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*Historical Narratives:  
Products of Ontology and Hierarchy*

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay postulates that an ambiguity between historical facts and the historians' interpretation of these facts produces a gap where parts of a historical narrative are silenced and others given uptake. Unequal power structures enter the story when historians try to fill this gap by drawing connections. By addressing three main problems historians face when they attempt to construct an accurate account of the past, namely ambiguity, ontology, and methodology, this essay offers a critical analysis of the production and development of historical knowledge. The author calls for historians to approach writing history with a diversity of methods in their toolbox to address idiosyncrasies to the best of their ability.*

**KEYWORDS:** *historiography; methodology; ontology; perspective; power structures; truth; accuracy; ambiguity; genealogy; silencing*

*Introduction*

Those who do not study academic history commonly regard “truth” as its fundamental aspect, but are historians really capable of constructing a completely authentic account of the past? Simply put, history is an analysis of the human past, but this definition overlooks its many complexities. History consists of more than names, dates, and places. Similar to the people central to historical analysis, history is a complex phenomenon. History is complicated because it is multifaceted. A variation of unequal powers alters the story, compromising the ability of a historical narrative to encompass the whole truth.

Historians must consider their specific ontology apart from their historical subject's ontology. One's ontology is built by a hermeneutic relationship between oneself and how one experiences, interprets, and situates oneself in the world. Therefore, ontology includes systematic biases because personal experiences construct one's ontological identity. Ontology is inherited, but it is also affected by present circumstances. Ontology changes over time, and as it changes all aspects of life are altered, including how one writes history. Therefore, analyzing historical narratives is important, but considering how historians write history also makes a narrative more accurate. Analysis must be cognizant of both sides of the historical context. Ontology makes any interpretation problematic because power structures influence one's interpretation. This means that any single interpretation can never capture the whole “truth.” By utilizing a combination of methods, historians can track various power structures found on both sides of the historical process to construct a more accurate version of the past.

Part one of this essay is an overview and explanation of three major areas where inequalities of power make constructing a narrative problematic for historians, namely ambiguity, ontology, and productivity. Part two explains the mutually reciprocal influence between the dominant forms of society and historiography. Finally, part three introduces three methods of historical analysis

and explains how their fusion can help address inequalities of power and help construct a more accurate narrative.

### *I. The Three Power Problems*

The fundamental problem with historicity lies in an ambiguity within the definition of history. Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot acknowledges this ambiguity by bisecting history into different sides, namely historicity one and historicity two.<sup>1</sup> Historicity one represents the socio-historical process, in other words an event that has already happened, while historicity two refers to the narrative constructed from the knowledge one has of the socio-historical process, or simply what is said to have happened.<sup>2</sup> The recognition of some ambiguity within the definition of history is not new, but in the past strictly positivist and constructivist standpoints have dominated the conversation.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, the positivist view of history has assumed an accurate formulation of the past to be possible through a distinct separation between an event and what is said to have happened. The positivist viewpoint understands power as an unproblematic part of the story. On the other hand, constructivists are critical of the historian's ability to adequately represent the past because constructivists see historical narratives as an inevitable convergence between what happened and what is said to have happened. The constructivist standpoint denies historical narratives any power in themselves because constructivists understand historical narratives as fictional stories that unrightfully claim to be true.<sup>4</sup>

Trouillot regards both positivist and constructivist ideologies as problematic because,

history is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.<sup>5</sup>

Focusing on the production of history outside of the positivist and constructivist dichotomy places the utmost importance on specific conditions in which historical events happen and are interpreted.<sup>6</sup> Only once historians shift their focus from what history *is* to how history *operates* can they begin to advance toward a more precise account of the past that includes a multiplicity of perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 4-6.

<sup>5</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 4.

