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Fence Sitting for a Better View:
Finding a Middle Ground
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Turn in the Epistemology of History

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Over the past several decades the social sciences have experienced an expansion of historical research. Much of this historical work is linked to the new social history that has significant materialist roots in cultural Marxism and the Annales school. In the past several years this epistemology has been challenged by members of the linguistic turn who draw on poststructuralism and deconstructionism. They seek to debunk what they see as the metanarratives of this materialist ontology, and produced an alternative historiography center on the analysis of discourse. The author argues that the linguistic turn raises important issues, but many of its practitioners hypostatize discourse and create an alternative essentialism. To explicate these problems the study uses as an exemplar the recent work of historian Patrick Joyce. The author alternatively proposes a discourse analysis drawing on Bakhtinian literary theory, which focuses on the social construction of meaning through language. This alternative recognizes the material and social foundations of meaning construction and retains a conception of agency while bringing discourse into historical explanation.

Over the past several decades there has been a pronounced historic turn in the social sciences, particularly among analysts of macrosocial processes (Abrams, 1982; J. R. Hall, 1990, 1992; McDonald, in press; Skocpol, 1984; Smith, 1991; Tilly, 1981, 1984). This tendency has been so pronounced that Philip Abrams was led to assert that “sociology which takes itself seriously must be historical sociology” (1982, p. 17). As Dennis Smith noted, the first

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wave of such comparative historical work in the 1950s was predicated on American structural-functionalism and British liberalism (Smith, 1991, pp. 4, 172-173). Much of this work in many respects was produced in a dialogue with Durkheim, Tocqueville, and Weber and their developmental perspectives on a liberal, capitalist, and rational modernity (Skocpol, 1984, p. 5; Smith, 1991, p. 2).¹

Much of what Smith termed the second and third waves of historical sociology has been produced through cross-fertilization with what became known as the “new social history,” an encompassing term that included various strands of historiography. Though predicated on a diverse set of approaches, much of the new social history was heavily influenced by Marxist historiography (in particular, British cultural Marxism) and the French Annales school. Turning away from traditional political histories and a focus on critical events, the new social history focused on the creation and transformation of enduring structures, from the level of lived experience in everyday life to Braudelian concerns of the global transformation of socioeconomic systems.² Despite distinctive and sometimes contentious underlying foundations, this new social history largely shared materialist and realist epistemologies.³

Recently, however, with the rise of a new cultural history (see Chartier, 1988; Hunt, 1989) and the dissemination of postmodern literary theory among historical researchers, the assumed link between this historiographic perspective and social science research has become attenuated. As exemplified in Joan W. Scott’s (1988) highly influential piece on gender as an analytic concept, this linguistic turn is predicated on the poststructuralism and deconstructionism of Foucault and Derrida. As I discuss below, many within this linguistic turn seek to supplant the materialist and realist foundations of the new social history.

Today, those involved in historical research thus face an increasingly bewildering array of epistemologies on which to base their work. One of the most acute, vexing, and problematic divisions is between the linguistic turn and historical materialism. As J. R. Hall described this divide, the historical analyst is presented with two mutually contending epistemologies focusing either on “the knowing subject or the structures and symbols by which things are known” (1990, p. 334). The arguments between these two epistemological positions create an increasingly imposing barrier of disunity, a fence that stifles rather than facilitates the creation of a middle ground. In this article I stake out a position atop this fence because I think that it provides a better vantage point for seeing a middle ground. Terry Eagleton, whose critical discussions on ideology explore the rift between materialism and poststructuralism, suggested that fence sitting invites nothing but pot shots from both sides (1987, p. 47). However, I hope that providing some vision of a common terrain might dampen the fighting.
Both sides in this dispute proffer reasoned critiques of the other's inadequacies. Those in the linguistic turn provide a compelling commentary on a good deal of the historical research base in a materialist mode when they argue that it has neglected the formative role of discourse in its accounts of power, agency, and change. Specifically, such critiques raise vital issues concerning the meanings produced through discourse and its critical role in mediating and bounding social action. A premise from the linguistic turn that I will pursue then is that social action inescapably transpires within the ideological terrain of discourse.

However, following the March Hare and the Hatter—two arguably pioneering poststructuralists—I do not think these poststructuralist practitioners necessarily say what they mean, or exactly mean what they say, and (as Carroll remarked) being caught in such equivocation leads to nothing but confusion. When many within the linguistic turn argue that discourse creates meaning, provides identities, and contains the basis of diachrony, I think they overlook the ways in which this position both hypostatizes discourse and undermines the purpose of our work, that is, to create intelligible analytic narratives of the past. As I also argue in a later section, attempts to apply poststructuralism in the creation of historical narratives sometimes seem to inadvertently substitute one base-superstructure model for another. Rather than actually finding the logic of events on the play of signifiers, some analysts construct narratives on the institutional dynamics that support the language that is putatively the focus of their historical narratives.

To redress these problems, I propose we look at an alternative analytic framework based on a reading of the Bakhtin Circle of literary theorists. These Russian writers, led by Mikhail Bakhtin, produced wide-ranging writings on the nature of language and the ways in which it fundamentally mediates social life. I argue that their perspective of dialogism allows us to retain a concept of discourse as social action, while accepting that the systems of meanings produced through it mediates all relations and understandings of the material world. I start with a brief review and critique of some of the fundamental premises of the linguistic turn, and then move on to the dialogic alternative.

NEW PREMISES

The linguistic turn is an epistemological shift brought on by a confluence of shared concerns within postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstructionism. Although, as Jane Caplan (1989) rightly noted, these theories take divergent paths to prescriptive methodologies, all share strands of a common critique, particularly of the historical materialism that has dominated much of social history in recent decades. One point of agreement is the rejection of what are seen as the underlying metanarratives that have served
as the foundations of historical analysis (J. R. Hall, 1990, p. 339; Roseneau, 1994, p. 93; see also Dean, 1994; Somers, 1992, 1994; Somers & Gibson, 1994). This critique of grand narratives is aptly summarized by Steven Seidman (1991) in his advocacy for postmodern sociological theory:

The great modernist stories of progress or decadence almost always operate with one-dimensional, virtually mythic notions of domination and liberation. Ignoring actual complex conflicts and power dynamics with their ambiguous calculus of gains and losses, benefits and costs, pleasure and pain, these grand narratives frame history and social conflicts in grossly simplifying millennial or apocalyptic images. (p. 140)

