

Silencing the Past

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Power and
the Production
of History



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overlap and the distance between the two sides of historicity may not be susceptible to a general formula. The ways in which what happened and that which is said to have happened are and are not the same may itself be historical.

Words are not concepts and concepts are not words: between the two are the layers of theory accumulated throughout the ages. But theories are built on words and with words. Thus it is not surprising that the ambiguity offered by the vernacular use of the word history has caught the attention of many thinkers since at least antiquity. What is surprising is the reluctance with which theories of history have dealt with this fundamental ambiguity. Indeed, as history became a distinguishable profession, theorists have followed two incompatible tendencies. Some, influenced by positivism, have emphasized the distinction between the historical world and what we say or write about it. Others, who adopt a “constructivist” viewpoint, have stressed the overlap between the historical process and narratives about that process. Most have treated the combination itself, the core of the ambiguity, as if it were a mere accident of vernacular parlance to be corrected by theory. What I hope to do is to show how much room there is to look at the production of history outside of the dichotomies that these positions suggest and reproduce.

One-sided Historicity

Summaries of intellectual trends and subdisciplines always short-change the various authors they somewhat compulsively regroup. I do not even attempt such a regrouping here. I hope that the following sketch is sufficient to show the limitations that I question.¹

Positivism has a bad name today, but at least some of that scorn is well deserved. As history solidified as a profession in the nine-

teenth century, scholars significantly influenced by positivist views tried to theorize the distinction between historical process and historical knowledge. Indeed, the professionalization of the discipline is partly premised on that distinction: the more distant the sociohistorical process is from its knowledge, the easier the claim to a “scientific” professionalism. Thus, historians and, more particularly, philosophers of history were proud to discover or reiterate instances where the distinction was supposedly indisputable because it was marked not only by semantic context, but by morphology or by the lexicon itself. The Latin distinction between *res gesta* and (*historia*) *rerum gestarum*, or the German distinction between *Geschichte* and *Geschichtschreibung*, helped to inscribe a fundamental difference, sometimes ontological, sometimes epistemological, between what happened and what was said to have happened. These philosophical boundaries, in turn, reinforced the chronological boundary between past and present inherited from antiquity.

The positivist position dominated Western scholarship enough to influence the vision of history among historians and philosophers who did not necessarily see themselves as positivists. Tenets of that vision still inform the public’s sense of history in most of Europe and North America: the role of the historian is to reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate the truth. Within that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative as such. At best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won.

The proposition that history is another form of fiction is almost as old as history itself, and the arguments used to defend it have varied greatly. As Tzvetan Todorov suggests, there is nothing new even in the claim that everything is an interpretation, except the euphoria that now surrounds the claim.² What I call the constructivist view of history is a particular version of these two

propositions that has gained visibility in academe since the 1970s. It builds upon recent advances in critical theory, in the theory of the narrative and analytic philosophy. In its dominant version, it contends that the historical narrative bypasses the issue of truth by virtue of its form. Narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. Thus they necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct. Within that viewpoint, history becomes one among many types of narratives with no particular distinction except for its pretense of truth.³ Whereas the positivist view hides the tropes of power behind a naive epistemology, the constructivist one denies the autonomy of the sociohistorical process. Taken to its logical end point, constructivism views the historical narrative as one fiction among others.

But what makes some narratives rather than others powerful enough to pass as accepted history if not historicity itself? If history is merely the story told by those who won, how did they win in the first place? And why don't all winners tell the same story?

Between Truth and Fiction

Each historical narrative renews a claim to truth.⁴ If I write a story describing how U.S. troops entering a German prison at the end of World War II massacred five hundred Gypsies; if I claim this story is based on documents recently found in Soviet archives and corroborated by German sources, and if I fabricate such sources and publish my story as such, I have not written fiction, I have produced a fake. I have violated the rules that govern claims to historical truth.⁵ That such rules are not the same in all times and all places has led many scholars to suggest that some societies (non-Western, of course) do not differentiate between fiction and history. That assertion reminds us of past debates among some Western observers about the languages of the

peoples they colonized. Because these observers did not find grammar books or dictionaries among the so-called savages, because they could not understand or apply the grammatical rules that governed these languages, they promptly concluded that such rules did not exist.