Another issue in the historical field is the dominance of Western ontology in the interpretation of historical events. Anthropologist Thomas C. Patterson tracks power structures that evolved into the modern Western ontology that continues to affect society. Patterson provides the background necessary to critique the dubious merits of civilization and initiates a desire for different perspectives. He challenges the Western-centric ideas of civilization, progress, and reason that follow Western ontology's foundation in inequalities of power. Western definitions of civilization, progress, and reason are problematic because they create a subjective version of the world that eliminates alternative standpoints by disregarding them as unimportant or incorrect.

Patterson shows how European expansion produced the knowledge of the "other" necessary to establish, maintain, and justify ideas of civilization, progress and reason. These ideas were used to build Western ontology. According to him, Western intellectuals characterized their theory of civilization as a historical change from a natural or original condition to a more advanced form through the process of moral, intellectual, and social progress. During European expansion, the idea that progress made life in the present superior to the past was new. This was when progress became desirable, directional, and cumulative.<sup>7</sup> Then, reason became understood as the propeller for progress. The growth of reason facilitated the conquest of nature and instigated advancement to the detriment of the "others" who, in the eyes of the West, did not seem to have any attributes of civilization. Ultimately, reason initiated a progression toward a more "civilized" society.<sup>8</sup> Western civilization continues to be upheld by reason, and progress was bolstered by the rise of capitalism, the scientific and industrial revolutions, the appearance of modern nations, and the Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup>

European expansion made dominating "others" possible through the construction of racial, cultural, and economic hierarchies based on a society's relationship to civilization, reason, and progress.<sup>10</sup> Privileged groups within Western social hierarchies used knowledge rooted in European expansion to construct a concept of civilization based on a human-versus-nature binary. This binary was and continues to be used to distinguish the "elite" from subordinated communities. The "other" who they deemed closer to nature placed the West on the human side of the binary, allowing Western intellectuals to view their own societies as more civilized.

One reason why racial hierarchies that structure Western ontology challenge historians is because ontology can make history unthinkable as it happens. The foundations of Western ideology in colonialism deemed the Haitian Revolution

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas C. Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization*, 22.

unthinkable before the event took place. Ideas of imagined Northern European superiority derived from European expansion were reproduced, reinforced, and challenged by Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophical literature.<sup>11</sup> The prevailing power structures of colonialism assumed that Africans could not fathom African freedom, therefore, they were not capable of developing methods to attain any such freedom.<sup>12</sup> However, Africans could understand freedom, but within the framework of colonialism the West could not fathom the idea of African liberty. In other words, colonialists could not have thought about the human equality the way we do today because facts about the Haitian Revolution were unthinkable within the narrow framework of Western colonial thought.

Trouillot suggests that discourse always lags behind practice, meaning that only after the “impossible” had happened could the West begin to debate the Haitian Revolution. Even during the Revolution, the West found explanations to justify the facts about the Revolution to fit their colonialist mindset. The Revolution remained unthinkable to colonialists because Western ideology dominated the discursive framework around the Haitian Revolution. Colonialists had to continue to believe that slaves lacked a natural desire for freedom because believing in African liberation would have undermined the Western understanding of the world that was so deeply set in their ontology. Unthinkable history creates a problem for historians because if an event is unthinkable even as it happens, then how can the unthinkable be interpreted later? For later historical accounts of the Haitian Revolution to be accurate, the West must break free from its ontology constructed by colonialism.<sup>13</sup>

History can also be misrepresented through ontology in the naming of a fact because terminology creates a field of power through historical representation. Just like all choices in the historical process, Western ontology influences all terminology. Specific word choices used to represent history influence the representation and interpretation of people and events later on. Specific words chosen by the dominant West to describe a historical event or group can set the tone for how people interpret history after the construction of the narrative. For instance, naming an event a “revolution” has a positive connotation—as opposed to naming it a “rebellion” which has a negative connotation. This same process can be seen as modern African American retaliation to oppression is named a “riot” when the event could be called an “uprising,” all depending on the interpretation of the event. The dominance of Western terminology misrepresents historical events as one-sided phenomena and does not acknowledge that one person’s rebellion is considered another person’s revolution.

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<sup>11</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 106.