The rejection of grand narratives more particularly means the abandonment of what poststructuralists perceive as the reductionist logic of historical materialism. Advocates of the linguistic turn see Marxist history as privileging a falsely unified understanding of the economic as the teleological motor force of history, to the exclusion of a diverse array of other political and social factors (Joyce, 1995, p. 75). As Ernesto Laclau explained:

Classical Marxism conceived the economy as a homogeneous milieu. It was a "level" of society, but a level governed by a single logic that started from the category of commodity to produce out of itself all the other categories. In the end, the whole historical process was considered to be governed by the unique contradiction between forces and relations of production. I am trying to suggest that no single logic exists. The material reproduction of society results from complex practices which are articulated in diverse ways. Thus the unity of the economic as such, as far as it is conceived as a logical postulate, should be dissolved. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1982, p. 93; see also Laclau & Mouffe, 1985)

Logically following from these renunciations are critiques of the working class as the subject of history and of the ontological status of people as subjects of history in general. The concentrated attention in recent historiography on the working class is taken as a valorization of a mythic collective actor that excludes and silences the many other voices and actions of oppressed peoples. Moreover, postmodernists raise considerable skepticism about the premise that people make history as coherent subjects with unified interests. Such analysis, they argue, rests on an errantly holistic view of the social or society in which social structures determine interest, identity, and action in coherent and enduring ways (Scott, 1991; Smart, 1992, p. 195). Instead, as Joan Scott maintained, "‘interest’ does not inhere in actor or their structural positions but is discursively produced" (1988, p. 5).

Scott’s assertion represents the underlying shift to a discursive reading of the historical process. In what William Sewell Jr. (1993) characterized as a postmaterialist history, members of the linguistic turn advocate a view of historical analysis as foremost a type of textual practice in which meanings are critically interrogated to understand the ways in which discourse structures identities, power, subject positions, and the diachrony of history (Dean, 1994, pp. 32-35; Spiegel, 1990, pp. 60-62). Foremost among the foundations of this perspective is that discourse—not material life, experience, or social
structure—determines subjectivity. As Patrick Joyce proclaimed, "[m]eanings make subjects, not subjects meanings" (1994, p. 13).4

Many within the linguistic turn carefully assert that they are neither trying to deny the notions of experience or collective consciousness that have been so central to Marxist historiography nor evacuate the allied concept of agency from historical accounts.5 Rather, they claim that these can only be comprehended as they are realized within language. Thus the task of historical analysis becomes the close reading of this discursive process (Reid, 1993, p. 42). Joan Scott's lucid articulation of this position is worth quoting at length.

Treating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event is not to introduce a new form of linguistic determinism, nor to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between "experience" and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy. And subjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being "subject to definite conditions of existence, conditions of endowment of agents and conditions of exercise." These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited. Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside of established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience can both confirm what is already known (we see what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted (when different meanings are in conflict we readjust our vision to take account of the conflict or to resolve it—that is what is meant by "learning from experience," though not everyone learns the same lesson or learns it at the same time or the same way). Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two. (1991, pp. 792-793; see also Joyce, 1995; Vernon, 1994, p. 84)

From this alternative epistemology and ontology the linguistic turn thus tries to decenter, debunk, and pluralize the old grand narratives. Their presumed materialist teleologies are effaced from our storytelling. Historical analysis becomes the contextual investigation of the ways in which contingent and frequently conflictual configurations of meaning, structured in discourse, created shifting paths of power and multiple identities that bounded social action. Writing history means dissecting this play of differences within language that make historical action possible and intelligible rather than the reconstitution of a past empirical reality, which is forever beyond the grasp of the historian. This project calls for a new form of historical narrative, one in which we consciously question our own interpretive systems by interrogating those of the past. Through it we deconstruct the narratives that organize past experience to understand the ways in which discourse provided subjects with a social imaginary, structured the many social differences by which identities were organized, and produced the narrative frameworks by which they made judgments about their lives. As importantly, these analyses
root out the ellipses within discourse that silenced and marginalized subjects. This new narrative project thus constitutes a new type of political history, one in which power is both dispersed and actualized through the dissemination of discourse. As Donald Reid argued, "Power is revealed in the ways in which linguistic structures define social relations as they describe, incorporate and give meaning to social reality." (1993, p. 43; Scott, 1988, p. 5).

PROBLEMSPOSED

The linguistic turn has prompted a flurry of responses, ranging from the enthusiastic to the forthrightly hostile. Rather than review this still growing corpus, I will concentrate on three linked issues that raise particularly thorny problems for the application of poststructuralist and deconstructionist epistemologies to historical analysis. These center on the polyphony and mutability of meaning, the causal priority attributed to discourse, and the antistructural strictures of the linguistic turn. To illustrate these paradoxes, I will turn an example from 19th-century English historiography, which consciously seeks to supplant Marxist analyses of the period with narratives focused on political language. Following this discussion of these problems, I will argue that dialogism provides some tools amenable to their resolution, while retaining the linguistic turn's legitimate concerns surrounding the role of language in historical action and analysis.

All three of these problems arise from the entanglement of poststructuralist and deconstructionist epistemology with the imperatives of historical narrative. As both sympathizers and critics often have suggested, the epistemological project of these perspectives (especially the latter) is antithetical to historical narrative as it is generally conceived and practiced (Cadieux, 1996, p. 338; Caplan, 1989, p. 272; Childers, 1989, pp. 383-384; Hobson, 1987, p. 109; LaCapra, 1995, p. 812; Wordsworth, 1987, p. 120; Zammito, 1993, pp. 802-804). But as even an enthusiast such as Lynn Hunt observed, all historical practice eventually relies on some narrative form: "History is a process of telling stories about the consequences of actions in the world. . . . Histories are not unproblematic truths, but it is unavoidable because actions do have consequences in the world (they have a before and after) and therefore have an inherent narrative structure" (1991, p. 103).

