THE central purpose of this essay is to clarify some of the terms in literary criticism that are being employed in current historiographical debates, and to comment on some of their possible implications for German history. As interdisciplinary theoretical debates proliferate beyond their immediate sources, contested positions often come to be built on misleading, heavily derived, or partisan versions of the concepts and practices drawn from the other side. Once battle has been joined, the issue of more exacting definitions and distinctions may go by the board. On the other hand, my modest attempt to provide a glossary for others’ arguments may mask a more presumptuous claim to both the knowledge and the distance needed to set a tangled record straight. But although I want to suggest which insights might be valuable to historians, and which may be more problematic or unhelpful, I cannot pretend to adjudicate between currently competing theories of knowledge-production. For the German context, that undertaking would require at least some discussion of late nineteenth-century idealist historiography, and of the debate about modernization and modernity that can be traced through Marx, Weber, and Habermas. This will have to await another occasion.

In general terms, then, the current round of debate on historical methodology and epistemology has been characterized most obviously by the relative eclipse of arguments about social-science modes of explanation, and a shift towards theories drawn from linguistics and
literary studies. As Quentin Skinner has pointed out, this substitution of the text (which is open to interpretation) for nature (which is open to causal explanation) as the sovereign model for the apprehension of human behavior/social action has also been accompanied by the abandonment, or radical revision, of the search for a way in which the subject of a cognitive act can reach an "objective" understanding of the object of her cognition.\(^3\)

This paradigm shift raises anew the question of the relationship between interpretation and explanation. Habermas, following Weber, has argued that social science can and should reconcile these two projects, so that it ought to be possible both to explain the causes and to interpret the meanings of human action—a dual project which has more or less defined modern social scientific practice. Since this theorization of the reach of human knowledge has also been one of the foundations of the Enlightenment politics of progressive and scientific humanism—whether liberal, democratic, or marxist—the intellectual debate about its present status is also highly politicized. Among the most contentious of current political disputes is, in fact, whether there is now an adequate political justification for treating these historically discordant political disciplines as local variants of an overarching philosophical project of emancipation which is itself in the course of being disintegrated. This argument will have to be transacted in an equally political context of theorization and practice if it is to yield politically useful insights. Academic arguments alone will not resolve this debate, but neither can they avoid participation in it.

Isabel Hull’s essay on feminism in this collection discusses the site of the most energetic of these solvent contemporary debates. Feminism, as she points out, has developed its own critique of the core premises of the Enlightenment project of emancipation—i.e., abstract universalism, the unitary subject, and the (intelligible) social totality—and this critique shares some common ground with the ideas I shall be discussing here. Whether contemporary feminist epistemology and praxis actually anticipated these ideas is a matter of disagreement. There is, however, no doubt that it has raised equivalent questions about the adequacy of basically monodic systems of explanation, however sophisticated, to account for the sources and political signification of such terms as race, gender, ideology, and subjectivity. In particular,

the prolonged, painful, necessary, yet inconclusive encounter between marxist and feminist praxis in the past twenty years has exposed the limited ability of marxism—the most coherent and powerful of the Enlightenment theoretical projects—to generate correlates to these newly articulated questions, let alone to yield satisfactory answers to them.

In these ways, a new politics of history was already well in process in some circles long before the recent spate of articles in the American Historical Review and elsewhere registered the professional arrival of the newest of the new histories. Those who participated in it probably encounter the latest theoretical debates with a mixture of déjá-vu, excitement, and apprehension—déjá-vu, because this is not the first such encounter in recent years; excitement, because there is surely no doubt that marxism is now at an intellectual and political impasse, yet feminism experiences enormous difficulties in establishing itself as a strategic political praxis; and apprehension, because the decoupling of the explanatory/interpretive project has been particularly disturbing to marxist historians, who risk yielding the ground of their intellectual and political work to what may appear simply a more seductive kind of idealism.4

1. DISAGGREGATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

By avoiding the use of a single collective term to designate what is under discussion here, I have tried not to anticipate the first point I want to make: postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction are not interchangeable synonyms. Moreover, the point about these theories that describe themselves as “post-” (post-structuralism, post-feminism, post-marxism, etc.) is that they do not simply resist, oppose, or repudiate the term after the hyphen, but are the outcome of a process of critical engagement with it, in a dialectical sense. To be a poststructuralist is not to have just said no to structuralism, but in a crucial sense to have worked with and through the presuppositions of structuralism (or marxism, or feminism), as a means of exposing the theory’s own blind spots or deficiencies. To accept this relationship is

also to refuse on principle what would otherwise be an undisrupted binary opposition between two terms.\(^5\)

