intellectual gymnastics, Hegel argued that an ultimate form of understanding could conceivably be realized through pure Mind (Collinson, 1987). Hegelian dialectics' sphere of influence spread far and wide throughout his lifetime, and through a reconfiguration by Feuerbach, became the mainstay of Marxian thought. Later, post-Hegelian thought proved influential in Vygotskian forms of Socio-cultural Theory (Tucker, 1978; Cohen, 1978).

It seems rather ironic, given Hegel's later influence on historical materialism, that much of his writings were Christian-based and highly religious in nature. For Hegel, "properly understood" Christianity provided an integrated account of human existence, both historically and in the modern world (Plant, 1999, p. 52). In Phenomenology of Spirit (p. 464), Hegel states that [religious] philosophy becomes the foundation for an "accomplished community of consciousness" (Plant, 1999, p. 50). This was not accomplished merely through the "elaboration of a set of general principles", but rather was "rooted in our personal, social, and cultural experience", which then formed the basis "for a common life" (Plant, 1999, p. 50). According to Hegel, an important part of this experience was to be realized through "appropriately rethought Christian categories" (Plant, 1999, p. 50). Through the dialectical process, an individual formed an interpretation of "what is", and through this interpretation, transformed and transfigured consciousness into new understandings (Plant, 1999, p. 50).

Hegel's Panentheism

As part of Hegel's personal transformation, he had initially viewed Christianity as part of the "fragmentation of the modern world" (Plant, 1999, p. 50). However, in his later, mature work he came to view Christianity as "part of the solution" through "an understanding of God, Incarnation, Holy Spirit, and the Trinity" (Plant, 1999, p. 50). A contemporary of Hegel, Krause

first coined the term “panentheism”, translated as “everything-in-God”, to encapsulate and categorize Hegel’s religious understandings. Plant (1999, p. 52) stated that “Hegel meant: that God is immanent in the world but more than the sum of the parts of the world”.

Viewed in this manner, Hegelian Christianity seemed favorably aligned with the Platonic notion of idealized Forms, which was considered an encapsulation of the embodiment of Truth. These Forms as Truth were then applicable, upon full realization, to the material world (Collinson, 1987.) Further, one might see the correlation of Hegel’s concept of Mind, with that of the Cartesian emphasis on the full expression of the existence of Self, which was purported to be based on the higher powers of an “attentive”, rational mind (Collinson, 1987).

Interestingly, Hegel’s complex belief system later split into two branches, the Young Hegelians Right and Young Hegelians Left. The right-wing branch eventually formed the foundational core for Hitler’s totalitarianism, while the left wing formed the basis for Marxist socialism. Additionally, the Hegelian concept of panentheism found a place among British philosophers in the latter part of the nineteenth century, principally through the works of T.H. Green, Sir Henry Jones, and John and Edward Caird (Plant, 1999, p. 52).

It was through British Hegelian Christianity, as defined by the writings of J.R. Illingworth, that ties were made between Hegel’s notion of “the self-developmental of God in the world of culture and nature” and the theory of evolution “as a developmental account of nature” (Plant, 1999, p. 53). It was through Feuerbach’s reconstitution of this principle that the dialectic of historical materialism began to take form (Tucker, 1978). Marx then applied Feuerbach’s interpretation of Hegelian determinism to a new level by inverting Hegel’s other-worldly, abstract idealism of Pure Mind to a secularized, pragmatic analysis of the potential for lived-experience in this material world (Tucker, 1978).

Marxian Historical Materialism

By turning Hegelian dialectical theory upside down, a youthful Marx began to apply specific aspects of his mentor’s belief system to the changing world around him. The concept of *alienation*, which had earlier been linked with man’s perceived disassociation with God, was now applied by Marx to the less than humane conditions he witnessed in the smoke-choked cities of

industrial Europe. Marx set about the task of delineating certain mechanistic ‘laws’ to the human condition. Iggers noted that Marx believed “objective scientific knowledge was possible, and that scientific knowledge expressed itself in general statements about the lawful behavior of phenomena” (1997, p. 79). What separated Marx from other positivist colleagues such as Buckle and Taine, was his insistence that the “primary motor” of lawful, historical development was rooted in conflicting social norms derived from economic inequality (Iggers, 1997, p. 79).