The problems posed by the need to "practice" history manifest themselves in three linked paradoxes in many revisionist texts. First, whereas the linguistic turn seeks to supplant what it sees as a flawed materialist model of structural determination, it sometimes does so by inadvertently retaining elements of a Saussurean and structuralist distinction between langue (formal systematized language) and parole (speech, or language in use). Its practitioners often treat their object of analysis—discourse, meanings, sign systems—as text that have their own systemic structure that remains substan-
tively unquestioned in the analysis. Seemingly patterning the analysis after some version of Foucault's episteme or archaeological methodology, this structure hangs above social action in the narrative. It determines the diachrony of the stories told, privileging the play of signs within this langue at the expense of conceptions of human agency and social causes.8

Second, and following from this, the paradoxical result is that these revisionist narratives can depict discourse as a surprisingly stable and durable system of meaning that structures identity, power, and hierarchy. The post-structuralist tenet of the essential mutability of discourse gives way to a set of relatively durable meanings that provide the logos of the narrative. Thus in Scott's (1988) analyses of the gendering of workers in postrevolutionary France and Kazin's (1988) reevaluation of the 19th-century U.S. labor movement, the discourses of political economy and populism, respectively, whose instabilities and inner contradictions go largely unexplored, remain remarkably resilient and stable structural foundations for their stories.

Finally, because the episteme or discursive formation provides the stable pivot on which the story turns, the diachrony of the narrative often is actually furtively smuggled in through institutional action and change. In many of these stories we find people or institutions exhibiting conscious agency in the construction of meanings and the structuring of discourse. They behave in remarkably "modernist" ways, as people of the older humanist vision operating with fixed identities, acting on interests determined by some social structural position outside of discourse. In a peculiar manner, partly because a number of these studies often focus on political language, hints of a new base-superstructure model arise to substitute for the old historical materialist discard. The result can be a narrative in which institutional conflicts over power are reflected in rather than determined by discourse, with the latter becoming the superstructural manifestations of these conflicts. Thus, for example, Scott's insightful analysis of the Statistique de l'industrie of 1847-1848 is of the chamber of commerce, aided by political economist Horace Say and backed by the government, quite deliberately proffering a particular discourse of labor against others proposed by revolutionary workers' leagues.9

A PROBLEMATIC CASE

I think these tendencies are well exemplified in the recent works of Patrick Joyce. I focus on Joyce partly because I know the English case best, but partly as well because his work is a programmatic effort to supplant Marxist historiography of the 19th-century working class with a self-identified postmodernist alternative. Through two recent monographs, Visions of the People (1991) and Democratic Subjects (1994), as well as several essays (1992, 1993, 1995), Joyce provided a detailed analysis of the political culture he believed
was the seedbed of a working-class populism throughout most of the 19th century.

*Visions of the People* is the first monograph from the linguistic turn to confront the accumulation of British cultural Marxist historiography on the making of the English working class. Quickly dissociating himself from this corpus, Joyce argued that class is (and was) a variable social construct rather than an objective structural reality. Moreover, the category of experience so consequential to the work of the British cultural Marxists “is in fact not prior to and constitutive of language, but is actively constituted by language” (1991, p. 9). Sheding what he considered the constricting confines of class analysis, Joyce embarked on an exploration of the way in which the manifold identities and thus collective consciousness of working people were discursively shaped. Breaking with materialist analyses, he informed his readers that interests are not somehow given in the economic condition of workers, but are constructed through the agency of identities. Indeed, such identities are as real as any “interests” ever were. The formation of social identities is not therefore something peripheral to a broader social and cultural history but is quite central to it. And this formation was something accomplished through language. (Joyce, 1991, p. 16)

Claiming that class was only a minor player in this troupe of identities, Joyce focused his analysis on the political language that he claimed was formative in shaping working people’s social identities. Joyce argued that the languages through which workers constructed their consciousness were mostly varieties of political populism. These populist discourses transcended economic categorization: “the discourse of ‘the people’ did not express some higher ‘class’ identity or unity. It mattered in its own right” (1991, p. 333, see also pp. 8, 16-17). They incorporated diverse class groups through a culture of national identity. Through them, working people made claims and asserted their identity as a “righteous and dispossessed ‘people,’ rather than a working class” (p. 329). According to Joyce, even though this culture of nation and people formed the foundations of collective identities that stretched almost the entire breadth of the century “populism cannot be viewed as static, conservative, or traditional (as opposed to the ‘modernity’ of class): on the contrary, it is the capacity of populism to mutate that is striking” (p. 218).

Joyce identified class language (and thus the identity and consciousness enunciated through it) as that which speaks transparently to a sense of shared socioeconomic condition (pp. 10-12). He maintained, “[T]he problem is to know what class identity looks like, where it starts and stops” (p. 11). In his analysis, markers of class discourse surprisingly reflect an old and narrow version of historical materialism. Thus when he roots about in the residue of discourse he finds that workers sometimes exhibited a consciousness of class, but rarely a class consciousness. When portraying labor issues, populist languages focused on reciprocal rights and duties of trade members, the
respectability of independent production and the security of the hearth, and the moral limits of the market (pp. 57, 90-92, 99, 108-109). Joyce argued that class discourse centers on exploitation in production, and he maintained that the critical discourse drawn on by workers did not contain a critique of the social relations of production per se. No castigation of the mode of production, no class language (pp. 94, 100). Thus the master narrative from within which working people produced their collective identities was one of a nationalist (and sometimes radical) populism in which England, providence, and the people were firmly intertwined (p. 332).

In Democratic Subjects, Joyce further pursued the analysis of narrative to explicate the ways in which working people, and indeed those within the nation in general, fashioned a democratic (or what he terms "demotic") culture. Continuing his construction of a postmodern alternative to historical materialism, he argued that the history of the "social" is a history of the construction of imagined relations produced in language: "language describes a human condition itself always marked by the making of meaning, a making always occurring in symbolic, more loosely 'metaphoric,' terms" (1994, p. 13). Acknowledging that his previous argument concerning populism was too constrictive and reductionist, he pursued the subject of narratives and the way in which they pattern sometimes disparate and fractured experiences into intelligible wholes (pp. 11, 82). Of particular concern to him is the constitutional narrative that was the formative vessel of political identities. Open and flexible in form, and providing an encompassing national and democratic story line for social and political life,

it conferred legitimacy on the political subject. But it did so in a particular way, one which told against class identities at least in the political sphere. To share in the constitution was to share in the nation. (p. 195)

This narrative was scripted in melodramatic fashion, providing a broad culture and moral vocabulary that transgressed class boundaries. By placing themselves within this melodrama working people, the broad swath of the middle class and even elites jointly participated in a demotic culture. Through it they were constituted as social and political persons with rights, duties, a sense of community, and a vision of the future (pp. 177-180). As he noted within this narrative, "[t]he people and the leader imagined one another" (p. 215). Working people found a voice that overcame their powerlessness, and the middle and upper classes were provided with a "culture of improvement" that morally configured their doctrines of liberal politics and political economy. This was equally a narrative that valorized a masculinity of control of the self, property, and family (pp. 167-169, 172-173, 190, 196).