Postmodernism, unlike the other two terms in play here, can be understood not only as referring to a (loose) body of thought, but also as a historical description, the label (however condensed and inadequate) of an age. In connoting these two meanings, it seems to me equivalent to a term such as “the Enlightenment.” This dual purchase is what is conveyed by Lyotard in the opening sentence of his study of postmodernism: “Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age.”\(^6\) Postmodernism thus has a series of references: (a) to the current epoch of late capitalism, characterized, in Jameson’s words, by a “specific logic of cultural production”;\(^7\) (b) to post-historicism,\(^8\) in the sense meant by Hayden White, i.e., the intellectual turn from the nineteenth-century philosophies of history; and (c) to post-history, i.e., the flight from history itself.\(^9\)

Although I don’t want to fall into a process of pigeon-holing, postmodernism as an epochal reference seems to have two basic variants which are worth distinguishing. There is Jameson’s broadly marxist-

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8. The term historicism has had a confusing history itself, partly because of the tension in it between a constricted empiricism and a philosophically expansive positivism. Originating as a term for the nineteenth-century German academic claim to provide an objectively faithful account of past events (Ranke’s “wie es eigentlich gewesen”), it was given a more metaphysical inflection in the later nineteenth century as relativist theories of consciousness and cognition gained ground (see Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History* [Middletown, Conn., 1968]). In the 1940s, Karl Popper claimed the word as a pejorative category for all theories pretending to a “scientific” knowledge of the laws of History, with marxism as the chief offender. Most recently, the literary “new historicists” have marshalled the term in their bid to return studies of texts to the material and cultural conditions of their production and dissemination.

structuralist analysis of the postmodern within a theorized concept of history (his reading of Mandel’s *Late Capitalism*); and there is Lyotard’s poststructuralist account of a culture characterized by “incredulity towards metanarratives,” of which more below.

Post-historicism may not be particularly problematic for historians as such to accommodate, because most historians have not recently belonged clearly to schools of historical philosophy anyway. For marxist theory and historiography, however, the challenge is more pressing, as I have already suggested. Although marxism has already undergone a process of self-criticism which has led some marxists to relinquish claims to an extra-discursive truth, it is clear that this has been vigorously resisted by other marxists. For this, see for example the strenuous debates between Perry Anderson and Paul Hirst, or between Norman Geras on the one hand, and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the other.11

Post-history in the final sense raises the largest kind of cultural and political questions for the debates to which this paper is a contribution, for it has also previously been claimed for or by fascism. In this sense, the most characteristic and corrupting aspect of current postmodernist thought is, according to its critics, not only that it is the solipsistic self-description of a post-historic epoch, but that it makes history—and, in a specific and powerful concept of history, progress too—impossible. In the (reported) words of Raymond Williams: “Modernism being the terminus, everything afterwards is counted out of development.” By other critics postmodernism has been described as “a hedonist withdrawal from history, a cult of ambiguity or irresponsible anarchism,” and as “the randomization of history.”12 Lutz Niethammer has recently characterized “posthistoire” as “a disappointed postscript to nineteenth-century philosophies of history”; drawing on Habermas’s linkage of reason and intersubjectivity, he argues strongly


for the political importance of “bolster[ing] the subjectivity of the individual in his/her historical self-perception.” These aspects of postmodernism need more prominence in current debates, especially in terms of exploring the cultural/intellectual (if not personal/biographical) relations between fascism, modernism, antimodernism, and postmodernism.

Poststructuralism is a theory, or bundle of theories and intellectual practices, that derives from a creative engagement with its “predecessor,” structuralism. Structuralism, as is well known, originated as a theory of linguistics, epitomized in Saussure’s claim that “language as a total system is complete at every moment, no matter what happens to have been altered in it a moment before.” The other central tenet of Saussurean linguistics is the familiar proposition that meaning in language is the product not of reference to things exterior to it, but of a system of difference internal to language as a code. Though not constitutively related, these two propositions serve to emphasize the arbitrariness of any system of signification, and to detach it from external reference, whether to the past or to the real, as the guarantee of its meaning or truth. In the extension of structuralism to literary criticism (through, for example, the Russian formalists, Macherey, or the early Barthes), and to the realm of social and human sciences (Lévi-Strauss, Althusser), the further argument is made that not only language but all cultural systems represent coded systems of meaning rather than direct transactions with reality. Thus structuralism posits a closed system of meaning that is intelligible to a competent reader, and in this sense it retains the Kantian transcendental subject. But given the insistence on the synchronicity of the structured system, and the consequent tendency towards spatially rather than chronologically extensive metaphors, it is not surprising that structuralism has not proved congenial to the historian’s practice.