To understand how history works, historians must uncover and trace the inter-dimensional forces of power throughout history. However, doing so is a complicated process because the same forces historians analyze have different meanings throughout history – meanings that certainly differ from the original context. Moreover, historians must be cognizant of their interpretations because their ontology can be problematic when narrating the past. Western ideology continues to affect how people see and interact with the world in the present, including how they interpret the past. The West's one-sided perspective hinders historians in their ultimate goal of achieving the most accurate account of the past because Western subjectivity silences alternative interpretations.

Another major problem historians face is insufficient resources and methods to produce narratives. The archive becomes problematic for historians because power structures operate within the production of a narrative itself. Only through a careful examination of the historical process can historians discover silences that expose the roots of uneven power relationships.<sup>14</sup> Ontological biases affect which facts are considered relevant or “true” in the construction of a narrative. Trouillot identifies four moments where silences commonly occur in historical production: fact creation (making sources), fact assembly (making archives), fact retrieval (making narratives), and retrospective significance (making history in the final sense).<sup>15</sup>

The process of creating and assembling sources produces silences because not one fact is meaningless, yet some are omitted for practical reasons inherent in the recording process itself.<sup>16</sup> Fact retrieval silences parts of history through archival power. Favoring certain sources forms an archival path that leads researchers a certain way. An archival path is set once authority and credibility are attributed to specific sources along the path, increasing some sources' chance of retrieval while discouraging the discovery of others.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, retrospective significance adheres to the first three steps as well as the socio-historical process itself. The first three steps all contribute to how an event or person is remembered and interpreted later on. Retrospective significance is based on the importance of an event or person when the facts and narratives are considered later on. Ultimately, power structures in the historical process are always uneven, meaning sources are never created equal.<sup>18</sup>

The story of the three faces of Sans Souci exemplifies how power inequalities create silences through the four main methods of historical production.<sup>19</sup> The three faces of Sans Souci are the Milot palace in Haiti, the Potsdam palace in

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<sup>14</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 51.

<sup>17</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 53-54.

<sup>18</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 44-45.

Germany, and the Colonel in the Haitian Revolution. The Milot palace belonged to Henri Christophe, the king of Haiti during the revolution. Christophe surrendered to the French forces in April 1802.<sup>20</sup> There are many assumed reasons for Christophe naming his palace Sans Souci, but it is rarely mentioned that Sans Souci was the name of a man murdered by Christophe.<sup>21</sup> Sans Souci had quickly become Christophe's subaltern and played an important role in the Haitian Revolution. Soon after Christophe surrendered, Colonel Sans Souci reassembled the Haitian colonial troops and started a new rebellion.<sup>22</sup> As soon as Sans Souci's former superiors defected and joined in an alliance with the French, Sans Souci resisted the French and resented Christophe and his followers as traitors. Sans Souci resisted longer than most but eventually surrendered to the French without bowing to Christophe's authority. Offended, Christophe asked for one last meeting with his former subaltern. At that meeting, Christophe's soldiers shot Sans Souci and his followers. Few historians question Christophe's unique name for the Milot palace because instead of recognizing Sans Souci Milot as a pantonym for his deceased subaltern, they wrongfully attribute his choice to the grand Sans Souci palace of Potsdam, built six years earlier.<sup>23</sup>

There are many reasons why historians assume that Christophe named his Milot place after the Potsdam palace instead of the enemy he murdered in cold blood. First, the Potsdam palace stands out in ways the Milot palace does not. Continuous renovations to Potsdam and the elegance of Frederick the Great's life gave the Potsdam palace great archival power and retrospective significance. Unlike Potsdam, the Milot palace deteriorated over time and therefore lost any archival power and historical significance.<sup>24</sup> As for Sans Souci, the man, only small amounts of information can be found because practical reasons inherent in source and archival creation have silenced him.<sup>25</sup> Sans Souci, the man, was silenced by fact retrieval because some historians, influenced by their ontology, chose to exclude any small information about him from the narrative.<sup>26</sup> Once historians formed archival paths excluding Sans Souci, the man, he was further silenced and lost any of his archival power. By murdering Sans Souci and naming the Milot palace after him, Christophe marginalized Sans Souci's, the man's, retrospective significance to the story. The retrospective significance of Sans Souci in Potsdam, being more significant than Sans Souci, the man, provided the historical power necessary to create an artificial correlation between the names of Milot and Potsdam, pushing Sans Souci, the man, further into his