The result was a political culture that had "no single centre of power within the imaginary, no centre of gravity from which emanated either the domination of the mass or the leadership, let alone the domination of class rule" (p. 137). Because of the fluidity and decenteredness of language, meanings were determined by historical conjuncture (p. 131). Yet despite the mobility
of meaning, consensual elements developed within this narrative that endured throughout the Victorian era and well beyond (p. 75).

For all of his discussion of the fluency of meaning and the instability of language, Joyce's analyses of populism and constitutionalist narratives exhibit the problems I have noted above. His accounts of popular discourses often rely on an essentialist reading of a system of political language that seems both well structured and highly stable. Rather than following his self-expressed dictums on determining meaning in context and through the interplay of signifiers, he often judged meaning by a surface reading of its presumed affinity with institutional action. Because of the narrative's political institutional locus, he a priori discerned populist and political meanings given an assumed political linguistic system.

Joyce's latent base-superstructure model and structuralism can be seen in his analysis of the absence of class discourse. He proclaimed the muted relevance of class in *Visions* when in characterizing populism he observed, "What is first of all striking is how little class terms or a class analysis seem to have been evident" (1991, p. 30). By class, however, Joyce meant a reductionist vision of the social relations of production, evoking a base-superstructure model that the linguistic turn takes pains to repudiate (1991, pp. 10-11). Rather than deciding on the meaning of language in situ through its usage and in relation to other language, vocabulary is labeled by its institutional sphere of use, and he found such terms critically deployed in the sphere of institutional political action.

Class identities were, therefore, a product of arguments about meanings, arguments which were primarily political in character. Class does not seem to have been the collective cultural experience of the new economic classes produced by the Industrial Revolution. (Joyce, 1994, p. 161)

Thus Joyce largely found traces of class language and consciousness among the labor struggles early and late in the century. However, absent an explicit and encompassing critique of the mode of production, any other such labeling of working people's discourse is errant. In his alternative account, workers throughout most of the century inventively employed a "political discourse about oppression" to critique their economic exploitation (1991, pp. 58, 64, 94-95).

Similarly, Joyce's structuralist and reductionist tendencies emerged in *Democratic Subjects*. There, he argued that any characterization of the discourse of capitalists as class based reduces a more complex discourse of progress. Manchester magnates did not talk in terms of personal or class gain, but of the ascension of "humanity" and "mankind." What Joyce (1994) read is a far more encompassing cultural narrative.

Economic concerns, of course, shaped the way in which capitalism saw the social order, but neither these, nor political concerns, give an adequate account of how capitalists saw things. This account is to be sought, in the much broader concerns evident in what they felt the ends of human life to be, and how they thought
social arrangements might bring about these ends. They gave the terms “culture” and “civilization” to these purposes. . . . We may say that free trade was far more than an economic and political doctrine. It was one of the fantasies of progress, of exemplification, and justification, of the narrative of improvement. (pp. 163, 169)

Rather than deconstructing the meaning of these terms given the particular social contexts of their use, Joyce seemed to opt for a more surface reading in which the integrity of the text as a whole provides the key to its meanings.

Finally, despite Joyce’s pronouncement that it is meaning that creates subjects, much of his story seemed to focus on how resourceful and powerful actors concertedly shaped the discourse that becomes the shared stock of populist culture. In his narratives of the rise of liberalism, it is generally elites who provided the language through which working people constituted their political identities (1991, pp. 44, 49, 53; 1994, pp. 88, 98-104, 110-111, 125). Despite his insistence that the democratic imaginary was jointly constructed by the leaders and the lead, his analyses of liberalism and constitutional narratives frequently lapse into a monologic and univocal reading of political language. The sharing of meanings between elites and working people is often assumed rather than demonstrated.12

In sum, rather than the instability of discourse serving as the foundation for subversion, the mutability and multiplicity of collective identities and the dynamo of change (poststructuralist tenets), political language looms as algorithmic, creating fixity, providing enduring social identities, and serving as the foundation for a complex of stable and encompassing social practices and structures. Political narratives often seem akin to viruses, moving from place to place, mutating to fit particular environments, but never changing their fundamental nature or their effects. Moreover, this discourse often seems to be consciously propagated by resourceful and elite actors who, though not wholly aware of their cultural dissemination nor simply manipulative in their actions, nevertheless have agendas and interests based in their positions within social structures and institutions.

A PROVISIONAL ALTERNATIVE13

Despite the problems posed by the application of poststructuralist and deconstructionist theory to the writing of historical narrative, the challenges raised and issues posed by the linguistic turn have considerable merit. To move beyond these dilemmas, but retain its useful insights, I suggest that we can provisionally find an amenable alternative in the Bakhtin Circle’s theory of dialogism. Mikhail Bakhtin and his associates sought to surpass Saussurean structuralism and formalist literary theory by fundamentally recasting the analysis of language. Constructing a “sociological poetics,” they offered a socially grounded perspective on discourse that recognizes its essential mediating role in the process of social life.
As opposed to both Saussurean linguistics with which they tussled (and much current poststructuralist theory), the circle insisted that we start not with language as chains of signifiers or texts but with what they sometimes termed speech communication. This is not language per se, but the social process of producing meaning accomplished between actors in specific contexts (Hitchcock, 1994, pp. 3-4; Holquist, 1981, p. 163; Zavala, 1989, p. 56). Bakhtin and his followers emphasized that words are lexically inert unless and until they become part of this social process. As he observed, "Language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it. . . . The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another" (1984, p. 183; Medvedev & Bakhtin, 1978, p. 8; Zavala, 1989, p. 51). Arguing against structuralist abstractions, the Circle thus maintained that language was foremost a social process of creating interpersonal meaning. Thus language is necessarily tied to the material contexts in which it was used. As Volosinov (1986) observed:

In order for any item, from whatever domain of reality it may come, to enter the social purview of the group and elicit ideological semiotic reaction, it must be associated with the vital socioeconomic prerequisites of the particular groups existence; it must somehow, even if obliquely, make contact with the bases of the group's material life. (p. 22)

The Circle's epistemology thus brings the task of narrative back to telling the stories of social actors and the consequences of their actions rather than the infinite deferral and interplay of signifiers (A. White, 1993, pp. 153-154).