15. Indeed, if any recent intellectual conflict deserves to be called a Historikerstreit, it was surely the remarkably polemical war of position that was fought over structuralist marxism in the 1970s. The arguments here had less immediate resonance within American or German intellectual circles than among a small but influential group of British historians and intellectuals—chief among them Edward Thompson, Richard Johnson, Perry Anderson, Paul Hirst, and Barry Hindess. But the encounter was symptomatic of a new kind of clash between theoretical and
Poststructuralism has reopened the question of the diachronic, in the sense that it rejects the fixed orbits of the closed structuralist system in favor of circuits of mutable interpretation and unstable meanings. The poststructuralism advanced by the later Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and others rejects the stability, integrity, and closure of the structuralist system, the binarism that allegedly underpins it, and the proposition that the truth of a system is intelligible to an observer or reader who occupies the appropriate vantage point. For poststructuralism, there are neither fixed meanings nor privileged positions from which truth might be known. As Derrida has put it, exposing the contradiction he sees as inherent in structuralist thought, “On the basis of the structural description of a vision of the world one can account for everything except the infinite opening to truth, that is, philosophy. Moreover, it is always something like an opening which will frustrate the structuralist project. What I can never understand, in a structure, is that by means of which it is not closed.”

The refusal of totalization and binarism, the affirmation of decentering and multiplicity—these are the familiar and central themes of poststructuralist thought, and the core of its commitment to openness. Barthes, for example, revised his own earlier structuralism both by blurring the boundary between literature and criticism, text and reader, and by conceding that his own metalanguage, semiology, was itself open to analysis (contrast the embarrassment of marxist theory in the face of its own historicity). Lyotard’s refusal of legitimation by consensus (“consensus is a horizon that is never reached. Research that takes place under the aegis of a paradigm tends to stabilize”) represents a similar critique of both intellectual and political tendencies towards closure. As far as historians are concerned, it is no doubt Foucault who has been the most familiar and congenial exponent of poststructuralism, though the continuing effort to work within his practical politics that has since become widely characteristic of arguments within feminism as well as the left. Whether the structuralist initiative collapsed of its own intellectual deficiencies, or was beaten back by a redoubtable professional police action, is no doubt a matter of opinion. It is at any rate undeniable that the theoretical work of Althusser, Poulantzas, and the rest has not left a very durable legacy to history as a discipline, and that few historians have seen any reason to do more than dismiss it unread. (The exception here is David Abraham’s Poulantzian The Collapse of the Weimar Republic, 2d ed. [New York, 1986]; and see also Ian Kershaw, “The Nazi State: An Exceptional State?” New Left Review 176 [July/Aug. 1989]: 47–56.)

17. Lyotard, Postmodern Condition, 61.
paradigms will no doubt expose their limitations. Yet although Foucault’s rejection of meta-narrative and his critique of humanist sovereignty have been powerfully developed, his substitution of a knowledge/power relationship for that of knowledge/truth may well be seen as a loss of nerve or an abdication of responsibility, in the context of a society locked into unequal access to the means of communication.

*Deconstruction*, finally, is one variant of the poststructuralist tendencies represented by such different contemporary thinkers as Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Baudrillard, or Kristeva. It is the one which perhaps most effectively discloses and represents the uneasiness of structuralism in the face of its own claims. Deconstruction is a method of reading that not only exposes the limitations or inconsistencies of any particular set of conceptual oppositions and priorities in a text, but also shows how the text’s attempt to maintain this system undermines the very principles of its own operation. In other words, deconstruction is simultaneously a critique of the categories proffered by a text, and an exposed of the text’s unacknowledged challenges to its own premises. The model for this is Derrida’s deconstruction of the priority of speech over writing proposed by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. In this critique, together with his parallel deconstruction of Rousseau’s texts on language, Derrida shows how the text represses that which contradicts its own argument, while also leaving available to the (attentive) reader traces of what is repressed.

