II. Social and Intellectual History

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The impact of postmodernism on modern British social history[1]

> British social history is a crucial field of engagement for postmodernism. For British social history in the recent past achieved a particularly successful combination of the empirical method and Marxisant theory. In this respect, then, it is a historiography that reflects the accomplishments of a modernist history, operating through the premises of positivism. As such it is matched only, perhaps, by the annalistes as a standing rebuke to the theory and practice of postmodernism.
>
> *Richard Price*[2]

The last few years have not, on the face of it, been good ones for British social historians. Crises of confidence have beset practitioners working in various sub-disciplines. Many of the most basic concepts which stood at the heart of the social history project have been seriously called into question and (allegedly) the best days of Marxism – one of the most powerful intellectual tools at the social historians' disposal – are in the past. The contrast with the 1960s and 1970s is a stark one indeed. Then it could seem as if the social historians were set fair to take over the whole historical establishment. Much of the most exciting and innovative work carried out by historians anywhere was being generated by the social historical approach, while the subject's "common sense" – a combination of empiricism and Marxism – seemed powerful enough to transform entire historiographical landscapes. From the mid-eighties, however, there were signs that the golden age of social history was about to come to an end. There were all manner of barbarians at the gate – including Thatcherite management gurus and advocates of such technologies of rule as research assessment exercises and teaching quality assessments – but few posed as direct an intellectual threat to the social historians as the postmodernists. Unhappy with various aspects of modernist historical practice, they set about deconstructing the very concepts and operating procedures that underpinned the social history project. The resulting debates were frequently vitriolic as historians struggled over the heart and soul of the discipline. By the early nineties one could be forgiven for thinking that the historical profession had been split into two apparently incompatible and constantly warring factions. Yet it will be suggested here that notwithstanding the profound differences between the linguistic turners and their binary opposites – the historical positivists – recent years have seen the cultivation of postmodern sensibilities within an essentially modernist

1 I would like to thank Stefan Berger and Chris Williams for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

2 Richard Price, "Postmodernism as theory and history", in John Belchem and Neville Kirk (eds), *Languages of Labour* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 11.

framework. Whilst such a state of affairs inevitably offends the theoretical purists, the result has been an invigorated social history that has been able to ask fresh questions of the past. Before sketching out some of the ways in which postmodernism's influence has been felt, it is useful to consider the guiding assumptions which helped shaped the thoughtworld of the social historians and the nature of the postmodern challenge.

Deconstructing 'the social': the postmodernist challenge

Postmodernism is, of course, something of an umbrella term, a catch-all for a collection of often disparate ideas. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the social history paradigm, it became clear from the mid-1980s that the linguistic turn was to pose a set of distinct challenges. Amongst the most pressing was the rejection of metanarratives, the dissolution of "hard" concepts such as class and the move to see "the social" itself as a discursive construct rather than a structure "out there" in the "real world".

A scepticism of masternarratives (or grand systems of thought that purport to provide "total" explanations about the past) is deeply embedded in the postmodern project. Seeing such overarching philosophies of history as features peculiar to the modern age, postmodern thinkers have poured scorn on what they characterize as highly subjective and anachronistic ways of thinking about the past. The idea that history had to be heading somewhere – be it to an ever more successful global capitalism, or to its binary opposite, global communism – was identified as a delusory piece of modernist nonsense. Events such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union merely seemed to confirm such beliefs. Thus, as Keith Jenkins, a keen postmodern proselytizer, has rather sweepingly put it: "with the collapse of the optimism of the modernist project in ways which, metaphorically speaking, sink right down to its ostensible roots … nobody believes in those particular fantasies any more."[3]

One such "fantasy", Marxism, was singled out for especial criticism, not least because it had assumed such a dominant position in the academy. A host of "post-ist" thinkers set about dismantling the huge edifice that was Marxist thought.[4] Foucault was to the fore, reconceptualizing power in such a way as to question Marx's ideas about it being exercised by classes.[5] Feminist post-structuralists took issue with Marxist historians for the way in which they had conceived of class formation as a process that effectively excluded women.[6] Lyotard, meanwhile, took umbrage at what he perceived to be Marxism's "totalizing model and its totalitarian effect".[7] From this reading, he set about ridiculing such totalizing ambitions. That

3 Keith Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader* (London, 1997), p. 5.

4 As Stefan Berger has pointed out, Marxism was a favourite target of the postmodernists, but, of course, their attack had equally profound implications for those drawn to Weber's notions of modernity and class.

5 Joseph Rouse, "Power/knowledge" in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 104–107.

6 See, for example, Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), chapter 4.

7 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and

these, and other, criticisms have had an effect is clear. Even those scholars who doubt whether we are living through "the end of History" can conclude that "something very important did happen in the last decade. Marxism, once the privileged bearer of modernity, lies buried in the rubble of the Berlin Wall, and with it lies one of the most compelling narratives of the last one hundred and fifty years."[8]

Given the central place that Marxism had come to occupy in the social history project, it was clear from an early stage that a forceful attack on such a major theoretical touchstone could result in severe collateral damage being sustained by the social historical approach itself. The likelihood of this was only increased by postmodernism's insistence on dissolving "hard" concepts such as class. As leading post-structuralist thinkers began proclaiming "the death of the author" and insisting that "there was nothing beyond the text", they were calling into question some of the most fundamental assumptions that had governed the practice of historians for years. From the perspective of those engaged in the writing of social history, the most worrying implications centred around "class" and "the social" itself.