As befits comparisons between the West and the many subaltern others it created for itself, the field was uneven from the start; the objects contrasted were eminently incomparable. The comparison unfairly juxtaposed a discourse about language and linguistic practice: the metalanguage of grammarians proved the existence of grammar in European languages; spontaneous speech proved its absence elsewhere. Some Europeans and their colonized students saw in this alleged absence of rules the infantile freedom that they came to associate with savagery, while others saw in it one more proof of the inferiority of non-whites. We now know that both sides were wrong; grammar functions in all languages. Could the same be said about history, or is history so infinitely malleable in some societies that it loses its differential claim to truth?

The classification of all non-Westerners as fundamentally non-historical is tied also to the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity. Yet Ibn Khaldún fruitfully applied a cyclical view of time to the study of history. Further, the exclusive adherence to linear time by Western historians themselves, and the ensuing rejection of the people left "without history" both date from the nineteenth century.⁶ Did the West have a history before 1800?

The pernicious belief that epistemic validity matters only to Western-educated populations, either because others lack the proper sense of time or the proper sense of evidence, is belied by the use of *evidentials* in a number of non-European languages.⁷ An English approximation would be a rule forcing historians to

study. To be sure, such an impact does not lend itself easily to general formulas, a predicament that rebukes most theorists. I have noted that while most theorists acknowledge at the outset that history involves both the social process and narratives about that process, theories of history actually privilege one side as if the other did not matter.

This one-sidedness is possible because theories of history rarely examine in detail the concrete production of specific narratives. Narratives are occasionally evoked as illustrations or, at best, deciphered as texts, but the process of their production rarely constitutes the object of study.²⁶ Similarly, most scholars would readily admit that historical production occurs in many sites. But the relative weight of these sites varies with context and these variations impose on the theorist the burden of the concrete. Thus, an examination of French palaces as sites of historical production can provide illustrative lessons for an understanding of Hollywood's role in U.S. historical consciousness, but no abstract theory can set, *a priori*, the rules that govern the relative impact of French castles and of U.S. movies on the academic history produced in these two countries.

The heavier the burden of the concrete, the more likely it is to be bypassed by theory. Thus even the best treatments of academic history proceed as if what happened in the other sites was largely inconsequential. Yet is it really inconsequential that the history of America is being written in the same world where few little boys want to be Indians?

Theorizing Ambiguity and Tracking Power

History is always produced in a specific historical context. Historical actors are also narrators, and vice versa.

The affirmation that narratives are always produced in history

leads me to propose two choices. First, I contend that a theory of the historical narrative must acknowledge both the distinction and the overlap between process and narrative. Thus, although this book is primarily about history as knowledge and narrative,²⁷ it fully embraces the ambiguity inherent in the two sides of historicity.

History, as social process, involves peoples in three distinct capacities: 1) as *agents*, or occupants of structural positions; 2) as *actors* in constant interface with a context; and 3) as *subjects*, that is, as voices aware of their vocality. Classical examples of what I call agents are the strata and sets to which people belong, such as class and status, or the roles associated with these. Workers, slaves, mothers are agents.²⁸ An analysis of slavery can explore the socio-cultural, political, economic, and ideological structures that define such positions as slaves and masters.

By actors, I mean the bundle of capacities that are specific in time and space in ways that both their existence and their understanding rest fundamentally on historical particulars. A comparison of African-American slavery in Brazil and the United States that goes beyond a statistical table must deal with the historical particulars that define the situations being compared. Historical narratives address particular situations and, in that sense, they must deal with human beings as actors.²⁹

But peoples are also the subjects of history the way workers are subjects of a strike: they define the very terms under which some situations can be described. Consider a strike as a historical event from a strictly narrative viewpoint, that is, without the interventions that we usually put under such labels as interpretation or explanation. There is no way we can describe a strike without making the subjective capacities of the workers a central part of the description.³⁰ Stating their absence from the workplace is certainly not enough. We need to state that they collectively reached

the decision to stay at home on what was supposed to be a regular working day. We need to add that they collectively acted upon that decision. But even such a description, which takes into account the workers' position as actors, is not a competent description of a strike. Indeed, there are a few other contexts in which such a description could account for something else. Workers could have decided: if the snowfall exceeds ten inches tonight, none of us will come to work tomorrow. If we accept scenarios of manipulation or errors of interpretation among the actors, the possibilities become limitless. Thus, beyond dealing with the workers as actors, a competent narrative of a strike needs to claim access to the workers as purposeful subjects aware of their own voices. It needs their voice(s) in the first person or, at least, it needs to paraphrase that first person. The narrative must give us a hint of both the reasons why the workers refuse to work and the objective they think they are pursuing—even if that objective is limited to the voicing of protest. To put it most simply, a strike is a strike only if the workers think that they are striking. Their subjectivity is an integral part of the event and of any satisfactory description of that event.