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<sup>20</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 53.

silence. The three faces of Sans Souci reveal the multiplicity of ways histories can be silenced by inequalities in the historical process before, during, and after the historian intervenes.<sup>27</sup>

After a narrative is constructed, the historical narrative has material outcomes in the real world through historical representation.<sup>28</sup> For example, the historical representation of slavery is problematic because history itself has a fixed chronology that can only represent slavery as finite. By representing slavery with a beginning and an end, history's timeline does not highlight that slavery involves power that transcends from the past and manifests itself differently in the present. Trouillot points out that, although slavery has ended, slavery's oppression continues in less obvious and more complex ways, such as institutional racism (employment, education, political power, housing) and denigration of blackness (unfair criticism of the black community).<sup>29</sup> Thus, representing slavery accurately needs to address the events described in the past, as well as their different representations in the present. Illustrating slavery as the past creates an inaccurate view that trivializes the connection between the legacy of slavery's power and the racial injustices of the present.<sup>30</sup>

## *II. The Hermeneutic Relationship between Society and Historiography*

Historiography is a metadiscourse on the critical evaluation of the different ways history has been written over time. Jeremy D. Popkin's historiographical timeline shows that shifts in historiography are a result of "the questions raised by the difference between the two meanings of the word history."<sup>31</sup> Popkin defines the major obstacles historians have faced when analyzing and interpreting events, and chronologically outlines the various methods historians have used to approach these problems over time.<sup>32</sup>

The way historians interpret history is connected to their ontology, which is inherited the same way that knowledge is articulated and how common sense is constructed. "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>33</sup> For this reason, the historian is not exempt from the socially constructed schemas that shape a society because those schemas build the historian's ontology. Historians are products of "their" time just like any other historical subject because they interpret events differently depending on the prevailing concerns of their day.

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<sup>27</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 44-45.

<sup>29</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 146-147.

<sup>30</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 148.

<sup>31</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, x.

<sup>33</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 89.

Living in a specific period provides knowledge specific to a historian's lifetime, shaping his or her perception of the world, including how history works.<sup>34</sup>

Historical events contribute to shifts in ontology that transform the perception of history during a particular time.<sup>35</sup> Changes in the methods used for historiographical analysis are caused by paradigm shifts in ontology rooted in real-world experiences, but real-world experiences can also alter historiographical methods. Historians must not only focus on the the prevailing methods of their own day because a variety of many historiographical methods is crucial to an accurate historical narrative.

For example, in the fifteenth century, the invention of the printing press created a shift in ontology that influenced how history was conceived.<sup>36</sup> When he invented the printing press, Johannes Gutenberg became the positivist's hero. His invention revolutionized the way historical information was transmitted, and it expanded access to historical knowledge and documentation. The mass printing of documents also spread education and increased awareness of current events, which affected the ontology of the public. People began reading about the events of their day, and they themselves started writing journals about their experiences and opinions.<sup>37</sup> Journals would later serve as important sources to aid historians in their accounts of the past. People writing about history could now read original sources for themselves, but the mass production of narratives also paved the way for new questions. How could a reader be sure of a text's authenticity?