By starting with social interaction rather than the interplay of signs, the focus of analysis shifts from the grammatical units of a text to the performative units of speech—what Bakhtinians referred to as an "utterance" (Gardiner, 1992, pp. 12-15; Holquist, 1990, pp. 60-63; Todorov, 1984, pp. 41-54; Volosinov, 1983, p. 115). The utterance is a vehicle of contextual meaning between subjects without a fixed structure, content, or length. Rather, what determines its scope and length are the semantic exhaustion of its theme, the interactions of the communicants, and the stylized generic forms it takes (more will be said about speech genres below) (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 88; Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 218). All meaning within the utterance is the result of processes of communication and response—what Bakhtin termed "addressivity"—that are situated both within the "immediate social situation and the broader social milieu" (Volosinov, 1986, p. 86). Discourse is thus more properly speaking (pun not intended) interdiscourse, because meaning always lies between and within the confluence of voices that compose communication. Dialogism thus accepts a notion of the intertextual as suggested by the linguistic turn, but anchors it in social interaction. It thus provides us with a social ontology for linking material and social contexts to the dynamics of discourse. "Utterances and their types, speech genres, are the drive belts from the history of society
to the history of language," noted Bakhtin with typical poetic panache (1986, p. 65).

Dialogism insists on the materiality of language as a fundamentally social process through which people exercise agency, but (as the linguistic turn) it also acknowledges that all social action is inescapably mediated by its meanings: "language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 63). The recursive relationship between material life and discursive meaning has significant implications for the ways in which we analyze collective consciousness, ideology, the polyphony of the word, and social agency and change.

Although proponents of the linguistic turn argue that discourse structures consciousness, the social ontology of the Circle offers a different viewpoint. As several interpreters of Bakhtin's theories have argued, consciousness is essentially a "border phenomenon," lying on the borders of interdiscourse between self and others. Any concept of self, any identity, is a product of the contact between "inner" and "outer" speech (Bernard-Donals, 1994, pp. 118-119; Clark & Holquist, 1984, pp. 91-92; Todorov, 1984, pp. 97-98; Volosinov, 1983, p. 108). As Fred Evans (1990) argued, "[P]olitical identity is located neither in subjects nor in language, but in the ongoing interplay of voices, that is in dialogue and heteroglossia, in the equi-primordiality of subject and language" (p. 514). Precisely because consciousness lies on this border, people can reflectively understand how discourse mediates both what they think and how they interact with others. This is not to say that they can ever get outside of language, but they can realize the discursive construction of their worldviews and representations of material reality. People can thus recognize the materiality of the social world and the forces that shape their lives, even if they need discourse to represent this cognition (Bernard-Donals, 1994, pp. 103, 119). Thus our historical narratives need not abandon concepts such as experience for an all-encompassing textuality. Instead, we can and should explore the manner in which discourse mediated experience, as well as the ways in which people could be at least partly cognizant of this process.

The emphasis on interdiscourse has equally significant implications for our understanding of polyphony (so critical to the linguistic turn) and ideology. For Bakhtin, the mutability of the word—or as he put it, its "heteroglossia"—is revealed through and because of communication. The Circle insisted that meaning is a process of dialogic tension in which each actor seeks to fill the words of others with preferred meanings.

Every discourse has its own selfish and biased proprietor; there are no words with meanings shared by all, no words "belonging to no one." . . . When we seek to understand a word, what matters is not the direct meaning the word gives to objects and emotions—that is the false front of the word; what matters is the actual and always self-interested use to which this meaning is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker, a use determined by the speaker's position (profession, social class, etc.) and by the concrete position. Who speaks and under
what conditions he speaks: this is what determines the word's actual meaning. All direct meanings and direct expressions are false. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 401)

Discourse is interested action, not simply representation or the structural constitution of subjectivity. As a transmission of evaluative viewpoints, actors seek to establish their preferred meanings within it (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 337, 339; 1986, p. 96; Volosinov, 1983, p. 145). The word is thus heteroglossic both because signifiers are neutral and because in their transmission people invest it with social hierarchy and differentiation. They do not do so in a simple utilitarian fashion, nor can they step outside of the system of meanings that they seek to create. However, part of the process of creating meaning does involve conscious acts of power (Hitchcock, 1994, pp. 4-6). The stories we tell thus should focus on this dialogic tension and the ways in which inequities of power are played out through discourse.

The members of the Circle, and Bakhtin particularly, focused on the ways in which order, stability, and conventionality are brought to bear in this potentially cacophonous heteroglossia. According to Bakhtin, every epoch, every social trend has a speech genre that privileges some stylizations over others (1984, p. 202; 1986, p. 65). A genre contains the bounded set of vocabularies and meanings, and rules for using them within dialogue, and their construction is keyed to the need for meaning within social formations. Within any one period there can be multiple genres that provide the field of meanings for situated social interaction (Bakhtin, 1986; Briggs & Baumann, 1992, p. 148; Clark & Holquist, 1984, pp. 218-219; Gardiner, 1992, pp. 74, 81; Volosinov, 1983, p. 116; Zavala, 1989, pp. 45, 50). Most importantly for this discussion, powerholders seek to objectivize and naturalize their power-laden definitions and meanings within genres, creating a cultural understanding that normalizes subjugation and oppression.

The struggle over meaning usually takes place within a genre, because it is through the webs of signification it provides that ideological visions are normalized (S. Hall, 1993, p. 18). In this sense, the speech genre is the site of what cultural Marxists term hegemony. Actors can realize power within discourse to the extent that they can convert the dialogue to a monologue, that is, dampen or temporarily arrest the multivocality of its signifiers. Bakhtinians argue that to the extent language is stylized in speech genres, such hegemony can be achieved. Genres produce stylizations that seek to naturalize meanings, objectivizing the monologic word (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 290; 1984, p. 189). Bakhtin was careful to insist that genres were not ossified systems but were continually reborn and renewed with changing contexts and interlocutors: "A genre lives in the present," he observed, "but always remembers its past" (1984, p. 106). Generic analysis thus highlights the traces of meaning insisted on by deconstructionists, but anchors these remnant markings to other concrete social actions and contexts. It suggests ways in which we can add the issues raised by the linguistic turn concerning polyphony to the fruitful analyses of hegemony produced by cultural Marxists,
without recourse to the deconstruction of postmaterialists such as Laclau and Mouffe.