Marx extended the notion of dialectics, which in and of itself contained a certain contradictory element, to reexamine the positivist notion that economic forces contained their own set of codified, ‘scientific’ laws (Iggers, 1997, p. 80). Iggers notes that Marx rejected “political economy, or rather the economic system that operates on its premises, because it places the requirements of capital ahead of the innermost needs and aspirations of human beings” (1997, p. 80; Marx, 1844). Human agency, in Marxist terms, contained the power to make necessary corrections in the dysfunctional social systems shaped by a profiteering middle class--a condition created through a blend of human self-interest and indifference, and sustained through the inaction of subjugated populations.

Developments in Historical Pragmatism

Buckle, however, was not so quick to afford humanity such powerful sway in such a socio-historical refiguring of history. While replacing Aristotle’s ultimate goals of poetry and philosophy with science, Buckle argued that humankind must know the past from a scientific standpoint (Wilson, 1999, p. 13). He made the claim that humans function according to patterns, rather than through the exercise of free will (Wilson, 1999, p. 13). Consequently, according to Buckle, human tendencies and activities must be understood more in terms of behavior of a colony of ants, than as a voluntary enterprise (Wilson, 1999, p. 12).

Buckle accepted Comte’s first two premises that: (a) a “theological hypothesis” was a foundation for the theory of predestination with its “doctrine of necessary connexion [*sic*]” or “supernatural interference,” and (b) this “metaphysical hypothesis” was a foundation for a “theory of free will” with its “doctrine of Chance” (Comte, unpublished, p. 6-10). Buckle then added a

third proposition, leading to a “scientific truth” in which a theory of uniformity and regularity of human behavior would lead to “fixed general laws” (Wilson, 1999, p. 17).

These “governing laws” then provided western culture (so enamored with scientific inquiry) a means for developing blanket theories that spread into a variety of domains. Calvinistic models of predestination afforded northern European Protestants latitude to make sweeping political, religious, military, legal, and ethical decisions, based on the assumed consent of a higher power. In an ironic twist of intellectual license, Carl Hempel in the 1940s used the logic of Socratic syllogisms to build “covering laws”, which in turn were instrumental in formulating scientific proof that history could argue for generalized, natural laws applicable to all people (Wilson, 1999, p. 20). Examined in their worst manifestations, these behavioristic “covering laws” provided a rationale for such practices as craniology, eugenics, religious persecution, and genocide. But even as early as during Hegel’s reign, not all historians accepted, without critical thought, some of the propositions espoused by the positivists.

The Development of Historical Relativism

If the systems created by Buckle and others could establish laws governing human behavior, then it was argued, “Why then do these laws not provide the ability to predict future activities?” In the early nineteenth century, Johann Gottfried von Herder offered another historical perspective by stating that one simply cannot compare the past with the present (Wilson, 1999, p. 14). Herder’s emphasis on the organic development of unique cultures stood at odds with Hume’s ethnocentric assurance that French and German thought was an extension of a superior, Greco-Roman model (Wilson, 1999, p. 14). By rejecting the Enlightenment claim of a universal human nature, Herder provided a *contra*-absolutist point of view, while heralding the advent of cultural relativism (Wilson, 1999, p. 14).

Wehler’s writings of the 1960s and 1970s sought to view recent historical activities in Europe, and the catastrophic events of Germany in particular, to a newly reformulated “historical social science” (Iggers, 1997, p. 68). Rather closely aligned with “Critical Theory” (as conceived by the Frankfurt School’s Horkheimer and Adorno,) Wehler sought to distance himself from the “speculative and authoritarian aspects” of traditional Marxist doctrine (Iggers, 1997, p. 68).

Additionally, Wehler challenged Weber's "imperative of value neutrality" in social science research, which Iggers claims Weber, himself, violated in practice (Iggers, 1997, p. 69).

While accepting Marx's premise that the development of German society was "determined by the persistence of structural and social inequalities", Wehler rejected Marx's notion of the "primacy of economic forces" (Iggers paraphrasing Wehler, in Iggers, 1997, p. 69). To ground his theory in an established framework, he sided with Weber's conception of politics, economics, and culture as three, inter-related forces that determine *every* society (Iggers, 1997, p. 69). Thus, along with the writings of neo-Marxists Horkheimer and Habermas, Wehler stood with one foot in positivism and the other near a new plateau shaped by 'humane autonomy' (Iggers, 1997, p. 70). As such, he represented what some may consider the last vestiges of a highly modified form of Enlightenment theory in the late-modernist era.