Class had long been one of the basic building blocks employed by social historians. Marxist scholars, naturally enough, found it indispensable when constructing their histories of nineteenth-century Britain. The story ran something as follows: the "industrial revolution" brought with it a reconfiguration of the social relations of production along class lines. Those classes produced their own forms of consciousness, culture and politics.[9] Classes struggled with each other, sometimes violently. The dominant classes attempted to incorporate key players from among the upper echelons of the working class as a means of maintaining social stability.[10] These techniques of "social control" could be seen at work not just in the workplace, but also in the realm of leisure, a new historiographical growth area.[11] The big questions for Marxists revolved around how and when these "things" (and class was thought to have a "thing-like" quality to it) came into existence. Books with titles such as *The Making of the English Working Class* became foundation texts.[12] Classes were "born" or "made", their "prehistories" were sketched out, and the moments at which their histories began were duti-

B. Massumi (Manchester, 1984), p. 13.

8 Christopher Kent, "Victorian social history: post-Thompson, post-Foucault, postmodern", *Victorian Studies*, 40, no. 1 (1996), pp. 97–133: 97.

9 For examples of social historians making connections between class, culture, consciousness and politics, see Eric Hobsbawm, "The formation of British working-class culture" in his *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1984), pp. 176–193, and Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working-class culture and working-class politics in London, 1870–1900: notes on the remaking of a working class", *Journal of Social History*, 7, no. 4 (1974), pp. 460–508.

10 For a critique of the dominant ideology thesis, see Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London, 1980). For social historians' (sloppy) use of "social control", see Gareth Stedman Jones, "Class expression versus social control: a critique of recent trends in the social history of 'leisure'", *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), pp. 163–170.

11 See, for example, Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830–1885* (London, 1978).

12 E.P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1980 edn.). For a discussion of Thompson's influence on social historians, see Kent, "Victorian social history", pp. 99–101.

fully marked.[13] While the working class commanded the lion's share of the historians' attention, the middle class was not entirely ignored. Similar questions were pressed into service. When was the middle class "made"? What was the nature of its ideology? Was the bourgeoisie a "failed force"?[14]

Such problematics were heavily indebted to Marxism, but it was never only the Marxists who were concerned with questions surrounding class. For example, Harold Perkin, a social historian who rejected Marxist ideas, gave the concept pride of place in his provocative *The Origins of Modern English Society*.[15] In a like fashion, in his *The Rise of Respectable Society*, F.M.L. Thompson could set out to quiz the Marxist stereotypes that had attached themselves to the working and middle classes, whilst still holding onto class as a key concept. Opening his book with a chapter entitled "Economy and Society" – a classic social historical way of thinking – Thompson noted that industrialization was a much more drawn out affair than had previously been thought, and the social structure of Victorian Britain was far more complex than had been assumed. However, his observation that "The making of the working class, once thought to have been accomplished by 1830, is now placed firmly in the 1890s", revealed his debt to a basic Marxist assumption: whatever the timing, classes were "made".[16]

"The social" was also seen as real "thing" that possessed the power to determine other aspects of the lived historical experience. Itself shaped in part by an equally real economic base, no practising social historian worth their salt questioned the notion that society had a reality which could be accessed through a study of primary sources. Few doubted that various sociological constituencies – including those organized in non-class ways such as rank, caste, gender, race and so on – were "out there", with their own distinctive characteristics. No leap of faith was required to conclude that such constituencies generated their own forms of consciousness as group members "experienced" the social world and made sense of it. In the process, cultural formations would coalesce around these collectivities, ideological positions would be formulated, political viewpoints framed. All of these socially-determined effects left their traces in the written record and could thus be perceived by the historian. For language would necessarily bear testament to the shifts in the realm of the social; contemporaries, when confronted with their altered social landscapes, would instinctively seek to describe them in linguistic terms. If a word did not exist to do such a thing, then one would be coined. Hence, long before the linguistic turn, social historians were well used to searching for the

13 For the birth of the Welsh working class, see Gwyn A. Williams, *The Merthyr Rising* (London, 1978).

14 For an overview, see Simon Gunn, "The 'failure' of the Victorian middle class: a critique", in J. Wolff and J. Seed (eds), *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 17–43.

15 Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969). Perkin's book incidentally demonstrates the huge gravitational pull of the Marxist paradigm; even its most determined opponents often found themselves ineluctably drawn to the questions it asked, a point made by R.J. Morris in his *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution 1708–1850* (London, 1979), p. 10.

16 F.M.L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830–1900* (London, 1988), p. 30.

"language of class".[17] That they found it alive and well in the nineteenth century was to be expected, given the rise of a class society that was believed to have accompanied a profound transformation in the means of production.