The invention of the printing press transformed the prominent methods for creating historical narratives and ultimately impacted the nineteenth-century Rankean school of history. Leopold von Ranke was indeed a product of his time. His main focus was on the political and diplomatic history of elites and military leaders, and he used this as the foundation for the school he founded.<sup>38</sup> He was a positivist who believed that a historian's task was to show what essentially happened by distinguishing between history and fiction. Because of this, he emphasized the use of primary sources in preference to other materials. Ranke insisted that the entire history of the past needed to be rewritten by historians trained in new methods that focused on primary sources. For Ranke, a historian needed to evaluate sources by using the specific context in which they had been created. This meant each age had its own sets of schemas, and one was not superior to any other. Ranke also emphasized footnotes to show the creation of a dual aspect of history: one of the past and one of the historian's efforts to

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<sup>34</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 89.

<sup>35</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 66.

<sup>36</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 66.

<sup>37</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 54-55.

<sup>38</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 19.



construct it.<sup>39</sup> Ranke's concern for sources and citations influenced the development of standards for the conservation of documents. His focus on showing what essentially happened led to the creation of the modern archive and the professional archivist. Yet, Ranke's reasoning for the creation of archives is ironic considering how the interaction of historians with archives silences certain parts of history.<sup>40</sup> The Rankean school of history's political and diplomatic methods were criticized for excluding women, minorities, and common people, which influenced the social and economic history of the masses used by the Annales school.<sup>41</sup>

The Annales school of history was founded in the early twentieth century by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre.<sup>42</sup> According to the Annales school, the goal of the historian was to produce a total history that would take in every aspect of the past. The Annales historians' methods were heavily social and economic and were dependent on data that could be analyzed statistically. The Annales scholars' approach could construct a convincing account of the past, but their focus on statistics and numbers diverted the attention away from the experiences of the people involved. The Annales historians also broadened the types of evidence they drew from to support their idea of a total history.<sup>43</sup> They focused on interdisciplinary methods of historical analysis to try and include every aspect into historical narratives. Although the Annales methods included common people, women, and minorities in their history of the masses, they failed to recognize the differences in historical experiences of specific groups and downplayed the aspect of human experience.<sup>44</sup> The Annales' failure to accurately depict the experiences and thoughts of historical subjects influenced the cultural-linguistic turn of the late twentieth century.

Cultural history emphasized the variety of ways historical agents have made meanings for themselves over time. Cultural history deals with the prevailing ideas, discourse (language), and practices of specific groups instead of the social history of the masses. The linguistic side of cultural history places an extreme constructivist emphasis on the power of discourse in the shaping of human lives, which is problematic when trying to include any agency of historical agents.<sup>45</sup>

### *III. Using Methods to Address Problems of Historicity*

In the 1960s, there was a linguistic change in the methods of historiography associated with poststructuralism.<sup>46</sup> Although Michel Foucault would never

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<sup>39</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 77.

<sup>40</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 128-129.

<sup>41</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 111.

<sup>42</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 111.

<sup>43</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 110-111.

<sup>44</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 112-113.

<sup>45</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 142.

<sup>46</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 135.

admit it or use the term, he was central to the poststructuralist movement. Foucault's discursive approach to the links between language, representation, and practice initiated a change in historiographical methods and how history was understood.<sup>47</sup> Foucault focused on discourse as a linguistic system of representation that consists of rules and practices that dictate meaningful knowledge and regulate normativity.

Discourse dictates what constitutes useful knowledge by establishing ideas of reality, normality, and "truth" within a particular context. Knowledge is constantly linked to the influence and operations of power, and combined they shape an artificial perception of the world. Therefore, discourses are not effective tools for determining a reality external to the framework in which it operates because "truth" is relative to the knowledge within certain contexts. Truth does not come from knowledge directly, but when the majority believes certain knowledge to be truthful, that knowledge becomes true because it then has real consequences in the world. Discourse produces knowledge through language, but it also regulates practice through normalization. Discourse establishes normal ways of acting toward a topic and regulates what is sayable or thinkable about a topic by deeming certain behavior unfit for the situation.