Derrida’s theory of meaning-production through *différence* (a coinage which connotes both alterity and deferral, as opposed to identity and presence) also makes conspicuous the play of presence and absence in language use. Referential theories of meaning imply that there is something outside of language whose absence is made present by language; they claim that, so to speak, thought could attain to an immediacy with itself (what Derrida calls the *propre* or self-sameness—an originary state of plenitude and presence) that would be self-validating if only language didn’t intervene as a treacherous intermediary. Derrida’s critique of Rousseau’s arguments about speech and writing is a bid to expose this claim as an illusion. Moreover, he argues not only that there is no originary state of self-authenticating knowledge, but that all writing/communication forever displaces meaning beyond the reach of stable knowledge. If Rousseau’s thought represents the quest for originary presence, for the *terminus a quo*, that of Hegel, the subject of another of Derrida’s deconstructions, represents the hope
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of the *terminus ad quem*, presence to-be-attained. The now notorious claim by Derrida that "there is nothing beyond the text" could, I think, be read as a claim that the text's act of self-betrayal is also self-disclosed, and that reading is in this sense part of the text, rather than constitutive of something imposed on it from the outside. In deconstruction, Derrida thus takes the propositions of poststructuralism to a point where they disclose their own incoherence, and he deploys the authority of *differénce* in order to deconstruct the myth of presence. Derrida's own writings will, of course, exhibit their own blindnesses and contrariness, even as they equip others to expose these. Indeed, Derrida's rhetoric takes a form that constantly acknowledges the provisional nature of his own readings, that subverts his own authority as a reader, and offers his body to those that follow (in that sense, the poststructuralist can never have "the last word").

The three terms do, then, bear a relation to one another, in the sense that deconstruction can be seen as one variant of poststructuralist thought, and that poststructuralism is one possible constituent of postmodernism. Thus deconstruction has been described as "a temporary waystation on the exodus from Marxism," but it is not the only such waystation (temporary or not), nor is marxism the only theory from which an exodus is being sought—feminism, as already suggested, shares more than a few insights with poststructuralism. In the past feminists have tackled both structuralist and marxist theory, and it is in intellectual terms inevitable and, to my mind, valuable that some feminists are now doing the same with poststructuralism.

2. HISTORY, THEORY, AND POLITICS

Having made these distinctions, I want to suggest that, while deconstruction can offer at the most a sensitive method of reading to historians, and postmodernism at the least a useful periodization, poststruc-

18. For one such critique, see Paul de Man's "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau," but also his claim that "It would seem to matter very little whether Derrida is right or wrong about Rousseau" (137). It is interesting that Derrida's (and de Man's) gesture of auto-subversion, which is enacted in a rhetoric of complexity and doubling, is what seems often to enrage their critics: but is it the obscurity that distresses them, or the subversion? Or perhaps the fact that by auto-criticism the critic anticipates and expropriates the grounds of the critique?

19. Nancy Fraser, "The French Derrideans: Politicizing Deconstruction or Deconstructing the Political?" *New German Critique* 33 (Fall 1984): 143.

20. See the discussion and references in Isabel Hull's essay in this collection.
naturialism has a potential theoretical power that justifies attending to its claims.

In politics and in scholarly debate, the first question to be asked of a theory or a reading is not whether it is correct, but whether it poses useful questions to theory or practice. This seems to me a basic but frequently forgotten premise, one which is necessary unless one thinks one has access to a revealed or an already sufficient truth (in which case such questions barely arise). To suggest “useful” rather than “correct” does not dispose of the problem of validating criteria, of course, but it does serve to emphasize that intellectual or practical claims are provisional and partial, and that the basis for discriminating among them cannot be their admissibility according to an a priori schema, or even some fixed ideal of the possible. Perhaps one might develop in their place a critical sense of the mobile relationship between interpretations of what has been, what is, and what can be imagined. The utilitarian goal here is, for academia, the production of new knowledge; for politics, it would be the production of new practical criticism and critical practice—perhaps a politics of critical resistance rather than aim, since a politics of aim ultimately epitomizes the claim to privileged knowledge.