Within this broad interpretative schema there was enough play in the joints to allow nuanced variations to develop. E.P. Thompson emerges as a pre-eminent figure, for his analysis of class formation added a distinctive twist. Unhappy with the economic determinism evident in many works, Thompson (although still writing from within a Marxist position) was keen to emphasize the extent to which men (he had little to say about women) could make their own history, albeit in circumstances that were frequently not of their own choosing. In so doing, he placed an especial stress upon culture as a significant source of agency. Although happy enough to allow that culture had anchors in the realm of the economic, he saw it as possessing a sizeable degree of autonomy. Other influential figures, such as Raymond Williams, had reached similar conclusions.[18] The consequence was that from quite an early stage, the social history project in Britain had a strong cultural flavour. Yet, for all the innovation and sophistication, the basic assumptions remained in place. Changes in the realm of the social – for instance, the arrival of new social collectivities such as classes – would be "experienced" by historical actors and made sense of through language, thus leaving traces in the archive which could then be accessed and interpreted by historians.

Under such a dispensation, a common sense view of language tended to predominate; words were taken to express, however imperfectly, an underlying social reality. It is in this respect that the challenge posed by postmodernism has been at its most profound. For according to the precepts laid down by the linguistic turn, the equation between language and "the social" is reversed; language comes at the start, not the end, of the proceedings. The point can be neatly made by considering the arguments put forward by one of the first of the British social historians to engage with post-structuralist ideas, Gareth Stedman Jones. In a path-breaking essay, he sketched out his discontent with important aspects of the social history approach.[19] In his estimation, historians had fundamentally misunderstood the nature of Chartism, for they had viewed the politics of Chartists as a mere epiphenomenon which had its origins in the more "fundamental" realms of the economic and the social. By building interpretations around the idea that poverty and distress were unproblematically "experienced", transmogrified into a working-class "consciousness" and then, at the end, converted into a political formulation (in this case Chartism) Stedman Jones thought the social historians had put the cart before the horse. "Consciousness cannot be related to experience except through the interposition of a particular language which organizes the understanding of experience".[20] Language, he insisted, could not simply be decoded as a means of uncovering the "interests" of workers

17 See, for instance, Asa Briggs, "The language of 'class' in early nineteenth-century England", in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1960), pp. 43–73.

18 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London, 1990 edn).

19 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History* (Cambridge, 1983), chapter 3.

20 Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, p. 101.

(interests which had been predetermined in the realm of the social). On the contrary, "it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place".[21] So, whilst not denying the hardship and suffering of the 1830s and 1840s, he suggested that against such a context consciousness was produced by politics and not *vice versa*.

Stedman Jones's intervention was a highly significant moment in the introduction of postmodernist ideas into the mainstream of modern British social history, not least because of his pedigree as a leading social historian; few could dismiss his arguments as being those of a marginal crank. But the appearance of his essay was a portent of what was to come; it was not, in itself, a cataclysmic event. Of course, few of his readers were left in any doubt that the social history project was being heavily critiqued, for he was explicit enough on that front. Nevertheless, his brand of post-structuralist thought made real gestures towards accommodating much that had gone before. In his assessment of the work of others, for instance, Stedman Jones was generous. And he acknowledged that a study of language could not, on its own, provide a satisfactory account of Chartism. So whilst the implications of his core argument for the social history project may have carried critical (even fatal) overtones, they were dispensed in a sensitive fashion that suggested a process of evolutionary growth and increased diversity rather than a revolutionary replacement of one monolith with another.

The dialogue of the deaf

Things were to change markedly as the 1980s shaded into the 1990s, for the British historical establishment found itself beset by a number of so-called "crises".[22] Amongst them was the postmodern challenge. It was registered most obviously in the pages of leading historical journals, and took the form of a debate that was at once illuminating and infuriating, as numerous heavyweights on both sides of the argument started slugging it out. The ground upon which their gladiatorial encounters took place shifted according to the inclinations of the combatants, but epistemological issues were frequently to the fore, as was the question of the continued relevance of metanarratives. The "crisis of class" also featured prominently in the resultant discussions. In the process, intense rivalries emerged and egos clashed. Ultimately, judgement on which side was victorious has yet to be reached, but few of the contributors emerged from the (often unedifying) encounter entirely unscathed.

The harbingers of doom were, of course, there for all to see, long before the early nineties. Stedman Jones's efforts to introduce post-structuralist ideas into the mainstream of British social history were the most obvious, but there were others too. Most notable were the debates raging in the United States and elsewhere.[23] However, it was not until 1991 that the

21 Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*, p. 22.

22 David Cannadine, "British history: past, present – and future?", *Past and Present*, no. 116 (1987), pp. 169–191.

23 Getrude Himmelfarb traces the various assaults upon the modernist history project as played out in the States in her "Postmodernist history", in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lash-Quin (eds), *Re-*

postmodern storm finally broke upon British shores. It did so courtesy of a note penned by Lawrence Stone and published in *Past and Present*, by then one of the flagship journals of the social history project. Stone adumbrated the dimensions of the "crisis of self-confidence" that he believed was already engulfing the historical profession. History, as the study of "events and behaviour" and the "explanation of change over time", was in danger of being deconstructed out of existence, he warned. The contention that "there is nothing beside the text, each one wide open to personal interpretation irrespective of the intentions of the author" was a worrying one. "Texts thus become a mere hall of mirrors reflecting nothing but each other, and throwing no light upon the 'truth', which does not exist." It was important for all historians, whatever their field of study, to be aware of the "ever-narrowing trap in which we … find ourselves".[24] Such a high-handed missive did little to encourage a cool, reflective assessment of the nature of the postmodern challenge. Worse, it helped set a tone for many of the debates which followed in its wake. Most immediately, it provoked a response from Patrick Joyce, an historian who was fast becoming one of the leading advocates of the linguistic turn in Britain.[25]