Workers work much more often than they strike, but the capacity to strike is never fully removed from the condition of workers. In other words, peoples are not always subjects constantly confronting history as some academics would wish, but the capacity upon which they act to become subjects is always part of their condition. This subjective capacity ensures confusion because it makes human beings doubly historical or, more properly, fully historical. It engages them simultaneously in the sociohistorical process and in narrative constructions about that process. The embracing of this ambiguity, which is inherent in what I call the two sides of historicity, is the first choice of this book.

The second choice of this book is a concrete focus on the process of historical production rather than an abstract concern for the

nature of history. The search for the nature of history has led us to deny ambiguity and either to demarcate precisely and at all times the dividing line between historical process and historical knowledge or to conflate at all times historical process and historical narrative. Thus between the mechanically “realist” and naively “constructivist” extremes, there is the more serious task of determining not what history is—a hopeless goal if phrased in essentialist terms—but how history works. For what history is changes with time and place or, better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and conditions of production of such narratives. Only a focus on that process can uncover the ways in which the two sides of historicity intertwine in a particular context. Only through that overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others.

Tracking power requires a richer view of historical production than most theorists acknowledge. We cannot exclude in advance any of the actors who participate in the production of history or any of the sites where that production may occur. Next to professional historians we discover artisans of different kinds, unpaid or unrecognized field laborers who augment, deflect, or reorganize the work of the professionals as politicians, students, fiction writers, filmmakers, and participating members of the public. In so doing, we gain a more complex view of academic history itself, since we do not consider professional historians the sole participants in its production.

This more comprehensive view expands the chronological boundaries of the production process. We can see that process as both starting earlier and going on later than most theorists admit. The process does not stop with the last sentence of a professional historian since the public is quite likely to contribute to history if only by adding its own readings to—and about—the scholarly

productions. More important, perhaps, since the overlap between history as social process and history as knowledge is fluid, participants in any event may enter into the production of a narrative about that event before the historian as such reaches the scene. In fact, the historical narrative within which an actual event fits could precede that event itself, at least in theory, but perhaps also in practice. Marshall Sahlins suggests that the Hawaiians read their encounter with Captain Cook as the chronicle of a death foretold. But such exercises are not limited to the peoples without historians. How much do narratives of the end of the Cold War fit into a prepackaged history of capitalism in knightly armor? William Lewis suggests that one of Ronald Reagan's political strengths was his capacity to inscribe his presidency into a prepackaged narrative about the United States. And an overall sketch of world historical production through time suggests that professional historians alone do not set the narrative framework into which their stories fit. Most often, someone else has already entered the scene and set the cycle of silences.³¹

Does this expanded view still allow pertinent generalizations about the production of the historical narrative? The answer to this question is an unqualified yes, if we agree that such generalizations enhance our understanding of specific practices but do not provide blueprints that practice will supposedly follow or illustrate.

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).

These moments are conceptual tools, second-level abstractions of processes that feed on each other. As such, they are not meant to provide a realistic description of the making of any individual

narrative. Rather, they help us understand why not all silences are equal and why they cannot be addressed—or redressed—in the same manner. To put it differently, any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.

The strategies deployed in this book reflect these variations. Each of the narratives treated in the next three chapters combines diverse types of silences. In each case, these silences crisscross or accumulate over time to produce a unique mixture. In each case I use a different approach to reveal the conventions and the tensions within that mixture.

In chapter 2, I sketch the image of a former slave turned colonel, now a forgotten figure of the Haitian Revolution. The evidence required to tell his story was available in the corpus I studied, in spite of the poverty of the sources. I only reposition that evidence to generate a new narrative. My alternative narrative, as it develops, reveals the silences that buried, until now, the story of the colonel.

The general silencing of the Haitian Revolution by Western historiography is the subject of chapter 3. That silencing also is due to uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives. But if I am correct that this revolution was unthinkable as it happened, the insignificance of the story is already inscribed in the sources, regardless of what else they reveal. There are no new facts here; not even neglected ones. Here, I have to make the silences speak for themselves. I do so by juxtaposing the climate of the times, the writings of historians on the revolution itself, and narratives of world history where the effectiveness of the original silence becomes fully visible.

