

Postmodernist Historiography

Fall 2009
Professor Lavender

Texts:

- Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973): 3-30.
- Edward Said, "Introduction," to *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), and selections from "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories," from *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
- Michel Foucault, selections from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984)

- French philosopher
- Focused mostly on "structures of thought"
- Trained as a psychologist, not as a historian;
- But wrote historically-situated cultural studies.



Overall argument of his work

- Before Foucault
 - commonly could talk about people as if have an identity
 - that is fixed and "true" identity or character
 - people have an "inner essence" of who they "Really Are"
 - and that some people have different levels of power
 - which means that they are more (or less) able to achieve what they want
 - in their relationships with others,
 - and society as a whole.

Foucault Rejects "Real" Identity

- Foucault argues people do not have a 'real' identity within themselves
 - instead they have a way of talking about and presenting the self
 - a "discourse."
 - identity' is a shifting, temporary construction.
- And power:
 - people do not 'have' power implicitly
 - instead, power is a technique or action which individuals can engage in.
 - Power is not possessed; it is exercised.
- And where there is power, there is always also resistance.

"Power"

- POWER as socially constructed and contingent
- Gramsci focused on power as unidirectional
 - hegemony is imposed downwards in capitalism
 - but also argued that power could shift
 - hegemony could be originated in the "powerless" as a way for them to seize power
 - Examples?

“Power”

- From Gramsci, Foucault gets this argument about the fluidity of power
- and also a focus on CULTURE (especially language) as the site where power is constituted
- so: “DISCOURSE”

Foucault’s work

- Foucault’s major works
- dealt with here out of order
 - the two historical before
 - the theoretical one we have read some of for today

Madness and Civilization (1961)

- Examines ideas, practices, institutions, art and literature relating to madness in Western history.
- Starts in the Middle Ages noting the social and physical exclusion of lepers.
 - argues that with the gradual disappearance of leprosy,
 - madness came to occupy this excluded position.
 - “ship of fools” in 15th century is a literary version of one such exclusionary practice,
 - practice of sending mad people away in ships.
 - how is madness “like” leprosy?
 - contagious?
 - the fault of the mad?

Views of Madness

- 17th century Europe:
 - movement Foucault calls “Great Confinement”
 - “unreasonable” people locked away and institutionalized.
- 18th century:
 - madness came to be seen as the opposite of “Reason”
- 19th century:
 - madness as mental illness.

Where is power in this?

- Rise of scientific and “humanitarian” treatments of the insane
- Are in fact no less controlling than previous methods.
 - Samuel Tuke’s country retreat for the mad
 - punish the madmen until they learned to act “reasonably”.
 - Philippe Pinel’s treatment of the mad
 - an extended aversion therapy
 - freezing showers and
 - use of a straitjacket.
- Foucault argues “treatment” amounted to
 - repeated brutality
 - until the pattern of judgment and punishment was INTERNALIZED by the patient.

Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975)

- Opens with graphic description of brutal public execution in 1757
 - of Robert-François Damiens,
 - who attempted to kill Louis XV.
- Against this it juxtaposes
 - a colorless prison timetable from just over 80 years later.
- Foucault then asks:
 - how did such a change in French society’s punishment of convicts develop in such a short time?

"Technologies of Punishment"

- Focuses on two contrasting types of Foucault's "Technologies of Punishment":
- "Monarchical Punishment"
 - repression of the populace
 - through brutal public displays of executions and torture.
- "Disciplinary Punishment"
 - "modern" era practice (still with us)
 - gives "professionals" (psychologists, parole officers, etc.) power over the prisoner
 - esp. because prisoner's length of stay depends on the professionals' opinion.

Surveillance

- Foucault compares modern society with Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" design for prisons
 - in the Panopticon, a single guard can watch over many prisoners while the guard remains unseen.
 - dark dungeon of pre-modernity replaced with bright modern prisons
 - but Foucault cautions that "visibility is a trap"
 - Through this visibility
 - modern society exercises its controlling systems of power and knowledge
 - (terms which Foucault believed to be so fundamentally connected that he often combined them in a single hyphenated concept, "power-knowledge").
 - Increasing visibility leads to power located on an increasingly individualized level
 - institutions can track individuals throughout their lives.