Joyce had just published his *Visions of the People*, his first major foray into post-structuralist waters. A social historian of repute, he had long been uneasy about many of the guiding assumptions of Marxism, and much of his earlier work had called into question aspects of Marxist class analysis.[26] However, thus far, such critiquing had taken place firmly within the social history paradigm. By the late eighties, he had been convinced of the benefits of postmodernism and began applying its insights to a study of the Victorian social order. Joyce's book amounted to a powerful argument in favour of the demotion of class. Other identities should be allowed their place in the sun. As he remarked, "while there is no denying that class was a child of the nineteenth century … there were other children too who were every bit as lusty".[27] Those other identities – most notably a group clustered around the idea of "the people" – were in far greater circulation than the Marxists had ever allowed, and whilst conceding that they could carry class meanings, Joyce contended that they always amounted to something more than class by another name.

Not content with merely practising postmodern history, Joyce developed a devastating sideline in historiographical and theoretical discussion pieces which invariably aroused the ire of his opponents. By turns evangelical, apocalyptic and downright prickly, his interventions were crucial in placing postmodernism at the top of the historical agenda. Written in a highly combative style, they served as a major irritant both to Marxist scholars and to those committed defenders of existing social historical practices. Stone's note prompted a reply from Joyce

constructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society (London, 1999), pp. 71–93.

24 Lawrence Stone, "History and postmodernism", *Past and Present*, no. 131 (1991), pp. 217–218.

25 Patrick Joyce, "History and postmodernism", *Past and Present*, no. 133 (1991), pp. 204–209.

26 See, for instance, his *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton, 1980).

27 Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 1.

that was not intended to smooth ruffled feathers. He denounced Stone for "not [being] interested in debate, but in denunciation" and for serving up mere "pieties" rather than anything more substantial. And Joyce hinted at a vision of history's future which made Stone's worst fears appear well-founded. "[H]istory is never present to us in anything but a discursive form", he declared. To move beyond this required an engagement with the linguistic turn, for it allowed a questioning of the "dualism between the 'real', or the 'social', and representations of it". Social history, he suggested, would need to be radically rethought. And more generally, it was time for historians such as Stone to wake up to a new reality: "New approaches and new kinds of history are now on the agenda."[28]

The testy confrontation between Stone and Joyce was to set a precedent. For over the course of the next few years, various leading social history journals were turned into arenas in which battles over the future of history were fought. Books appeared with titles such as *Deconstructing History, Rethinking History, In Defence of History* and *Reconstructing History.*[29] The cases for and against postmodernism were heard, judgements passed and sentences meted out to all those who failed to abide by the rulings. Much of this exchange of views was healthy, and dealt with substantial epistemological issues. However, it was also often rather bad tempered, as stinging one-liners were hurled down upon the heads of old adversaries. After Richard Evans had discussed, in his *In Defence of History*, aspects of Keith Jenkins' work, Jenkins responded irritably. In his *Why History?*, he compared Evans (an historian he characterized as having given the "spurious" impression of being well versed in theory), to the likes of Lyotard, Baudrillard and Derrida. If the postmodernists inhabited a "generous, quasi-transcendental, cross-discursive, playful, radical" world, empiricists like Evans resided in "a world of the flat-earth variety". Jenkins was left with a feeling of "coming down to earth, of entering a more mean-spirited, often rather arrogant and dismissive discourse".[30] All good stuff, but difficult to see how it helped promote a serious debate. Joyce, by far one of the most impressive of the postmodernist historians, could also be guilty of hitting below the belt. Thus, his "The end of social history?" (a characteristically provocative title given its submission to the journal *Social History*), was at once a highly impressive rumination on some of the implications of the postmodern turn, and an – at times uncharitable – assessment of both Marxism and its practitioners. The former, Joyce casually asserted, was "rapidly retreating", a system of thought that was effectively dying on its feet, while representatives of the latter (such as Neville Kirk and Bryan Palmer) were dismissed as succumbing to a form of "fundamentalism"; meanwhile their espousal of "a so-called 'historical materialism'" was characterized as "sectarian and sanctimonious".[31] Whether such pronouncements were deliberately intended

28 Joyce, "History and postmodernism", pp. 204, 206, 208, 209.

29 Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London, 1997); Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (London, 1991); Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997); Fox-Genovese and Lash-Quin (eds), *Reconstructing History.*

30 Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (London, 1999), p. 95.