According to Stuart Hall, Foucault characterizes discourses as productive networks of power and knowledge which intertwine with and mutually support one another through pleasure and the threat of punishment; Foucault differentiates discourses from reductive forms of power.<sup>48</sup> Foucault asserts that the power of discourse is extremely dynamic through its characteristics of productivity, self-perpetuation, and invisibility. Discourse is productive in that it may restrict certain behavior, but its effectiveness lies in its ability to uphold itself by producing actions. Power compels its subjects to act in certain ways deemed normal by discursive production and compels its subjects to stay within the "normal" parameters of discourse because the pleasure associated with exerting power over another person creates the threat of punishment by others. The subjects through which discursive power operates experience gratification through material benefits and superior self-worth. Power sets the foundation for individuals to live out their daily lives, and power's luxuries compel subjects to participate in and uphold power relations by granting authority. Foucault argues that the ultimate characteristic of productive power is its invisibility. By uncovering power, people can begin to understand how it works.<sup>49</sup>

The introduction of Foucault's ideas of discourse, power/knowledge, and discipline to academia had great implications for the historical process.

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<sup>47</sup> Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 137-138.

<sup>48</sup> Stuart Hall, "Foucault: Power, Knowledge, and Discourse," in *Discourse Theory, and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 72-78.

<sup>49</sup> See John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), 45-46.

Foucault's contribution to historiography produced the language and knowledge needed to track the power included in historical production. Foucault revealed that historians are inherently engaged in power when creating a historical narrative. By showing that there are multiple versions of the "truth" relative to the powers working to construct a certain reality, Foucault challenged the ability of historians to uncover any historical "truth." Historians now had to be especially careful when interacting with archives. When historians sift through historical data, they exert power by selecting sources and excluding others. Historians favor certain sources while considering others as unimportant to the story. The ability of historians to disregard certain accounts of the past creates silences that compromise historical accuracy.

Foucault's method addresses the paradoxes of Trouillot by demanding the necessity for historians to be more self-conscious about the implications of their work.<sup>50</sup> In short, Foucault influenced the change from historical "truth" to historical accuracy. Foucault's method also determined that historical actors are products of their own time, meaning to interpret their associations based on any current conceptions of the world is flawed. Therefore, the study of historical subjects needs to utilize the corresponding historical context. To achieve the most accurate version of the past, the interpretation of history must be minimally untouched by the historian's modern conceptions.

Although Foucault promoted a more accurate account of the past, he has been criticized for missing part of the story as well. Foucault struggled with explaining change over time because he disregarded the agency of social actors.<sup>51</sup> William Sewell, Jr. critiques the previous characterizations of structures and offers a new definition that can account for structural change over time.<sup>52</sup>

Sewell derives his possibility for structural change over time from recognizing agency within social actors by critiquing and adding to previous conceptions of structures. Sewell upholds that defining structures as dual improves the understanding of the slow process of structural change over time. He describes structures as having a dual character because structures include a collection of different, mutually sustaining cultural schemas and a variety of resources that either empower or constrain social action.<sup>53</sup> He asserts that structures are both actual and virtual at the same time. Schemas are virtual rules of representation that construct social systems which generate actual social practices. Cultural schemas are determined virtual because they only exist in human minds. Schemas operate within a wide range of depth from the deep structures of ontology to the shallower superficial rules of etiquette.

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<sup>50</sup> See Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 138.

<sup>51</sup> See Popkin, *From Herototus to H-Net*, 138.

<sup>52</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (July 1992): 1-29.

<sup>53</sup> Sewell, Jr., "Theory of Structure," 27.

Resources can be identified as anything that serves as a source of power in social situations.<sup>54</sup> There are two main types of resources. First, authoritative resources are capabilities which generate command over people or human resources. Physical strength or knowledge are examples of specific capabilities that are used to enhance or maintain power. Any knowledge of the means of gaining, retaining, controlling, and reinforcing human resources falls under the category of an authoritative resource. Second, allocative resources are capabilities which generate command over material objects or nonhuman resources. Nonhuman resources can be naturally occurring or manufactured as long as they can be utilized as tools to enhance or maintain power.