The "carceral continuum"

- Foucault suggests that a "carceral continuum" runs through modern society
 - from the maximum security prison through probation, social workers, police, and teachers,
 - to our everyday working and domestic lives.
 - All are connected by the (witting or unwitting) supervision (surveillance, application of norms of acceptable behavior) of some humans by others.

The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969)

- Introduces the idea of "Discourse"
 - focuses on the "statement" or "utterance"
 - basic unit of discourse
 - that makes utterances meaningful.
- Discourse
 - creates a network of rules establishing what is meaningful,
 - and establishes the preconditions for utterances to have meaning.
- This, then, is the contingent meaning of the TRUTH
 - Truth is historically situated
 - The meaning of truth during various epochs changes
 - And this contingent "Truth" can only be sought on the basis of what was actually said and written during these periods of time.

Discourse over time

- Foucault examines discourse in several significant "moments":
- The Renaissance,
- The Age of Enlightenment, and
- The 20th Century.
- He argues that there are always "contesting forms of utterance"
 - but only certain ones win out
 - and thus become the normative discourses of the day

"Archaeology"

- Foucault defines his historical approach as "archaeology"
- The premise of the archaeological method
 - The process is to seek out the rules that govern discourse at any one time and place
 - Because systems of thought ("epistemes") and knowledge ("discursive formations") are governed by rules
 - beyond those of grammar and logic
 - that operate beneath the consciousness of individual subjects
 - and thus define a system of conceptual possibilities (which is the discourse)
- This discourse determines the boundaries of thought in a given domain and period.

Foucault and History

- Why do historians find Foucault useful?
- He stands opposed to old models of power (such as Marxism, feminism, etc.) which argued that power was held exclusively by dominant groups in society
 - for Marxists, by the bourgeoisie
 - for feminists, by the patriarchy
 - But exclusive holding of power depends on stable identities
 - no confusions as to whether a person was ruling class or workers, male or female

Foucault's Challenge

- Even the “powerless” hold SOME power (agency)
 - This is because power isn't a thing – it's a practice
 - Power can be used and deployed by particular people in specific situations
 - Which itself will produce other reactions and resistances

Edward Said (1935-2003)

- Palestinian (Jerusalem-born) scholar educated at Oxford and Harvard
- Who described his consciousness as “subaltern”



Major work: *Orientalism* (1978)

- What does the term “oriental” evoke?
 - Opium Smokers, Fundamentalists, Pornography, Honor, Inscrutable, Mysterious, Cruelty, Exotic, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism etc.
 - who has been there?
 - How is it then that we have such a multitude of conceptions and ideas concerning the Orient?
 - Answer: Orientalism.
 - Said: we are taught about the East
 - › in academic arenas,
 - › political forums,
 - › stable social institutions,
 - › through the media,
 - › our parents etc.

“Orientalism”

- “Orientalism” = the discourse about the “Orient.”
 - a discursive “reality” in which the actual “Orient” is absent
- The Orient becomes a political, social, and academic construction.
- This discourse is homogenizing,
 - it creates impressions, and representations of a collective whole,
 - in which any dimension of individuality is sacrificed.
- It creates dialogue utilizing binaries such as Us/Them

Orientalism and The Other

- Orientalism is the West's way of coming to terms with the experience of “the Other.”
 - that which is “not us” (remember Saussure and the “not Mao” of Zhang Hongtu?)
 - According to Lacan, humans construct a notion of self only in juxtaposition and recognition of “Otherness.”
- Said adopts Lacan's logic:
 - the West develops a sense of identity
 - only through its divergence and juxtaposition to the East.

The Not-Sign



Zhang Hongtu, "Stone Mao" from MATERIAL MAO SERIES, 1992

West defined by the Orient

- The West casts vices which it cannot acknowledge onto the Other.
 - drunkenness, greed, trickery, sloth, sensuality, cruelty, laziness, decadence, etc.
- In defining the Other, the West is actually creating boundaries which help it define itself.
 - Westerners are "cerebral" only because Orientals are "sensual," "corporal," or "bodily."
- Orientalism reveals more about the West and its own fantasies than it does about the actual people, culture, and history of the East.
 - The East becomes a repository for the repressed qualities which Westerners deny.