31 Patrick Joyce, "The end of social history?", *Social History*, 20, no. 1 (1995), pp. 73–91: 77–78.

to infuriate those yet to be convinced of the virtues of the linguistic turn is unclear. That this was their effect is, however, certain.[32]

One reason for the apparent ease with which historians began to fall out is doubtless the fact that the stakes were so high. The practice of history itself was the prize on offer. But the depths to which some of the combatants were willing to plunge was quite remarkable, even by the standards of a profession well used to the mud-slinging that can result when egos clash. Few can match Alun Munslow and Arthur Marwick in this respect. Their long-running spat, which, along the way, undoubtedly shed light on the key issues separating the postmodernists from their empiricist "Others", degenerated into pettiness. In a review of Marwick's *The New Nature of History*, Munslow accused the defender of empiricism of "wanton professional abuse", of "crude tub-thumping" and of expending "much spleen". Furthermore, he complained that his book contained only "occasional examples of … serious thinking".[33] For his part, Marwick implied that Munslow was not an historian at all and urged him not to be "too smug" or so conceited. He ended his rejoinder in typically robust fashion. Whilst there were obvious reasons for holding onto history, a more apposite question was begging to be put: "Do we *need* Munslow? The current number of the *Social History Society Bulletin* contains another pasting of him (by Harold Perkin). One has to admire Munslow's resilience. But does he really have to go on boring the pants off us?"[34]

At one level, such an exchange can be dismissed as pure knockabout. But it throws into sharp relief a key aspect of the ongoing engagement between the postmodernists and their adversaries; as much as it was a debate about the future of historical practice it was also a dialogue of the deaf, a chance for those wedded to certain theoretical positions to score points off their opponents. Chris Waters, in a perceptive review of *Visions of the People* put it neatly when he observed that critics of the linguistic turn would simply refute Joyce's argument, line by line, whilst supporters of postmodern positions would simply support it in a similar fashion; "it is futile to argue across epistemological divides".[35] He hoped that readers would meet Joyce on his own ground. Marwick, on the other hand, thought that such an open-minded approach was unrealistic. In the introduction to his *The New Nature of History* he recognized that he would never be able to get through to those that wilfully ignored his message:

[Y]ou are almost bound to have come across the postmodernist case. I shall be arguing against it, and my hope is that you will be persuaded by what I am saying. But I know that I have no

32 See Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, "Starting over: the present, the postmodern and the moment of social history", *Social History*, 20, no. 3 (1995), pp. 355–364.

33 Alun Munlsow, online review of Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Basingstoke, 2001), http://www.ihrinfo.ac.uk/reviews/discourse/munslow5.html (accessed May 2002).

34 Arthur Marwick, online response to Munslow, http://www.ihrinfo.ac.uk/reviews/discourse/marwick2.html (accessed May 2002).

35 Chris Waters, review of Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840–1914* (Cambridge, 1991) in *Social History*, 17. no. 3 (1992), pp. 513–516: 514.

chance of convincing anyone who is already a confirmed postmodernist. Our basic assumptions are different.[36]

Beyond the crisis: the development of postmodern sensibilities

If Marwick could think of the postmodernists as being beyond reason, many on the other side of the divide characterized their adversaries as being beyond apathy. As Joyce put it early on in the debate, "rank indifference" rather than outright hostility to the linguistic turn, seemed to be the order of the day.[37] And, more recently, James Vernon has suggested that little has changed: "the vast majority of historians in Britain have remained relatively insulated from the debates about the status of historical knowledge after the postmodern turn."[38] However, this idea of the profession being split into two immovable and mutually exclusive camps is only partially accurate. Firstly, the linguistic turners are wrong to assume that the majority of their colleagues have carried on oblivious to the debates that have swirled around postmodernism. As we shall see, a number of social historians have registered the "crisis" that is associated with the postmodern challenge. Secondly, postmodern sensibilities have been cultivated across large swathes of the social history field. More than a few historians have apparently been eavesdropping as the dialogue of the deaf was played out in the realm of the theoretical.

The claims that British historians have largely ignored the epistemological debates that have raged over the last decade do contain more than an element of truth. Take, for example, the case of British labour history. Significant areas of labour historiography have barely registered the postmodern angst so noticeable elsewhere. And this despite the fact that labour historians have had to watch as the postmodern alchemists dissolved those elements which had become the very stock-in-trade of their working lives: "class", "experience", "consciousness", not to mention the various brands of Marxist glue that held them all together. So desperate was the plight of the labour history paradigm in Patrick Joyce's view that he declared the field to be "almost moribund".[39] Yet one response to such attacks has been to carry on as if it was business as usual. Scottish and Welsh labour history journals, for example, have remained almost completely devoid of any reference to the linguistic turn.[40] Christopher A. Whatley, in his *Scottish Society*, makes the point that Scottish historians of class have basically spent their time pondering whether E.P. Thompson's arguments are applicable in Scotland. Indeed, Whatley continues in this tradition, with no mention of the linguistic turners.[41] Of course, positive

36 Marwick, *The New Nature of History*, p. 2.
37 Joyce, "History and postmodernism", p. 205.
38 James Vernon, "Thoughts on the present 'crisis of history' in Britain", http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/vernon.html (accessed May 2002). I would like to thank Rachel McNaughton for this reference.
39 Joyce, 'The end of social history?', p. 76, footnote 7.
40 See, for example, back issues of *Scottish Labour History* and *Llafur: the Journal of Welsh Labour History*.
41 Christopher A. Whatley, *Scottish Society 1707–1830: Beyond Jacobitism, Towards Industrialization* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 307–330.