Postmodernist theorists such as Lyotard and Laclau and Mouffe (and, in a rather different way, Jameson) have emphasized that the discourse of postmodemism is itself a historical product. Thus Laclau and Mouffe claim that “[i]t is because there are no more assured foundations arising out of a transcendental order, because there is no longer a centre which binds together power, law and knowledge, that it becomes necessary to unify certain political spaces through hegemonic articulations [as against a totalizing system]. . . . Every attempt to establish a definitive suture and to deny the radically open character of the social which the logic of democracy institutes, leads to what Lefort designates as ‘totalitarianism’; that is to say, to a logic of construction of the political which consists of establishing a point of departure from which society can be perfectly mastered and known [my emphases].”21 Of course, this counts as a claim not simply that there is no longer any belief in these foundations and centers, but that they no longer any belief in these foundations and centers, but that they no

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longer exist in whatever sense they once existed. Philosophically, one might want to continue to argue the point; historically, both propositions would be open to exploration.

At any rate, this position contrasts with that of Derrida and de Man, for it is certainly questionable whether deconstruction is sufficiently self-conscious about its own historicity as a method. Moreover, although Derrida’s subject is western philosophy since Plato, his critique has nothing to say about what is historically specific to any particular moment in its trajectory, but simply grasps it as a whole. Thus, while deconstructive method may be borrowed by the historian for the interpretation of single texts, deconstruction as an epistemology is virtually incompatible with the historian’s enterprise. There is, however, surely something to admire in Derrida’s insistence on repeatedly challenging the tendency of the new to lose its radical edge, as commodified knowledge is recuperated and domesticated. This is paralleled in Lyotard’s similarly motivated quest for “a form of [political] legitimation based solely on paralogy²² [and] a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown.”²³ On the other hand, this is certainly not unrelated to a politics of gesture which has hovered on the margins of acceptable political culture in Europe and America since the 1890s, and which continues to represent the threatening Other to a politics of rational communication.²⁴

Although this relationship raises once more the threatening specter of the irrational as a political ideology (on which see also below), poststructuralism seems to me at least as akin to Humean scepticism as to Nietzschean excess. By problematizing the subject, it encourages a certain humility, if I may be forgiven a humanist term, toward knowledge and authority. Rather than brutally enthroning indeterminacy and nihilism, it invests contingency and the positional with an explanatory and prescriptive significance that can hardly be discounted.

²². Literally, in logic, false reasoning; here intended to underscore Lyotard’s refusal of meta-languages and his commitment to the instability of knowledge.
²³. Postmodern Condition, 61, 67.
²⁴. Note the difference, advanced in the name of deconstructive practice by the short-lived and excruciatingly carefully named “Paris Center for Philosophical Research on the Political,” between the projects of taking a political position, and questioning the position of the political—a distinction which is easily mapped on to that between intellectual work and political practice in any sphere. There is, however, a certain Arendtian moment in one set of attempts to politicize deconstruction, in that they amount in the end to a critique of the extension of the political beyond the state; cf. Fraser, “The French Derrideans.”
Certainly Foucault, and perhaps Derrida too (but not de Man, or his American disciples), allow for a positionalism that may be relativist, but that does not lead ineluctably to nihilism or unintelligibility. It is possible, in other words, to concede that subjectivity, beliefs, knowledge, claims of truth are contingent on the different ways in which a subject is positioned, and to explore (and debate) the conventions of their production as knowledge, truth, etc., without falling into the abyss of nihilism—unless, once again, your point of contrast is a claimed knowledge of the master-discourse of history or truth. If you construct a correspondence theory of truth or evidence, in history or in political practice, one set of historiographical and political questions will arise; but if you construct a theory of knowledge based on difference, another set becomes possible. There is, however, no way to adjudicate the relative claims of these two theories, and no privileged relation to the real, because theories of what that is are differently premised: there is, to use Tony Bennett’s term, no “meta-metalanguage” to perform this task, no master-language of universal translation. There remains a Hobson’s choice between hypothesizing a transcendent ground for belief, or accepting the risks of groundlessness, in which case one will also want to argue which necessary fictions to lean on (and, for historians, to explore the necessary fictions of the past).