As Craig Brandist (1996a, 1996b) argued, Bakhtinian discourse theory provides an account of discursive struggle undertheorized in but complementary to Gramsci’s writings on hegemony. Dialogic analysis focuses on the grounded, piecemeal, and often sporadic ways in which oppressed groups subvert the language of the powerful and transform it into a weapon of the weak. Although Bakhtinians (Volosinov in particular) focused on discourse as a site of class struggle, recent work by Hitchcock (1994), Thomson (1989), and others suggests that such analysis is equally amenable for feminist critiques and the analyses of subaltern struggles.17

Readers likely will see similarities with things old as well as new in Bakhtinian dialogism and, as David Carroll noted, it can be sympathetically linked to a wide variety of disparate theorizing on language and meaning (1983, p. 67). Part of the familiar for social scientists is dialogism’s resonance with various strands of interpretive theory and epistemology stretching back at least to Weber, and recurring in more recent hermeneutics. This is certainly evident in the Circle’s situational perspectivism on the production of meaning in social life. This familiarity is no accident, because in his early work Bakhtin focused on an engagement with neo-Kantian ethics and the divide between transcendental reason and experience (Bakhtin, 1993; Bernard-Donals, 1994; Holquist, 1990, pp. 16-18).18 Akin to Weber’s historical sociology, Bakhtin’s work seeks to account for broad developmental patterns (as in the demise of the carnivalesque) while emphasizing contingency and situated meanings (Turner, 1992, p. 26).19 Bakhtin also broadly shares the perspective of both hermeneutics and Habermasian critical theory of interpreting human action and meaning within the context of the life-world and communicative interaction (Eagleton, 1983, pp. 62-63, 71; Gardiner, 1992, pp. 102, 111, 133; J. R. Hall, 1979, p. 267; 1981, p. 136). His perspective on the multivocality of language and the contest for power within it also overlaps with Habermas’s analysis of distorted speech communication and Ricoeur’s emphases on the dialectic between event and meaning, the polyphony of discourse, and the importance of appropriation (Gardiner, 1992, pp. 132-136; Halley, 1989, p. 168; Ricoeur, 1976, pp. 12, 16, 43, 92). Similarly, Bakhtin’s dialogism has parallels with the work of Fish and reception theorists who argue that the production of textual meaning is a situated and transitory social product of the interaction between context, text, and interpretive communities (Bernard-Donals, 1994, pp. 137-139; Eagleton, 1983, p. 85).20

In each case, however, dialogic theory takes a turn that leads to important epistemological differences with other interpretive perspectives. As opposed to the more sanguine possibilities of developing common or objective meanings in Gadamer’s continuing chain of meaning, Habermas’s ideal speech communication, or Ricoeur’s depth hermeneutics, dialogism emphasizes that all interpretation is partly divisive and conflict ridden.21 Plurality can be
recognized and people can engage in a search for shared truths through dialogue, but Bakhtin's politics of interpretation sees monologic power lurking in the background of any such attempted accord (Carroll, 1983, p. 70; Eagleton, 1983, p. 73; Gardiner, 1992, pp. 135-138). Some historians, such as Christopher Johnson (1993), see the makings of a compelling analytic system in Habermas's discussion of the encroachments of rational systems on the life-world, at least in terms of advancing a project for modern historiography. However, I think dialogic theory exposes the latent assumption of transcendental reason in language in Habermas's discussions of distorted and ideal speech communication (see Eagleton, 1990, pp. 405-406). For distortion is imported by system encroachment, and as such ideological domination is not inherently problematic in discourse per se.22

In contrast to a Schutzian hermeneutics and its preoccupation with the everyday, the Bakhtin Circle embedded the analysis of subjectivity within larger historical situations (J. R. Hall, 1981, p. 137). In addition, such a hermeneutic approach views language primarily as a stabilizing medium of intersubjectivity, and thus fails to appreciate both its internal contradictions and its role in domination (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, pp. 234, 250). In a similar sense, Bernard-Donals argued that in developing what he termed a "materialist rhetoric," Bakhtin also moved beyond the localized subjectivity highlighted in reception theory by embedding the analysis of discourse both in the larger material histories of contexts and the ways in which the histories of utterances ideologically mediate their boundedness over time (1994, pp. 174-177; see also Halley, 1989, pp. 170-171). Dialogic theory thus provides a more encompassing analytic strategy by which we can create historical narratives that connect conflicts of meaning to the wider dynamics of social change.

The emphases on the situational, relational, and historical production of social meanings in dialogism also have strong parallels to new work in narrative analysis, particularly that of Margaret Somers (1992, 1994; Somers & Gibson, 1994; see also Hall, 1992). Somers argued that social groups construct ontological identities through narratives, and that the stories and the identities they construct relationally shift over time and space (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 65; Somers, 1994, p. 621). Both Somers's concept of narrativity and dialogism thus highlight the processual nature of collective identity. Both also depict these social narratives as institutionally and situationally embedded collective interaction. I suggest, however, that dialogism adds an additional dimension to narrative analysis by problematizing the very nature of discourse through which such narratives are constructed.

Finally, whereas a number of poststructuralists see a kindred spirit in Bakhtin's work given his emphasis on polyphony, there are significant divergencies between these perspectives and dialogism. These distinctions can be seen both in respect to Derridean and Foucauldian theories of discourse and meaning. Parallels exist between deconstructionism and dialogism in their
emphases on the historical traces of meaning within discourse, the indeter-
minacy of meaning, and its production within a system of differences (Denzin,
1994, p. 185). However, deconstruction abandons both a metaphysics and a
materialism necessary for the construction of historical narratives. By deny-
ing a link between discourse, consciousness, and experience, deconstruction-
ism also denies our ability to construct narratives that link the voices of actors,
the events within which they are ensconced, and the larger temporal processes
within which both are immersed (Calhoun, 1992, p. 272; Eagleton, 1981,
pp. 117-118; Evans, 1990, pp. 512-514; Hirschkop, 1986, pp. 98-99; Holquist,
1986, pp. 154-155). Bakhtinian theory also retains a concept of agency in
discourse necessary for historical narratives abandoned by Foucault. As Peter
Hitchcock stressed, dialogism demonstrates not only how discourse is the
site of power but also how historical actors exercise such power through and
within it (1994, p. 11; see also Rutland, 1990, p. 128). Dialogism therefore
allows for a conceptualization of a social consciousness reflexively tied to both
the dialectics of discourse and the material world over time, in ways that
deconstructionism largely rejects.