reasons can be cited as an explanation of this historiographical silence, not least of which is the notion of the historian as a "people's remembrancer", someone dedicated to the production of history that has a relevance extending beyond the hallowed halls of academia. As such, the prospect of having to write in the tortuous prose of the postmodernists can seem like a step backwards.[42] But it also needs to be recognized that E.P. Thompson cast a long shadow in more respects than one. If *The Making of the English Working Class* shaped a generation, so too did his *The Poverty of Theory*, a book which a recent commentator has suggested threw a deep "theory chill" across a number of historians and historiographies.[43]

Yet, against such a context of anti-theory sentiment, the degree to which many so-called "traditionalists" have engaged with the postmodernists is striking.[44] Labour history again makes the point. For notwithstanding the Welsh and Scottish journals, other organs have taken cognizance of the serious charges levelled against the subject. Few could criticize the editors of *Labour History Review*, for instance, for remaining "insulated". In his final act as editor of the journal, David Howell drew attention to the charges facing the labour history paradigm: "institutionally based, Eurocentric, prioritizing the experiences of male workers, theoretically naïve and verging on and sometimes collapsing into antiquarianism. Such a neanderthal is appropriately dismissed by devotees of postmodernism, feminist and cultural historians and many others."[45] He invited fellow labour historians to consider these issues. The response, by the likes of John Belchem, John Saville, Malcolm Chase, Steven Fielding and others, revealed just how closely such scholars had been following the discussions about postmodernism.[46] Not content with simply giving over space in the journal to such weighty matters, "[i]n the spirit of open-mindedness and to stimulate as catholic an exchange as possible", a conference was held in 1997 which took as its theme the question of whether labour history had a future.[47] During a lively set of papers, a mood of cautious optimism emerged; as the editors of *Labour History Review* put it, "the subject is neither in crisis nor moribund … Labour history continues to be reformulated."[48] And as if to make the point, in the following year, John Belchem's and Neville Kirk's edited collection, *Languages of Labour*, appeared. Belchem and Kirk, both strong advocates of the continued relevance of the social historical approach, nonetheless have engaged actively with the linguistic turners.[49] The various essays all high-

42 For an assessment of the poor communication skills of that can mar the work of the postmodernists, see Michael Bentley, "Victorian politics and the linguistic turn", *Historical Journal*, 42, no. 3 (1999), pp. 883–902: 895–897.

43 Kent, "Victorian social history", p. 101; E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978).

44 Keith Jenkins uses the term "traditionalists". See his *Postmodern History Reader*, p. 22.

45 Howell, "Editorial", p. 2.

46 "Debate: the current and future position of labour history", *Labour History Review*, 60, no. 3 (1995), pp. 46–53. Also see, Patrick Joyce, "Refabricating labour history; or, from labour history to the history of labour", *Labour History Review*, 62, no. 2 (1997), pp. 147–152.

47 "Editorial", *Labour History Review*, 62, no. 3 (1997), pp. 253–257: 253.

48 "Editorial", *Labour History Review*, 62, no. 3 (1997), p. 254.

49 Neville Kirk, "History, language, ideas and post-modernism: a materialist view", *Social History* 19, no. 2 (1994), pp. 221–240. John Belchem's approach is neatly summarized in his *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 5: "this study applies the linguistic approach to re-

lighted potential ways in which postmodern sensibilities could be integrated into older ways of thinking about the past. And a thoughtful opening chapter, penned by Richard Price, subjected postmodern epistemologies to the same sort of criticism that had been applied to their modernist predecessors.[50] That Price reached broadly sceptical conclusions may have confirmed the linguistic turners' worst fears, but no one could have complained that such a volume was the product of "rank indifference" on the part of labour historians. Indeed, recently there have been signs that even Scottish and Welsh labour historians might be beginning to appreciate the benefits of engaging more positively with postmodernism.[51]

Similar impulses can be seen to be at work within the social history paradigm more generally. Certainly, there are few signs that historians *en masse* are willing to junk older epistemologies in favour of a postmodern alternative. To that extent the linguistic turners have indeed failed in their efforts to shake the foundations of the social history project. Nevertheless, they have been successful in invigorating concepts, assumptions, arguments and chronologies that were beginning to look a little stale. With Marxism no longer the driving force it once was, "class" (as a structure) has necessarily relinquished its place as the undisputed master category of analysis. The resulting vacuum has been filled by concerns that circle around much broader questions of identity. Class identities still feature, of course, but gender, national, regional, and ethnic identities (to name but a few) are as likely to be placed in the foreground. Post-Joyce, the social order itself has become a favourite topic of study. To his category of the "people" one can add "the public" as an example of a social identity that could be inscribed with class meanings but which also possessed its own dynamic. Meanwhile, the discourse of postmodernism is now commonplace, with historians routinely thinking in terms of "Otherness", "multiplicity" and "discursive constructs". Likewise, important debates are being initiated by the postmodernists. Of course, plenty of social historians are far from convinced by the linguistic turners, but even those implacably opposed to postmodernism, are now expected to explain why. Few can afford to talk about class, experience or consciousness – those underpinning concepts of the social history paradigm – without demonstrating an awareness of their problematic nature.[52]

Perhaps one of the clearest signs of postmodernism's impact is the attention that is now routinely lavished on language. While it has always been the case that historians have prided themselves on their abilities to effect careful readings of their sources, the linguistic turn has encouraged a closer internal reading of texts, a greater sensitivity to the role that language plays in the constitution of all manner of subjectivities and an interest in how texts "work".

construct the nature of radical thought and the manner of its transmission, while taking due account of the material influences in the production and reception of radical language".