In concrete terms, if one accepts the basic poststructuralist premise that all forms of subjectivity are established by exclusions and suppressions, there is a lot to be learned historically and politically from the critique of a politics based on individuated, autonomous subjectivity. The autonomous individual subject established since the eighteenth century as the basis of the enlightened European political order becomes open to interpretation as having been constituted by a series of exclusions determined by gender, race, sexual identity, age, etc., all of which leave their guilty traces in the ostensibly integral and unified citizen. An insight of this kind opens up the possibility of exploring the play of historic and contemporary discourses that permitted and maintained these exclusions. It also gives grounds for a sceptical assessment of the value of traditional feminist claims to the same unreconstructed citizenship as that occupied by men. To relate this to a matter

26. See also Isabel Hull’s related comments about men’s alienated debates about themselves, via women.
that has particularly scandalized historians, it is not the problem of agents alone that should concern us, but rather that of secret agents: the multiple and hidden determinants of conduct and culture. The problem of agency—the claim that subjectivity, agency, and causation are abolished in poststructuralism—has been overplayed and misinterpreted, perhaps in lingering reminiscence of the violence done to agency by structuralists such as Althusser. But to my mind, the point is to question not the existence of agency, in the sense of individual or group participation in the making of meaningful events, but its coherence. What still remains contentious, however, is whether a flagging subjectivity should be "bolstered," as Lutz Niethammer has suggested, or whether the demise of the construct of the bourgeois self and its subjectivity should be hastened in the interests of something like Mouffe’s project of radical democracy. 27

On a similar matter, I think it may also be less useful to go on arguing about the relationship of text and context, than to explore the difference between interpretation of texts, and the analogical application of this method to discourses: not because the latter are somehow existentially confused with texts, but because, as systems or regularities of communication, they are also open to interpretation. This is the basic promise of Foucault’s concept of “discourse,” as against Derrida’s less plastic concept of “writing,” or de Man’s even more limiting concept of and approach to the text.

There remains, however, a basic anxiety for historians in the face of deconstruction: namely that, in making the text ultimately undecidable, it abolishes the grounds for privileging any one interpretation, and therefore makes the writing of conventional history impossible. If all of history is also seen as a text, this only compounds the problem. It may be that here we have to concede deconstruction’s ability to discern the paralogies or guilty secrets on which our own practices depend. A deconstructive critique of the historian’s practice would point out that it represses what it has in common with its ostensible object, in order to create the illusion of its difference both from literary

Critical history has shifted from arguing that every “fact” is an interpretation to arguing that every historical account is a language-act; in other words, from the denial that facts are transparent, to the denial that language is transparent. This is true of language whether used by historians’ sources, or by historians themselves. We historians are well used to accepting that the language, structure, and style of sources aren’t transparent, but are more chary of applying the same linguistic insights to ourselves: not, I think, out of mere professional pride, but because this displaces the boundary between the historian and her object of knowledge. As Hayden White has pointed out, a theory of narrativity isn’t per se a theory of history (though if one also problematizes “the content of the form,” as he does, then the escape from this relationship isn’t as easy as he wants it to be). White’s arguments about the narrative strategy of history parallel poststructuralist propositions about the relationship between literature and criticism. Barthes, Derrida, and de Man efface the conventional boundary erected between literature and literary criticism, on the basis that both are equally examples of writing or texts, and are thus susceptible to the same kind of analysis of rhetoric and meaning. White applies this insight to the historical narrative, with the effect (if not altogether the intention) of similarly blurring the boundary between “the document” and “the narrative history.” In both these examples, neither the text (according to one theory) nor the interpretation (according to another) is privileged in the sense of having the authority or right to conserve “its” meaning against interpretation. The generic problem for historians is that fact and fiction do overlap, and attempts to repress this by asserting an essential difference merely make the returns of the repressed more unexpected and embarrassing.

In conclusion, one way of assessing these debates is to see them as a contest between a series of disciplines whose internal coherence and mutual boundaries are taken for granted. Another way is to propose that the content, boundaries, and relationships between disciplines are the conventional products of certain repetitive professional academic practices, and to see that although theoretical debates are mainly and perhaps inevitably expressed within disciplinary confines, they actually spring them and can best be explored beyond them: as has already

28. This has been one lesson of the commentaries on historical narrative by Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra; see also Michel de Certeau, Heterologies: Discourse on the Other (Minneapolis, 1986).
happened in the repositioning of philosophy and theory. The contest of faculties is in this sense not a circular struggle over sovereignty, but the very process by which new (different) knowledge is produced. Yet the conditions of cultural and academic production today produce a contest between repetition and revision, in which a culture of revision is superimposed on one of repetition; a marketplace in which, as in other exchanges, some have more power than others do to determine “choices.” Even though this situation is often confusing and sometimes tyrannical, I don’t believe it is a sufficient response to argue that intellectual revision is just a cycle of fashions, or to fall back on other provisional claims dressed up as eternal verities, whether these are presented in disciplinary, moral, or political terms. It is nevertheless not a matter of indifference which language one chooses to employ for one’s political and historical practice: to employ the language of poststructuralism is to reproduce and to some extent reinforce its claims to usefulness for the time being.

