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Truth and Falsity in Postmodernism (1)

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Since the early 1980s, a clear trend has emerged within the academy in which literary critics have “invaded” the “territory” of historians, sociologists, jurists and other disciplines in the social sciences and have elevated the analysis of literary texts as the only legitimate foundation for cultural commentary. Previously it was historians and others who used the examination of literary works to supplement historical and sociological investigation. The more recent tendency became, for those trained in the once relatively hermetic domain of literature, to claim a degree of rigor superior to that in the social sciences.

Such pretensions have been encouraged by historical conjunctures, during a time when those in the human sciences generally would not dare to enter the realm of literary analysis with the idea of shaking the conceptual foundations of critical enterprise. Moreover, literary critics or scholars may have a certain advantage in that they tended to “deconstruct” the premises and the formulations of those in the social (or “human”) sciences. Although the expression “deconstruction” can be variously defined, the notion of simply “taking something apart” is inhospitable to most historians and sociologists. Researchers in the human sciences have been especially trained to reconstruct or recompose historical and social reality, and for this reason tend to prefer words such as “analyze”, “interpret” or “explore” as opposed to notions presently in vogue such as “deconstruct”, “decode” or “decompose”.

What is most fundamentally at issue, according to literary critics influenced by the vogue of “post-structuralism”, is the very possibility of informed commentary on social reality through the analysis of empirical data or documentary evidence. Although poststructuralists tend to reject the possibility of determining regularities in social processes, the questions they have raised are valuable for the human sciences because all analysis must involve a constant calling into question of ideas, interpretations and intellectual formulations. One way of focusing upon the essential questions inherent in social analysis is to consider how cultural “values” can be understood in relation to individual (or collective) “interests”.

Determining the relation between values and interests is a fundamental consideration because all historical and sociological analysis must take account of — and even reconcile to a certain extent — the subjective and objective dimensions of social processes. It is a phenomenological consideration transcending the terms of analysis (such as “values” and “interests” or “objectivity” and “subjectivity”). At the same time, there can be no such transcendence in the absence of clear definitions, which in themselves constitute the conceptual building blocks of informed understanding.

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In the present discussion the following definitions are operative. “Values” refer to the content of subjectivity within a given socio-historical situation. “Interests” denote an objectified realm of demonstrable material necessity. The notion of “false consciousness” is that used by Karl Marx in his *The German Ideology* (1845-46) to describe a condition in which members of a particular social group have accepted, or have become attached to, ideas, norms or perceptions

that tend to detract from or even to contradict the material or political interests (or wellbeing) of the group to which they belong. These are definitions that, I believe, are pertinent to an examination of some of the confusions about (or inherent in) the social sciences.

Literary text and social science

Can we really aspire to “consciousness of what is false” in the social sciences? Indeed, the determination of “falsity” is as problematic as that of “truth”. For this reason, it is perhaps more legitimate to refer to what is *untenable* in social science, keeping in mind that this means, from the standpoint of the so-called hard or physical sciences, almost everything. Given that nothing can ever be *proved* in the social sciences, the problem is not at all resolved by the realization that validity in social science emerges from demonstration; for demonstration, as a product of method, analysis and imagination, is itself always subject to interpretation, to conflicting evaluations. In terms of their methodological (and epistemological) limitations, therefore, it can be readily concluded that the differences between social analysis and literary criticism are not significant.

There is, however, a major distinction between literary criticism and social analysis symbolized by the word “text”. This word has received a valorized status in recent years, revealing a process of reification that is reflective of an intellectual trend that can itself be analyzed as a social phenomenon. But the significance of the word-concept of “text” is that it represents a difference of perceptual orientation between literary critics and social analysts. It is therefore imperative to subject the notion of text to the same type of critical examination reserved to other value-concepts.

What is a text? From the point of view of the social sciences, a text is a circumscribed document composed of physical elements that are partially quantifiable. Even if the juxtaposition of its symbols can be complex, its *boundaries* are relatively clear. The fact of thinking of the word and the concept of “text” in this way minimizes reification for one essential reason: for the historian or the sociologist the object of study is qualitatively different than the object of study pursued by literary critics. For the social scientists, society, in all its past, present and future configurations, is the text. The totality and complexity of its relationships is the real object of study.

If, for literary critics, a text can be considered an open document leading in a myriad of directions and constructed of many layers of meaning, its physical contours and symbolic construction are nevertheless finite. That which lends complexity or, alternatively, which extracts meaning(s) from the document is the act of analysis. For historians and sociologists, on the contrary, the contours or boundaries of society (and within society) are not clearly observable; they must be induced. As stated, these contours or boundaries are the very object of study. They are not the physical limits within which analysis is applied, as in the case of literary criticism. Social or historical analysis is, therefore, always an act of circumscription. But is it not an act of circumscription that can rely solely upon reference to symbols or word-concepts as elements of demonstration.

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The way in which historians have reacted to the “deconstructionist” trend within academic “re-search” and discourse is revealing of how simple appropriation of language is not enough to overcome the very different modalities inherent in their discipline (when compared to literary criticism). In recent social and historical analysis, the recurrent use of the word “mapping” to describe the objective of a research study is a fashionable, if naïve, attempt to attribute textual characteristics to the infinitely more complex field of relationships constituting each historical situation and human society more generally. It is clear that the attempt of some literary critics to preempt the human sciences has led some historians and social scientists to present their field of study as a kind of cartography. (See, for example, Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the United States: Mapping the American Left* [1987] More recently, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen who describes his study of *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* [1996] as a “cartography of cultural cognition”. Many other examples could be cited.) However, understanding the fluid, relational

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dynamics of human interactions is not helped by suggesting they can be charted like so much topography.

The problem is that the “social text” is composed of willed human action, behavior that can be “objectively” observed or analyzed, political institutions, social formations and...cultural values. Ultimately, the historian, sociologist or political scientist must refer to an evidential context as the grounding of his or her work. The conclusions must bear a strict relation to the concreteness of the data. The acid test of demonstration is, therefore, the practical efficacy of method and conception in dealing with the available information. The degree of plausibility of the analysis is always tied to a certain notion of empirical factualness, which is far less present in literary analysis or philosophy as academic disciplines where speculation and stylistic innovations form a more accepted part of the “canon”.