50 Price, "Postmodernism as theory and history".

51 Callum G. Brown, "A brief defence of postmodernism", *Scottish Labour History*, 36 (2001), pp. 3–5; Andy Croll, "'People's remembrancers' in a postmodern age: contemplating the non-crisis of Welsh labour history", *Llafur*, 8, no. 1 (2000), pp. 5–17.

52 For a history that takes account of postmodern sensitivities yet does so in a modernist fashion, see Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (eds), *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900–2000* (Cardiff, 2000).

And it has at least made historians rethink the relationship between the socio-economic contexts and texts themselves. For example, the voluminous literature produced by the nineteenth-century "social explorers" has been revisited. A favourite quarry of social historians in the 1960s and 1970s, this rich corpus of material had been consulted in an effort to gain insights into the lived experience of the slum dwellers. Now historians influenced by postmodernism are more likely to be concerned with understanding how the likes of Mayhew, Booth and Greenwood set about making sense of what they saw. The stereotypes employed by the explorers, the literary devices and the plot structures are brought to the fore, while questions about how accurate their findings were (i.e. how closely their pictures of the slums corresponded to a material reality beyond the texts), are downgraded.[53] Yet older sensibilities remain in place. Even Alan Mayne, who could declare that "slums are myths", did not wish to reduce them to mere fictions or banish them to the realm of hyperreality.[54] He accepted that there were areas of poor housing in nineteenth-century Britain, but was concerned to underline the ways in which the representations of slum life could not be taken as simple access points into that reality. In short, a new methodology, replete with its own concepts and tools, has enabled familiar documents to be looked at in refreshing ways. New questions inevitably come to the surface, whilst older ones (perhaps concerned with getting at an underlying social reality, or consciousness or experience), are allowed to sink into the background.

Various further examples of works which display postmodernist sensibilities (most notably in the recognition that language can construct identities) yet which remain true to many of the key precepts of the social history paradigm can be cited. Thus, John Belchem's recent work has been concerned with engaging with the postmodernists in a critical fashion. He has done so in part by exploring the "ambivalence and tension between cultural representation and socio-economic materialism", although along the way he still found himself "taking due (postmodernist) account of dissonance, multiplicity and fracture".[55] In the end, his study of the Scouse accent – from within a materialist perspective – can be said to have added something to the linguistic turn, for postmodernist historians have usually restricted themselves to an analysis of written rather than spoken forms of language. Hence both approaches have benefited from being brought into contact with each other. In a like fashion, Jon Lawrence has stayed within the bounds of the social historical approach while applying post-structuralist insights in a study of popular Toryism.[56] Instead of conceiving of the working class as a group with unproblematic "objective interests" that politicians either represented or

53 See, for example, Roger Sales, "Platform, performance and payment in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*", in Kate Campbell (ed.), *Journalism, Literature and Modernity* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 54–71; Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representation in Three Cities, 1870–1914* (Leicester, 1993).

54 Mayne, *The Imagined Slum*, p. 1.

55 John Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 32, xv.

56 Jon Lawrence, "Class and gender in the making of urban Toryism, 1880–1914", *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993), pp. 629–652: 631. Also see his *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

misrepresented, he argues that "political constituencies are not pre-established social blocs awaiting representation, but painstakingly constructed (and often socially heterogeneous) alliances."[57] "Interests" and "experiences" are constructed through language, although in ways which have to make sense to potential voters, which have to fit in with their preconceived understandings of "reality". Such an approach does not entail a wholesale rejection of previous social analyses; rather, it adds to our appreciation of the complexities of the processes binding activists to the rank and file. Meanwhile, in her study of the Lancashire weavers' strike of 1878, Sonya Rose has effected a close analysis of the discourse used by various actors in the dispute. In the process, she has emphasized the contested nature of language, noting how trade union leaders employed a rhetoric which failed to make sense of the lived experiences of working men and women. Rose can only reach such a conclusion by thinking like a good social historian: "language or texts by themselves do not determine political identities. Language does not float free of social structures and organizations to do its work by capturing minds." Rejecting the hard line postmodern belief that language speaks us, Rose articulates a view that most social historians in Britain would support: "language informs action and creates identities when it speaks to people's lives, which are, after all, deeply affected by social divisions and unequal relations of power. Ultimately, however, it is these people who decide which words are significant."[58]