3. GERMAN HISTORY

These issues present a great number of generic questions to the practice of history, or to historicity as such; but there are some implications which will be of specific import to historians of Germany, in the sense of allowing certain kinds of questions to be asked, or of suggesting the futility of trying to answer, from history, certain other questions. One could also ask what questions are foreclosed by such theoretical positions; and, in addition, what challenges to current theory are presented by the study of German history. I confine my observations here to the example of National Socialism, conscious that Nazism has become in many ways the privileged site of debate or limit case for testing difficult questions about historical practice.

Foremost among the questions raised by this relationship are the problems of rationality and of relativism. To put it bluntly, what can one usefully say about National Socialism as an ideology or a political movement and regime via theories that appear to discount rationality as a mode of explanation, that resist the claims of truth, relativize and disseminate power, cannot assign responsibility clearly, and do not privilege (one) truth or morality over (multiple) interpretation? A further specific and powerful uneasiness of historians in relation to deconstruction is that its roots appear to lie in the same turn to the irrational from which fascist ideology is said to have developed. Hence the special distress and even venom aroused by the cases of de Man
and Heidegger, which replicate in some ways older (but still lively) controversies about the historic relation of fascism and literary modernism: Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Jünger, Céline, among others.

There is also a fear that National Socialism will be reduced, under the irresponsible gaze of a writer like Baudrillard, to the level of one more spectacle in a society of commercially determined spectacles—the fear that the ultimate way of interpreting or representing the concentration camp will no longer be as a consummate human catastrophe, but as ritual or play. In an age when so many other political symbols have been detached from their fetishized significance by the solvent power of the market and distributed as objects of consumption, what, other than the power of an overriding historical morality, will prevent the swastika, the SS rune, or even the Auschwitz tattoo from reemerging as modish decoration? And is the evacuation of their meaning less or more reprehensible than its repression or celebration? While few historians nowadays would claim that their task is principally to furnish moral lessons from the past, a sense of obligation lingers from a past in which this moral purpose was more lightly shouldered and less heavily borne. To impugn the possibility of historical truth here seems to impugn morality, and to risk a collapse into apologetics. On the other hand, it is arguable that moral truth and historical authenticity are separate issues; here one might recall de Certeau’s argument that historiography demarcates itself from fiction not by claiming to tell the truth, but by exposing and discounting what is demonstrably false. One could also point out that questioning the grounds of a morality is not the same as repudiating the value of consensual structures of agreement on standards of social and personal behavior.

These large questions will not be disposed of in a short essay, and to raise them is perhaps to do no more than repeat the obvious. But in terms of the practical historiography under discussion here, a critical assessment is needed of the prolonged reluctance to take fascist ideology more seriously as a subject of study. The traditional history-of-

29. Cf. Saul Friedländer, Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death (New York, 1986); also Walter Benjamin’s classic contrast between the politicization of aesthetics, and the aestheticization of politics.

30. This is the burden of Charles Maier’s strictures against poststructuralist history in The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 168ff.

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ideas approach to it was certainly deeply unconvincing to a generation of historians schooled in social history, but the new intellectual history offers an alternative analytic that is worth applying to the texts and signifying practices of fascism. Until this is done, I do not think that there are any grounds for apodictic pronouncements about the essential fascism of de Man or Heidegger as philosophers, whatever else may justifiably be said about their personal behavior. It is curious that in all the interminable published argument about these men, there has been a virtually complete silence on both sides about the actual premises and texts of fascist or Nazi ideology: as if this were coherent, already known, yet also somehow insignificant; as if one act of rereading were sufficient to prove the case for or against the accused. The massive imbalance between the intensive, even obsessive, rereading of Heidegger and de Man on the one hand, and the neglect of their alleged ideological confrères on the other, surely needs to be addressed—in order not only to establish some kind of balance between the two sides of the argument, but also to explore why it is that virtually all the contributors to this debate have confidently perpetuated this silence. A textual project of this kind would test the value of poststructuralist reading, especially if it could deconstruct the relationship between the rational and the irrational on one of the stamping grounds of the constitution of their difference.