Sets of schemas and resources mutually reinforce one another. Schemas are the effect of resources, and resources are the effect of schemas. Schemas without resources to empower them would eventually be obsolete, just as resources without schemas to direct their use would decompose. They mutually sustain one another.<sup>55</sup> Although structures tend to be reproduced by the social actions they empower, their reproduction is not automatic because structures are at risk for change in all social encounters.<sup>56</sup>

Sewell provides five reasons why structural change is possible. First, the multiplicity of structures within one society allows opportunities for change. Social systems are derived from multiple structures that operate in distinct ways, differ in depth, and rely on varying types of resources. The multiplicity of structures implies that the practices of knowledgeable agents which make up a social system are extremely versatile. The heterogeneous character of schemas and resources provides an unlimited variety of arrangements and applications for the social agent to utilize. Second, the transposability of schemas means they can be applied outside the contexts in which they were initially learned. Schemas can be applied to a wide and varying range of unpredictable situations. Third, the unpredictability of resource accumulation can undermine the reproduction of schemas. The continuing validation of schemas by other resources reproduces the same schemas. Therefore, schemas can be undermined by the accumulation of new resources and are subject to change because of the ability of social agents to interpret resources in their own way. Fourth, the multiplicity of meanings of resources allows for multiple different interpretations by different social actors. Specific resources reinforce or undermine certain structures depending on the social actor. Lastly, the intersection of structures allows schemas or resources to be appropriated from one structure to another.<sup>57</sup>

Agency is inherent in the dual elements of structures that permit structural change because directly through the functions of structures social actors become

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<sup>54</sup> Sewell, Jr., "Theory of Structure," 9-12.

<sup>55</sup> Sewell, Jr., "Theory of Structure," 13.

<sup>56</sup> Sewell, Jr., "Theory of Structure," 14-16.

<sup>57</sup> Sewell, Jr., "Theory of Structure," 17-19.

knowledgeable and active social agents. Agents are empowered by their knowledge of cultural schemas and their access to and power over resources. By having access and control over resources, agents can perform cultural schemas. Social actors' power over resources creates their agency by giving them the capability to gather a variety of resources and apply them creatively. Agency arises from the actors' knowledge of schemas, which gives them the ability to apply resources to new contexts. Once a social actor acquires the knowledge of cultural schemas, that knowledge can be generalized and creatively applied to a wide variety of different situations stretching across time and space. The agency of social actors is understood through interpreting and mobilizing resources on their terms and from their knowledge of many different schemas other than the ones initially constituted.

All actors have some form of agency, but the extent of their control over certain situations varies because agency is cultural and historical. Agency is much more profoundly collective than it is individual because all acts to mobilize resources are done in communication with others. The extent and control one has over a situation depends on one's location in collective groups.<sup>58</sup>

Sewell's theory of structure contributes to historical production by accepting the agency of social actors without hiding the forces of power that work through them. Combining Foucault and Sewell's methods creates an effective historical tool of analysis. Sewell's theory of structure and agency works with Foucault's method because he accepts that power constantly works through all social relations while acknowledging that social actors have some control over their situations. Sewell's concept of transforming structures revolutionizes historiography because he upholds the power of structures within a society without disregarding the agency of social actors. Sewell's concept of structure embraces the ambiguity of history because it allows people to be agents occupying structural positions, actors within a specific historical context, and subjects aware of their voices.<sup>59</sup> Sewell's method accepts humans as doubly historical, active on both sides of historicity. By using Foucault's methods to track power and Sewell's to explain historical changes and agency, the historical narrative can become more accurate because the story now includes the agents silenced by Foucault's extreme constructivism.

The combination of Foucault and Sewell's method revolutionized gender studies. By moving past the dichotomy of cultural and social forms of analysis, and focusing on how they mutually construct one another, the mixture of methods accounts for historical change.<sup>60</sup> Foucault's method of analyzing the discourse uncovers the powerful forces that linguistically construct ideas of

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<sup>58</sup> Sewell, Jr., "Theory of Structure," 20-21.

