

Social Sciences

Division II Faculty Publications

Wesleyan University

Year 2007

Haunting History: Deconstruction and
the Spirit of Revision

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HAUNTING HISTORY: DECONSTRUCTION AND THE SPIRIT OF REVISION¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the ways that the specter of deconstruction has been haunting history over the past thirty years, in particular this specter's effects on the revision of intellectual and cultural history. The essay uses the terms "specter" and "haunting" to express the fact that while deconstruction is repeatedly targeted in attacks against the dangers of postmodernism, poststructuralism, or the linguistic turn, very few historians actively use deconstruction as a historical methodology; in this regard the target has always been a phantom. However, some historians have employed the methods of deconstruction, and by examining their work as well as the attacks on it the essay attempts to explain the historiographical reasons behind these attacks. The goal of the essay is ultimately to indicate some of the ways that deconstruction is useful for the historian, as evidenced in the project of historical revision.

I. THE GHOST APPEARS

This is a ghost story—or rather a *Geist* story. It is both a *Geistesgeschichte* and a *Geistgeschichte* of the specter of deconstruction that has been haunting historians since it first began appearing in the late 1960s. Like most ghost stories, this one involves a phenomenon that is hard to explain and that has engendered varying responses. A small cadre of historians has welcomed this specter as a benevolent guide that would reveal aspects of the past and the future hitherto undetected. A larger, and more vocal, group takes this spirit to be a malevolent *Poltergeist* hell bent on causing mischief and ultimately destroying the historical profession. Still others see deconstruction as a conjuring trick performed with smoke and mirrors by disingenuous charlatans. But the vast majority of historians view deconstruction as they do most ghost stories, with bemused skepticism and guilty fascination. Most have read or heard about it secondhand, and as with most ghost stories this has led to exaggerations, inaccuracies, conflation, recastings, and revisions. The ghost is at times a monster or a demon. Furthermore, deconstruction is but one spirit among many that has haunted the historical profession since the early 1980s under the general terms "postmodernism," "poststructuralism," or the "linguistic turn." "Archeology," "genealogy," "employment," and "deconstruction" are often

1. I would like to thank Michael Roth, Brian Fay, Gary Shaw, and Dominick LaCapra for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

lumped together, as are figures as diverse as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Clifford Geertz, Richard Rorty, and Hayden White.

In terms of the practice and production of history, however, I suggest that the term “specter” is more appropriate to denominate deconstruction and the figure of Jacques Derrida than the other figures or methods invoked. Derrida is the culprit because in attacks against the dangers of postmodernism/poststructuralism/the linguistic turn it is really deconstruction that is the object; and “specter” is the right term to describe deconstruction because in fact this method has seldom been applied in the historical profession. Practically speaking, there are very few historians who actively use deconstruction as a historical methodology, and thus the target of deconstruction has largely been a phantom. More recently, the death of Jacques Derrida in 2004 and the pronounced death of “postmodernism” and the “linguistic turn” in works such as Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt’s *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (1999), Ernst Breisach’s *On the Future of History: The Postmodern Challenge and its Aftermath* (2003), and Gabrielle Spiegel’s *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (2005) appear to have put the final nails in the coffin. Twenty-first century trends in historical writing and the theory of history emphasize the return of agency, the primacy of experience, the value of testimony, and most recently the importance of “presence” for the project of history. Even stalwart proponents of the deconstructive project for history have begged off, as in the case of Dominick LaCapra, who has turned increasingly toward Freudian psychoanalysis. All indications seem to be that the postmodern moment has passed, the linguistic turn has moved to the great beyond, the subject has returned as the solid empirical ground for historical investigation, and the poltergeist has been exorcised from the historical profession. All that is left is to inter the remains of deconstruction.

But as this is a ghost story it is precisely after death that the plot thickens and the deeper and perhaps darker purpose is revealed. After all, as Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* taught us, one cannot kill a ghost. So, with the “death” of deconstruction facilitated by the death of Derrida, let us now revisit its historical life, reconstructing its impact and emplotting the narrative of its influence or lack thereof. As we shall see, by disturbing its remains we also raise it from the dead and bring back the past, and this act, implicit in all historical work, will reveal a key aspect of the relation between deconstruction and history.