My second comment follows from this. Irrationality and violence are often claimed as synonyms, so that the retreat from rationality constitutes an entry into violence, a substitution of the politics of coercion for those of suasion or even moral conflict. This is nowhere more clearly proclaimed than in the case of fascism, the archetypal fist smashed in the face of the Enlightenment’s humane rationality. Yet this pared-down coupling of fascism and irrationality has never been immune from a more probing analysis of the complex interrelationship between the Enlightenment, rationality, and modernity on the one hand, and fascism, especially Nazi racism, on the other. On the grand scale one need only think of Lukács, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Arendt, while more recently the same issues have been addressed by Detlev Peukert, with his concept of the “pathological modern” in German history, and taken up by Zygmunt Baumann in a reinterpretation of Nazi genocide.32

32. See Detlev Peukert, “The Genesis of the Final Solution from the Spirit of Science,” in Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan, eds., Re-Evaluating the “Third Reich” (New York, forthcom-
A further step would be to explore how even these critiques depend upon and restate the repressive and intellectually limiting binarism of rational/irrational. Rudy Koshar’s essay offers another example in his critique of the pair modernism/antimodernism, and similarly limiting binarisms strew the field here, most of them attached to this core contrast: fascist/communist, collaboration/resistance, myth/science, aestheticization/politicization, reactionary/progressive. The comforting kinship between the positive values in these pairings deserves to be questioned, so that the linkages can be prised apart, and the historical process of their precipitation opened up to critical scrutiny.

It seems to me, finally, that the historical study of Nazi genocide is currently caught up in a dualistic metaphysics of this kind, in the struggle between what could be called hyperrealism on the one hand, and extreme derealization on the other. In the particular encounter between life and death in the Nazi extermination programs, the individual body has come into its own as the final referent and reality-check of human experience. The “holocaust” intensifies this physical realism by representing an ultimate and ultimately horrible relation between the individual body and masses of bodies: infinite suffering, countable bodies. The impossible task of the historian then comes to be to draw up a meaningful relationship between the infinite and the finite, on the grounds of experience as an account of the truth. The derealist position is that which mythifies “the holocaust”—the term itself is an index of this—by making it a transhistorical event whose real meaning may perhaps only be appropriated in its fullest sense by those who are said to have participated in it. The hyperrealist seeks to resist this dehistoricization by fixing explanations of the genocide in textual sources and readings that are as precise and incontrovertible as possible (for example, the work of Hans Mommsen or Christopher Browning). Though these are practices with very different premises, what they have in common is a desire to fix past events, in interpretive and in causal terms respectively. In that sense they are both part of a shared project of closure which needs to be opened up to question.

There is no denying the deep dilemma of the historian in the face of these questions of theory and history, nor the fact that those of us...
who claim to speak on these matters are not engaged in language
games, but are tackling issues which currently carry the utmost cul-
tural and political freight. It is one thing to embrace poststructuralism
and postmodernism, to disseminate power, to decenter subjects, and
all in all let a hundred kinds of meaning contend, when Bleak House
or philology or even the archaeology of knowledge are the issue. But
should the rules of contention be different when it is a question, not
simply of History, but of a recent history of lives, deaths, and suffer-
ing, and the concept of a justice that seeks to draw some meaningful
relation between these? I do not have an answer here, and I do not
think that any of the theories under discussion here have yet yielded
such answers, nor perhaps are they capable of doing so as such without
a longer effort of practical political criticism. But there are nevertheless
things that can already be learned. If metaphor is all we have, then we
should be ultraconscious in our choice of languages. If there are
different contexts and conventions of knowledge-production, then
we must maintain a heightened vigilance about the context of our
utterances. If knowledge is always partial and provisional, never total
or final, then we must be on the alert for the moment when our
schemes of thought congeal into intellectually and politically limiting
dogmas. And we may have to be willing to give up what we already
know—perhaps especially some of the things that we think that we
know, or need to know, with the greatest certainty—in order to recon-
figure the relationship between local and strategic knowledge in poli-
tics, as in history.

33. As Robert Gellately has proposed in his most recent work on the operations of the
Gestapo; see “The Gestapo and German Society: Political Denunciation in the Gestapo Case

34. Cf. Martin Thom’s critique of the biologically suspect language of antiracism, in “Anti-