The discovery of America, the theme of chapter 4, provided me with yet another combination, thus compelling yet a third strategy. Here was an abundance of both sources and narratives. Until

1992, there was even a sense—although forged and recent—of global agreement on the significance of Columbus’s first trip. The main tenets of historical writings were inflected and bolstered through public celebrations that seemed to reinforce this significance. Within this wide-open corpus, silences are produced not so much by an absence of facts or interpretations as through conflicting appropriations of Columbus’s persona. Here, I do not suggest a new reading of the same story, as I do in chapter 2, or even alternative interpretations, as in chapter 3. Rather, I show how the alleged agreement about Columbus actually masks a history of conflicts. The methodological exercise culminates in a narrative about the competing appropriations of the discovery. Silences appear in the interstices of the conflicts between previous interpreters.

The production of a historical narrative cannot be studied, therefore, through a mere chronology of its silences. The moments I distinguish here overlap in real time. As heuristic devices, they only crystallize aspects of historical production that best expose when and where power gets into the story.

But even this phrasing is misleading if it suggests that power exists outside the story and can therefore be blocked or excised. Power is constitutive of the story. Tracking power through various “moments” simply helps emphasize the fundamentally processual character of historical production, to insist that what history is matters less than how history works; that power itself works together with history; and that the historians’ claimed political preferences have little influence on most of the actual practices of power. A warning from Foucault is helpful: “I don’t believe that the question of ‘who exercises power?’ can be resolved unless that other question ‘*how does it happen?*’ is resolved at the same time.”³²

Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different

times and from different angles. It precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation. Thus, it remains pertinent even if we can imagine a totally scientific history, even if we relegate the historians’ preferences and stakes to a separate, post-descriptive phase. In history, power begins at the source.

The play of power in the production of alternative narratives begins with the joint creation of facts and sources for at least two reasons. First, facts are never meaningless: indeed, they become facts only because they matter in some sense, however minimal. Second, facts are not created equal: the production of traces is always also the creation of silences. Some occurrences are noted from the start; others are not. Some are engraved in individual or collective bodies; others are not. Some leave physical markers; others do not. What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative. This is one of many reasons why not any fiction can pass for history: the materiality of the socio-historical process (historicity 1) sets the stage for future historical narratives (historicity 2).

The materiality of this first moment is so obvious that some of us take it for granted. It does not imply that facts are meaningless objects waiting to be discovered under some timeless seal but rather, more modestly, that history begins with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossils, texts, buildings.³³

The bigger the material mass, the more easily it entraps us: mass graves and pyramids bring history closer while they make us feel small. A castle, a fort, a battlefield, a church, all these things bigger than we that we infuse with the reality of past lives, seem to speak of an immensity of which we know little except that we are part of it. Too solid to be unmarked, too conspicuous to be can-

did, they embody the ambiguities of history. They give us the power to touch it, but not that to hold it firmly in our hands—hence the mystery of their battered walls. We suspect that their concreteness hides secrets so deep that no revelation may fully dissipate their silences. We imagine the lives under the mortar, but how do we recognize the end of a bottomless silence?

The Three Faces of Sans Souci

Glory and
Silences in
the Haitian
Revolution



2

I walked in silence between the old walls, trying to guess at the stories they would never dare tell. I had been in the fort since daybreak. I had lost my companions on purpose: I wanted to tiptoe alone through the remains of history. Here and there, I touched a stone, a piece of iron hanging from the mortar, overlooked or left by unknown hands for unknown reasons. I almost tripped over a rail track, a deep cut on the concrete floor, which led to a piece of artillery lost in a darkened corner.

At the end of the alley, the sunlight caught me by surprise. I saw the grave at once, an indifferent piece of cement lying in the middle of the open courtyard. Crossing the Place d'Armes, I imagined the royal cavalry, black-skinned men and women one and all on their black horses, swearing to fight until the death rather than to let go of this fort and return to slavery.

I stepped across my dreams up to the pile of concrete. As I moved closer, the letters on the stone became more visible. I did not need to read the inscription to know the man who was lying under the concrete. This was his fort, his kingdom, the most daring of his buildings—The Citadel, his legacy of stone and arrogance. I bent over, letting my fingers run across the marble plaque, then closed my eyes to