In contrast to both poststructuralism and deconstructionism, Bakhtinian
theory places greater emphasis on social and collective agency in the deter-
mination and dissemination of meanings within discourse. Just as we have
seen in the practice if not the theory of proponents of the linguistic turn,
people do make many decisions concerning the expression of meaning and
how it is conveyed. Signifiers and meanings clash, but the collisions result
from social struggle.

In a series of other articles, I detail the ways in which dialogic theory can
be used to create analytic narratives of such struggles, particularly those
involving historical class formation (Steinberg, 1994, 1995, 1996). In particular,
I focus on the protracted struggles of the silk weavers of London’s Spitalfields
district in the 1820s and 1830s to stave off degradation of both their status as
honorable artisans and their modest material security. The weavers’ social
and economic security had been anchored by protective trade legislation they
had secured in the latter 18th century. These so-called Spitalfields Acts had
protected the trade from imports and established a mechanism for binding
piece rates through the intervention of local magistrates. By the latter 1810s,
however, larger capitalist wholesalers and parliamentary champions of
political economy mounted a campaign to repeal the acts, which they
denounced as a fetter on free trade and prosperity.

Throughout the struggle over the repeal of the acts (which the weavers
finally lost in 1824), and in subsequent campaigns both for renewed govern-
mental wage protection and to combat substantial piece-rate reductions, the
weavers engaged in a wide variety of collective actions directed both at
various governmental bodies and against their large employers. Both groups
had successfully campaigned for the repeal of the acts through hegemonic
genres of political economy, Christian pietism, and nationalism. Through these discourses, they created a dominant narrative in which the prosperity of the weavers, the trade, and indeed the nation would best be realized through free trade and because of the superiority of national capital. Free trade defined liberty, a hallmark of the English constitution, because it allowed both employer and worker to seek their fortunes unencumbered in the burgeoning marketplace; this was combined with faith that providence rightly provided for meek, open markets in labor and goods and that English ingenuity provided the surest path to employment, security, and abundance.

In contrast to much recent work by members of the linguistic turn, I explore the ways in which the weavers constructed a class conscious discourse from within these genres to counter this dominant narrative. The hegemonic discourse of the large capitalists and parliamentarians structured a social reality that limited the ways in which they could defend their rights for trade protection. At the same time, however, the heteroglossic nature of these hegemonic genres provided the potential for the weavers to construct a collective identity as righteously aggrieved workers and citizens. By appropriating and restyling pieces of these genres, the weavers claimed rights for protection of their labor and status as independent artisans. From within the language of political economy, they defined their labor as property, and maintained it, just as the capital of the employers or land of the aristocrats, deserved positive governmental protections against theft and appropriation. Focusing on bourgeois political discourse, the weavers championed their status as independent artisans as an elemental form of freedom equally deserving of constitutional guarantees. And from within the discourse of evangelical Christianity, they denounced those who would ignore the Lord’s strictures to protect and succor the poor. In a series of concerted actions that intermittently stretched throughout the decade, the silk weavers thus produced in dialogic fashion oppositional discourses through which they sought to expose the class-interested actions and words of those they identified as their oppressors.

My analytic narratives thus look at the effects of and relationships between material, institutional, and discursive processes. Employers and parliamentarians developed hegemonic discourses as they assumed greater control and sought to transform the organization of production and polity. The development of these discourses was certainly conditioned, though not simply determined, by the envelopment of once petty production by larger capitalists and their forces of rationalization. No doubt they also resonated with the political expediency of a Tory government seeking to accommodate to these changes. The weavers responded to these very real changes within the polity and economy, though these changes and their response were given meaning through these discourses. Moreover, this discourse also contained the possibilities to vocalize dissension and discord. In a reflexive fashion, the weavers
sought to strike back at their oppressors and, in doing so, change the material balance of power that was subsuming them in ever greater immiseration.

As I hope I have demonstrated in this article and others, dialogism thus provides us with some provisional tools for analyzing the ways people have agency within discourse through time. It also explicates the epistemological bases of the ways actors and analysts recognize the material foundations of social action outside of discourse. For whereas discourse always mediates our recognition and understanding of the material past and present, the polyphonic nature of the word, and the active battles for its control, signal that there is something outside this system of meanings. Historical analysis' substantive task thus centers on illuminating the ways in which groups struggled within discursive genres that delineated power and order, shaped the constructions of identities, and bounded conceptions of the possible. We should recognize that this production of meaning occurs as a social process, created at the juncture of responsive communication and the specific material context that motivates it. We can and must continue to tell stories about the consequences of social action. Those stories, although attentive to the dance of discourse, must remain attuned to the ways in which people and their life conditions partly orchestrated this dance, and the ways they sought to change the dissonance of its tune. In so doing, we should be able to revamp the perspective of the new social history to account for the issues raised by the linguistic turn while retaining its materialist and realist bases.

Many commentators on Bakhtin's work have argued that he struggled with, but never solved, the neo-Kantian dilemma of linking the noumenal and the phenomenal. Perhaps they are correct, and if they are, it is just possible that what Bakhtin teaches us is how to establish the right perch, to sit atop the fence that divides the two, and at least have an equitable view of both sides. Perhaps, too, if we can all crowd atop the fence, it will, as the saying goes, turn us into good neighbors.

NOTES

1. One might also add that much of this work was produced against a distorted specter of Marx. Regardless, this or any such division is somewhat arbitrary. Christopher Lloyd (1993, pp. 66-88) distinguished five basic types of what he termed "structural history" that cross cut the gross division suggested here. He rightly reminds us of such important perspectives as those which he terms empiricist and individualist—encompassing demographics, cliometrics, and behavioral individualism—and interpretivism, which includes the highly influential work of historians influenced by cultural anthropologists such as Geertz. John R. Hall also presents a set of four ideal types of analysis for both of what he terms sociological history and historical sociology in a similar dehistoricized manner. Hall also recognizes four distinct types of discourse that are paired to these strategies, yielding a large array of possible approaches. Alternatively, Arthur Stinchcombe (1978) made the bold argument that all historical
sociology, when done correctly, draws on deep causal analogies to produce particular explanations of cumulative social change (though see Tilly, 1981, pp. 10-12, for a critique of this perspective).