If the social historians are more appreciative of the key role language plays in the construction of identities, they bear the imprint of postmodernism in other ways too. By quizzing the nature of the relationship between the social and the political, the linguistic turners have had injected new life into the field of political history, for instance. The realm of politics is now seen to possess a greater degree of autonomy than had previously been allowed. Stedman Jones had of course made this point some twenty years ago, but a raft of historians, including Jon Lawrence, James Vernon and Dror Wahrman, have drawn upon it in their various studies.[59] One very important consequence of this turn to the political has been the generation of new chronologies. According to the narrative elaborated under the social history paradigm, the nineteenth century was marked by moments of rupture. After a turbulent period in which the working class was made and which culminated in Chartism, came an age of equipoise – a period of apparent social stability. This was, in turn, followed by the remaking of the working class in the later decades of the century. Those decades after the century's mid-point caused social historians particular problems. How to explain the apparent evaporation of class consciousness that accompanied the decline of the Chartists? All manner of arguments were deployed to explain that period of apparent stability, including the labour aristocracy thesis and notions of false consciousness. But Stedman Jones's reconceptualization of the Chartists im-

57 Lawrence, "Class and gender", p. 631.

58 Sonya O. Rose, "Respectable men, disorderly others: the language of gender and the Lancashire weavers' strike of 1878 in Britain", *Gender and History*, 5, no. 3 (1993), pp. 382–397: 393.

59 James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993); Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995).

mediately opened up a new way of thinking. For in his analysis, Chartism marked the end of a much older tradition of political protest, rather than the beginning of a new working-class mass movement. It could not be the latter, for the working class was not "made" in the way that E.P. Thompson had suggested. And, as Christopher Kent has observed, by connecting Chartism up with Victorian liberalism, Stedman Jones also "smooth[ed] out another rough spot in the social history narrative". This smoothing-out process has been evident in the work of other historians too. Joyce's emphasis on the populist discourses, and Eugenio F. Biagini's work on popular liberalism, both serve as a bridgehead that neatly links an older Chartist radicalism with the Gladstonian liberalism that was to follow.[60] The upshot of all this chronological revision is a renewed emphasis (in some circles at least) on the continuities rather than the upheavals of the nineteenth century.

To be clear, none of the above is meant to suggest that British social historians have "gone", or are even in the process of "going", postmodern. Only the smallest minority would be happy to call themselves postmodernists. Fewer still would accept the radical postmodernist position which holds that it is futile even to try to access past social realities. And the linguistic turners' dream of fully post-structuralist-inspired social history, is likely to remain a dream, at least for the foreseeable future. For whatever the shortcomings of the social history paradigm, it retains the power to generate plausible answers to questions that historians still find fascinating, such as "change over time" and the interplay between the material and the ideal worlds. The postmodernist alternative, necessarily, has little to say about such eminently sensible (under modernist conditions) historical questions. What has been contended here is that, after a generation, social historians are beginning to break out of the powerful gravitational pull exercised by the likes of E.P. Thompson. In so doing, an engagement with postmodernism, along with other intellectual currents, has assisted them in the framing of new questions and new perspectives.

Conclusion

Viewed from the perspective of the more ardent postmodernists, the social history edifice remains substantially intact. Crucially, social historians remained wedded to many of the epistemological assumptions that have governed their activities for years. A "common sense" empiricism, which can appear hopelessly naïve to the linguistic turners, still holds court, and this notwithstanding the sustained efforts of the more theoretically-minded to highlight its apparent deficiencies. Given the imperial ambitions entertained by many of the strongest advocates of postmodernism – as evidenced by the "all or nothing" nature of many of the debates played out in the realm of the theoretical – such a situation could be taken to mark the ultimate failure of the postmodern challenge. Moreover, whilst the postmodernists have been adept at pointing out the supposed deficiencies of a modernist history, they have been spectacularly unsuccessful at building a New Jerusalem which meets the requirements of their

60 Kent, "Victorian social history", pp. 104, 117; Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, p. 5.

own post-structuralist blueprints. It is revealing that Keith Jenkins has recently had to admit that he cannot think of one truly postmodern work of history. Even more telling is the fact that he cannot even imagine what one might look like.[61] If the theoretical gurus have little idea of how to set about fashioning their new "histories of the present" and the future, social historians may well wonder what chance the rest of them have got. Until the postmodernists can move beyond simply criticizing what went before and begin delivering on their promise of a better historical practice, it is unlikely that social historians will be persuaded to turn their back on older ways of thinking altogether.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, while the linguistic turners have yet to win the big prize, they have had a substantial impact on the domain of social history in multiple ways. What should be theoretically impossible – at least if the "dialogue of the deaf" is any guide – has, in practice, happened; namely, there has been a partial synthesis between the old and the new. The old master concepts such as "class" and "experience" have been rethought; social historians have learned to appreciate the role of language in the construction of identities in new ways; and different questions have surfaced as a consequence. Certainly, postmodernism is not the only force that has been responsible for the reconfiguration of the field (the rise of cultural and gender history, for instance, have also worked their rejuvenating magic), but few can doubt the significance of its revivifying effects. Moreover, whereas twenty years ago, the budding postgraduate student would have most likely turned to Marxist historians in order to discover the latest, most "fashionable", ideas, today the linguistic turners have placed themselves on the cutting edge. Patrick Joyce's words to an anxious Lawrence Stone have borne fruit: "new approaches" and "new kinds of history" *are* now on the agenda. That British social historians are engaging with those new approaches is clear; that they are simultaneously holding on to tried-and-tested ways of thinking about the past is also beyond doubt.

61 Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, p. 28.