Orientalism as MORE than Discourse

- Orientalism is not only a discourse in the West
- but also has material applications in the actual East
 - in the form of "power-knowledge formations" (a Foucauldian term)
 - Ex: British and American colonial education chain across the East.
 - and Said himself was a pupil in British and American colonial schools.
 - Ex: Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798.
 - Napoleon brought with him not only soldiers, but also scholars.
 - knowledge is in fact not innocent, but rather a reflection of power.
 - this "power-knowledge formation" is in fact a creation of a Gramscian hegemony centered around race and nation, rather than class;
 - and ideology, hegemony, and consent are what give Orientalism its durability.

Locating Orientalism

- Orientalism exists in three arenas of discourse, all interdependent:
- In Academia.
 - According to Said, anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient is an Orientalist.
- In "Ontological and Epistemological distinctions"
 - differentiating between the "Orient" and "Occident".
 - which traps the critic in Orientalist mindsets
 - Said claims European and American ideologies make "pure" and neutral Western analysis of the East impossible.
- In corporate institutions and environments
 - basically, colonialism – specifically British and French imperialism in the East.
 - not only has the East been militarily and economically conquered;
 - but Britain and France also imposed ideological and repressive power:
 - what Said terms:
 - power cultural,
 - power moral, and
 - power intellectual.

Clifford Geertz (1926-2006)

- U.S. anthropologist
- Focused on the role that symbols play in conveying culture
- Worked primarily on Africa and Middle East (Morocco), but also on Bali and South Pacific.



The Interpretation of Cultures (1973)

- First chapter in *The Interpretation of Cultures*: "Thick Description":
 - discusses the role of the ethnographer.
 - to observe, record, and analyze a culture.
 - and to interpret signs to gain their meaning within the culture itself.
- based on the "thick description" of a sign
 - in order to see all the possible meanings.

Ex: "wink of an eye"

- Is he merely "rapidly contracting his right eyelid" or
- is he "practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking conspiracy is in motion"?
- the many things that a person rapidly opening and closing an eye can signify:
 - an involuntary twitch,
 - a conspiratorial wink, or
 - even a parody of such a conspiratorial wink.
- "thin description" = an eye opened and closed
- "thick description" = separating twitches from winks and one sort of wink from another.

Examines the concept of culture

- From Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror of Man*: potential meanings of "culture":
 - 1. "the total way of life of a people"
 - 2. "the social legacy the individual acquires from his group"
 - 3. "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing"
 - 4. "an abstraction from behavior"
 - 5. "a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave"
 - 6. "a storehouse of pooled learning"
 - 7. "a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems"
 - 8. "learned behavior"
 - 9. "a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior"
 - 10. "a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men"
 - 11. "a precipitate of history"
 - 12. a behavioral map, sieve, or matrix

Signs in Culture

- Geertz argues for a "semiotic" concept of culture:
- "The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." (5)

How to interpret a culture's web of symbols?

- 1. isolating its elements
- 2. specifying the internal relationships among those elements
- 3. characterize the whole system in some general way
 - according to the core symbols around which it is organized,
 - the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression,
 - or the ideological principles upon which it is based.

"Symbolic Action"

- Human behavior is "symbolic action" which maps out the underlying meaning of the action
- "Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification — what Ryle called established codes — and determining their social ground or import... Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript — foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound [i.e., in the written code of a language] but in transient examples of shaped behavior" (p. 10)

Contingency

- In reading that culture
 - the application of a single, hegemonic "normality" to culture acts and beliefs
 - by definition cuts us off from the contingent meaning constructed in cultures themselves.

What does this mean for historians?

- The necessity of “thick description” in historical analysis
 - to understand meaning as constructed within a web of culture
 - from which we are removed
 - if not by cultural identity itself then at the very least by time
- The past is another culture
 - and historians are ethnographers of the past.

NEXT – Reacting to “New Historiography”

- Christopher Kent, “Historiography and Postmodernism,” *Canadian Journal of History*, 34/3 (December 1999): 385-415.
- B. Keith Windshuttle, selection from *The Killing of History* (London: Macleay, 1994).
- C. John Vincent, selection from *An Intelligent Person's Guide to History* (London: Duckworth, 1995).
- D. Keith Jenkins, selection from *What is History?* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).
- E. Richard J. Evans, selection from *In Defence of History* (1997).
- F. Eric Hobsbawm, selection from *On History* (London: Abacus, 1998).