Reformulating Marxist Ideology

By usurping the Marxist moniker, the Stalinist government served to further confuse an already very complicated philosophical ideology. The humanitarian work of the historical anthropologist and semiotician Bakhtin, which resulted in his persecution at the hands of Stalin's totalitarian regime, illustrates the gulf between alleged forms of Marxian politics and actual practice (Iggers, 1997, p. 83). Marxism was further misunderstood in the West through a long campaign of negative propaganda from right-wing extremists in the United States. For a few, brief years in the 1960s during the Vietnam War, Marxist thought was courted in the United States, but its newly converted followers soon thereafter embraced capitalist-driven consumerism with unprecedented fervor.

With the symbol-laden dismantling of the Berlin Wall, which actually had little to do with true Marxist ideology, Fukuyama (1989) joyfully called for the "end of history". He envisioned capitalism's global stronghold as the high-water "endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution" (Fukuyama, 1989). In contrast to Fukuyama's Chicago-school style of economic politics, Medick "insists that history should move from concern with "central" institutions to the margins, where individuals who do not conform to the established norms are to be found" (Iggers paraphrasing Medick in Iggers, 1997, p. 105). Geertz concurs, "believing, with Max Weber, that [a hu]man is

an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Further, Geertz works within the conception of a culture as an “integrated, semiotic system”, although, as Iggers points out, one which lacks “differentiation and conflict” (Iggers, 1997, p. 107). Geertz’s work is often highly praised for its timeliness in a domain which had, up to that point, largely resisted *microhistoria* as a viable investigative tool (Iggers, 1997, p. 107).

Re-thinking Grand Narrative as Historical Truth

Noting that the grander the grand narrative the greater the opportunity for the events to be invented rather than found, White rejected history as science (White referenced in Iggers, 1997, p. 10). Likewise, Kellner’s critique of authority culminated in an understanding that “truth and reality are the primary authoritarian weapons of our time” (Kellner, 1982, p. 31). With the alarming realization that a rapidly spreading, post-McLuhanesque communications system had blanketed the globe, apocryphal mythologies designed to inspire nationalism were eschewed by a relative handful of historiographers. An investigative method of breaking down and examining such alleged fabrications had its roots in Marxian dialectics.

“Deconstruction”, as coined by Derrida, was adopted by principally neo-Marxist authors in the late 1970s, and was studied and discussed among New Historicists throughout the 1980s (Sim, 1999). One notable difference between Hegelian dialectics and Derridean deconstruction, however, seemed to be a gulf in the degree of concern regarding the emphasis of logic through syllogism. Baudrillard, for example, seemed comfortable in retracting his own key statements in rather cavalier fashion, while arguing that our present life condition, that of hyperreality, is of its own nature, unreal, illogical, and falsified (Horrocks, 1999).

Early Developments in Reverse-Discourse

The tension created by the varying degrees of emphasis placed on macrohistory and microhistory has been reflected in a shift from macrostudies to microstoria as a form of research inquiry. Originally instigated by Medick, Schlumbohm, and Sabeian through the Max Planck Institute for History (which involved their studies of proto-industrialism), the movement spread to a group of microhistorians in Italy. Reacting to traditional Marxism, neo-Marxists Ginsburg, Poni, Levi, and Grendi sought to “give history a human face” (Iggers, 1997, p. 107). Like their

German counterparts, the Italian group retained two important Marxian concerns: (a) the belief that social inequality is a central characteristic of all historical societies and (b) consideration of the role that production and reproduction play in the formation of cultures (Iggers, 1997, p. 108). Their commitment to *microstoria* was “to open up history to peoples who would be left out by other methods” and “to elucidate historical causation on the level of small groups where most of life takes place” (Muir in Iggers, 1997, p. 108). It is this shared concern that has prompted my own longitudinal studies involving narrative inquiry and image-based research, and the decision to center this research in and around under-represented populations in less industrialized societies.

These representational concerns noted above were voiced through Foucault’s observations that “hegemonic institutions have excluded certain ways of thinking as demonic, irrational, heretical, or criminal” (Foucault referenced in Iggers, 1997, p. 109). It is precisely this interest in relationships of power that has propelled postmodern thought into the forefront of what is now referred to as the New Historicism (Iggers, 1997, p. 11). Elements of interpretive ethnography, multi-modal semiotics, image-based theory and research, and a general application of relativistic inquiry have served to irritate and confound late-modern positivists, who cling tenuously to visions of historical cohesion. Their faith in a grand narrative has been questioned by Foucault and others who insist that history has no unity, but is marked by “ruptures”, which in turn create a dynamic and highly unstable platform from which to launch a “reverse discourse” (Spargo, 1999, p. 21).