2. For a critical discussion of the latter, see Tilly (1984, pp. 67-74).

3. Lloyd importantly reminds us that the origins of the Annales school in the work of Lucien Febvre and the analysis of mentalités have important links to the structuralism of Durkheim and Saussure. However, as he argues, the work of Bloch and Braudel is concerned with large-scale geographic economic and social relations (1993, p. 80).

4. In similar fashion, Scott asserts that “[w]ithout meaning, there is no experience; without processes of signification, there is no meaning” (1988, p. 38).

5. However, see Dean (1994, pp. 50-52, 135-136) for an explicit reject of the humanist bases of historical analysis based on Foucault's work. For Foucault's epistemological rift with the Annales school on related issues, see Noiriel (1994).


8. As both Hayden White and John Toews argued, the episteme operates as a formalized structure that eludes all logic and determination even as it imposes regularity on subjects within its field (Toews, 1987, p. 890; White, 1987, pp. 109, 114; see also Noiriel, 1994).

9. And as she noted in the concluding section of this essay, institutional repression rather than the episteme itself played a critical role in maintaining the legitimacy of this discourse of political economy: “In the years that followed the design and publication of the Statistique, the Second Empire’s tough censorship laws and vigilant police informers prevented the appearance of alternative versions of the reality of the world of work” (1988, p. 137).

10. As he later declared, “Language was the bearer of values and ideas, in stories and proverbs, for example. But it was more than merely a bearer or vehicle: it was in fact the embodiment or substance of values, itself a form of symbolic meaning standing for all manner of desires, associations, beliefs, conscious and unconscious” (p. 279).

11. Following others in the linguistic turn, Joyce eschewed linguistic determinism and claimed that the polyphony of language actually ensures human agency:

“Agency” is built in to the nature of language: the ever present gap between the signifier and the signified means rather than being “positioned” in the sense of immobile, the subject is inextricably mobile and active because s/he is always forced to know, in the sense of forever having to pursue a forever elusive meaning with a present one. In this sense there is no alternative but to be an active agent, if knowing is to occur at all. (p. 14)

12. A telling illustration of this can be found in his discussion of the great mill magnate and liberal champion John Bright, whose political speechifying Joyce takes as exemplary of shared popular constitutionalism. As Joyce (1994) described the mastery of this process,
Oratory was concerned with bringing to expression the great universal feelings of mankind. The emotionalism of everyday conduct meant that such feelings constantly pressed for expression,bursting continuously into conduct. The orator—through his words but also through his being—had at his disposal eminently raw material, whether he worked it by violence and declamation to further arouse emotion, or whether—as in Bright's case—he worked it by restraint, controlling it all the better to reveal its huge force. The orator can be seen as akin to a musical conductor, emotionalism his music. And, as in music, the meaning of the medium lay in experience, in being part of it, rather than extracting a literal significance from it, either before or after the event. (p. 119)

Throughout his discussions of the political process, the elaboration of constitutionalist narratives, and the proliferation of populist discourses, we are privy to a number of such impresarios in Joyce's stories. However, they are rarely working people who in the course of their workaday lives pick up the baton and conduct the movement of political discourse.

13. Here I provide the epistemological alternative the linguistic turn. I have demonstrated elsewhere (Steinberg, 1994, 1995, 1996) how dialogic analysis illuminates the discursive struggles of early 19th-century English workers.

14. As he noted in his widely read essay “Discourse in the Novel,” if we detach our analysis from the living impulses that animate the word and give reason for meaning “all we are left with is a naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in life” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 292).

15. In harmony Volosinov (1986) argued, “Every sign, as we know, is a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction” (p. 21).

16. In this way Bakhtin (1981) noted the active role of consciousness in making sense of the world through language:

Consciousness finds itself eventually facing the necessity of having to choose a language. With each active literary-verbal performance consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within it, it chooses, in other words, a “language.” (p. 295)

17. See also Diaz-Diocaretz (1989), Herndl (1991), and Hohne and Wussow (1994).

18. Bakhtin's novel (if problematic) response is to see the act, the locus of temporal being, as an achieved answer both to the practical material world and to cognition and reason, a nonunitary dialogue with both that is lived through (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 13; Holquist, 1993, p. xii; Liapunov, 1993, p. xix).

19. As John R. Hall (1996) has recently suggested, Weber's interpretivist methodology can be read as bridging postmodern concerns with textual and processual meaning and more materialist analyses of culture (pp. 4-5).

20. Literary theorists also have noted parallels between dialogism and the analytic philosophy of language. For a discussion of the relationship between Bakhtin and Wittgenstein's theory of language, see Eagleton (1981, pp. 114-119).

21. As Peter Flaherty (1986) noted, however, there are some similarities in the utopianism of Bakhtin's analysis of the leveling functions of carnival and Habermas's ideal speech situation (p. 423).

22. Keith Michael Baker presented a parallel critique of Habermas's concept of public opinion in his discussion of the public sphere and the French Revolution. He
argued that Habermas provides an almost teleological conception of a term that was conflict ridden and contested within the political discourse (1992, pp. 192-195; see also Kramer, 1992, pp. 242-243)

23. As Tracy Hobson (1987) argued, the radical contingency of Derrida’s concept of difference denies the possibility of such narratives: “There is no origin, no proper direction of meaning (sens propre) from which history can be measured. . . . There is no tidy seriality, but a complex pattern of forward and recursive loops.” (p. 109). This approach is aptly illustrated by Jacques Derrida’s (1989) defense of Paul de Man in the wake of the revelations of his publications in Le Soir, Het Vlaamsche Land, and Les Cahiers du Libre Examen. In his analysis of what he deems exemplary texts from this corpus, he performed a double-edged reading that throws into doubt any totalitarian inclinations of all the texts, thus refusing any clear narrative account. Curiously, he attempted to fashion a picture of de Man’s “agonizing” journey from wartime Belgium to the halls of Yale, but he tries to accomplish this gesture with the kind of empiricist and realist discourse that is generally regarded as an anathema to deconstruction.

REFERENCES


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