<sup>59</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 23-24.

<sup>60</sup> Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 135-136.

gender. Without the application of Sewell's structure and agency of social actors, the historical shifts in gender identity could not be accounted for. Together the methods identify gender as a linguistic construct while allowing structural changes in gender through the agency of social actors. Although Sewell restored human agency in the transformation of structures, he only described structural change as a slow development over time. His method becomes insufficient because it does not explain abrupt historical change such as revolts and revolutions. James C. Scott offers a method of analysis to explain abrupt change through unique forms of resistance.<sup>61</sup>

Scott describes social relations in terms of public and private transcripts. The public transcript is where social actors wear a mask and perform an act of deception to have smooth social interaction.<sup>62</sup> The public transcript is integration between subordinates and those who dominate them. The wider the gap in power, the more deceptive the public transcript. The public transcript is essential because it provides evidence for the dominant values that prevail in social relations. The problem with only observing the public transcript is that it only constitutes part of the story.

The hidden transcript represents a different part of the story because its discourse is constructed under different kinds of power for a different audience. The hidden transcript is specific to the social scene and in particular to specific actors. It not only contains vocalization of thoughts but practices that reflect those thoughts. The space between the public and hidden transcripts is often enmeshed in a constant battle. The hidden transcript offers an opportunity for the subordinate group to reveal its thoughts about the dominant group without the threat of retaliation. It is typical for the hidden transcript to be kept private, but in some instances, the hidden transcript breaks through to the public.

The declaration of the hidden transcript to a member of the dominant group in front of groups of those who are subordinate actualizes their shared situation.<sup>63</sup> Thus, insubordination creates the possibility for abrupt change because it empowers the collective with shared ideas of their subordinate situation. The hidden transcript provides communication of their shared experience which can be incited by an individual's vocalized resistance to the dominant group.

Scott's method of public and private transcripts works with Sewell and Foucault because Scott addresses the unequal power relations that permeate through society and accepts agency of all social actors while adding the possibility of resistance and abrupt change to prevailing structures. This allows social actors not just to follow a structure or transpose those of which they have

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<sup>61</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 1-16.

<sup>62</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 3-4, 45-69.

<sup>63</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 4-5, 202-228.

gained knowledge, but also the ability to resist and oppose prevailing structures through the hidden transcript. The hidden transcript builds a collective community in private which, when expressed in public, can empower the subordinate collective to act. Scott's idea of hidden transcripts transforms historiography by proposing a method to uncover the mentality of silenced subordinate groups. The hidden transcript reveals sentiments of the subordinate silenced by the dominant group's power. The hidden transcript provides an accurate attempt at including the whole of the story and is therefore an opportunity for historical accuracy. Hidden transcripts can be easily overlooked in historical production by the dominant group who may deem accounts of the subordinate as unimportant to the story.

By explaining the importance of hidden transcripts in constituting a whole, accurate account of the past, Scott restores the voices of the subordinate who have been silenced in the historical process. Scott's description of public and private transcripts has had important implications for postcolonial theory by considering that colonized individuals do not always appropriate hegemonic ideas, but resist them in private. Scott's methods call for a detailed reading of sources to reveal what might be silenced and hidden behind the official story.

### *Conclusion*

There is a wide variety of methods to analyze and write history. A combination of methods whose strengths address the weaknesses of the others is necessary to compose an accurate account of the past. By using different methods, the accuracy of historical narratives improves because specific combinations of methods address specific problems inherent in the ambiguity of history. The use of various methods of historical analysis reduces the risk of idealizing the Western world view and silencing other perspectives. When choosing methods of analysis and interpretation in the historical production of a narrative, historians must be able to make choices critically by having knowledge of the power structures that influence their ontologies. If historians are oblivious to the inequalities of power inherent in the production of history, their narratives become an inaccurate story of the most powerful, not a "true" account of the past. Those striving to become historians must learn to let go of the idealism of "truth" and focus on historical accuracy.

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