Relativistic Historicism v. Historical Determinism

This “reverse discourse” has become an object of disdain for positivists. Some of the criticism of *micro-storia* include: i) that the “new” historicists’ methodology, evidenced by their concentration of microhistory, has reduced history to “anecdotal antiquarianism”, ii) that they have “romanticized past cultures”, iii) that their emphasis on working with “relatively stable cultures” has shown an inability to cope with “contemporary cultures marked by rapid change”, and iv) that they are “incapable of dealing with politics” (Iggers, 1997, p. 113). These criticisms are further fueled by a nagging feeling that the postmodern relativists are somehow rather smug and arrogant in their denouncement of time-honored, institutionalized norms. Further, positivists are adamant about the shortcomings inherent in postmodern skepticism, noting that

deconstruction is effective in exposing weaknesses, but does little to offer solutions to serious socio-historical problems.

As would be expected, the relativists counter with their own critique of the positivist position. Derrida claims that “what is really being called for is the destruction of an opposing ideology” to that of the institutionalized conventionality of essentialism-- which in Bell’s words, has come to represent an outmoded, limiting “ideology which was once a road to action, that has come to be a dead-end” (Derrida in Sim, 1999, p. 18; Bell, 1962). In this regard, much has been written about Derrida’s call for the “end of history”, a tongue-in-cheek refutation of Fukuyama’s identical injunction. For Fukuyama, the end of history reflects the notion that “there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all the really big questions have been settled” (Fukuyama, 1989). In contrast, Sim emphasizes that Derrida is not proclaiming the end of history in any literal sense, “but History: that is, history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process” (Sim, 1999, p. 20).

The Manufacturing of Consent: A Postmodern Critique

This totalizing of public consent, as proclaimed by Fukuyama, is believed by certain critics to have its strength in popular media. The constant bombardment of imagery and literature produced by an omnipresent, corporate media is addressed by Lyotard, who observed that,

“The objects and thoughts which originate in scientific knowledge and the capitalist economy convey with them one of the rules which supports their possibility: the rule that there is no reality unless testified by a consensus between partners over a certain knowledge and certain commitments”
(Lyotard in Waugh, 1992, p. 121).

According to Lyotard, “modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities” (in Waugh, 1992, p. 121). It is this notion of a variety of multiple realities that would serve to legitimize not only the field work performed through a new type of historicism, but legitimize the marginalized populations with whom New Historians collaborate. It is for this reason that institutionalized forms of history (maintained by the patriarchal old guard

that benefit most from its sustainment) have been so reluctant to accept radicalized, qualitative field research as a legitimate form of historical inquiry. As Sim indicates, “one can not successfully police meaning or history; nor can one offer complete interpretations of them” (Sim, 1999, p. 50).

The last half century of the twentieth century became an important period for the development and widespread use of technology to record micro-histories. Seemingly, most American families own some form of photographic apparatus, as prices have become more affordable. Today, photographic equipment ranges from disposable mini-cameras to sophisticated, digital camcorders, and these apparatuses are used in every corner of the globe. Events such as Cronkite’s personal coverage and appraisal of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, the almost carnival-like ratings boom generated by the Gulf War media-blitz in the 1990s, and now global blogs and podcasts all serve as examples of how imagery has served to reformulate public opinion.

The camera is now in the possession of anyone who ventures into the streets to record history. Belief systems are tested daily in light of new evidence produced, not by professionals, but laypersons in the field. Those who venture into the various hotspots around the world - the Middle East, Central America, or the Pacific Rim - often collect visual data found to be incompatible with news generated by corporate media. Freelance photographers routinely produce material at odds with public perception, which forces government speechwriters and media ‘spin doctors’ to frantically devise a way to control potential damage to perspectives they wish to project.

It is with this understanding in mind that certain photo journalists seek to bulldoze the relationship between history and the science-based, educational cull d’ sac that I cited in Bell (1962). In doing so, postmodern historicists hope to forge a crack in a formidable facade of self-generated certainty that has proven to be a deterrent to alternative understandings about history’s place within the parameters of lived experience. Interpretive ethnographers opt instead for the creation of open forums for debate. If a fissure occurs, let it provide a rush of fresh air and a stream of light capable of illuminating new perspectives in how we observe and make new meanings of the world around us.

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