The deconstructive strategy is to approach a text (historical or otherwise) as a site of contestation and struggle, though one that is hidden because one element in the text asserts itself as the source of order by establishing a hierarchy of meaning. The hierarchy is constructed as an oppositional binary, but one that is presented as neutral thereby concealing the tensions within the text. This process is not the result of the intention of the author, because the construction of the text may very well invoke unconscious, unquestioned, or implicit assumptions that are at work in the ordering process itself. The purpose of deconstruction is to expose the binary construct and arbitrary nature of the hierarchy at work in a text by revealing how the binary elements in fact exchange properties with each other. Furthermore, deconstruction also focuses on what is left out of a text, that about which it is silent but on which it also depends.

As an instance of this, take the beginning of this article. It seems to privilege “presence” over “absence” as provoked by the specter *Geist*/ghost, or in the implicit assumption that because most historians do not “do” deconstruction it is not of practical use for the writing of history. As it turns out, it is the fact that most historians don’t employ deconstruction (an absence) that is the prime motor of this article despite the fact that this exploration of deconstruction is justified by drawing attention to the disproportionate number of articles attacking it (a presence or event) as dangerous for the practice of history. Here the binary is exposed and the hierarchy unsettled by the exchange of properties (absence is privileged over presence).

However, deconstruction might seem a most inappropriate tool for historians. After all, the writing of history is concerned with the construction of narratives highlighting events that occurred in an attempt to make them present to the reader or listener. One could argue that it is precisely this constructive nature of the project of history (the assembly of information, the architecture of the argument, the presentation of a comprehensible narrative) that makes deconstruction such an inappropriate strategy. The historian is building something and the end result would be a cumbersome two-step if one were to deconstruct each part along the way.

In one of the earliest critiques of deconstruction (1976), Hayden White, who in most cases haunts the postmodern mansion hand in hand with Jacques Derrida, warned against the dangers of Derrida’s “absurdist criticism” because with Derrida “there is no ‘meaning,’ only the ghostly ballet of alternative ‘meanings’ which various modes of figuration provide.”² The historian is warned to keep clear of the “ghostly ballet” unleashed by deconstruction and the damage it is capable of inflicting. Thus White dismisses Derrida with this question: “When the world is denied all substance and perception is blind, who is to say who are the chosen and who are the damned? On what grounds can we assert that the insane, the criminal, and the barbarian are wrong?”³ Deconstruction is incompatible with the work of “proper historians” who “seek to explain what happened in the past by providing a precise and accurate reconstruction of the events reported in their documents:” it disallows the possibility of concrete statements and opens the door to moral relativism. Proper historians construct their narrative by “suppressing as far as possible the impulse to interpret the data, or at least by indicating in the narrative where one is merely representing the facts and where one is interpreting them.”⁴ Deconstruction goes too far because it does not allow a space for critical judgment and justification but only endless critique. History must build something while deconstruction is ceaselessly unbuilding.

The question is, why does White see deconstruction as the point of no return where the ballet turns ghostly and all judgment, discrimination, and perspective is lost?⁵ In his 1978 review of White’s *Tropics of Discourse*, Dominick LaCapra

2. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 281. This chapter was first published as “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory,” *Contemporary Literature* 17, no. 3 (1976), 378-403.

3. White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 282.

4. *Ibid.*, 52.

5. Lloyd S. Kramer asks this same question in relation to White and LaCapra in his “Literature and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra,” in *The*

suggests “that one way to see White’s reaction is as a turn toward secure ‘sanity’ and conventional irony in the face of the ‘other,’ who actually articulates things that are ‘inside’ White himself—but an ‘other’ whose articulation is perhaps too disconcerting or at least too alien in formulation to be recognizable.”⁶ In deconstruction, White saw the ghostly reflection of himself and recoiled with dislike, much as Freud did when he saw his own reflection in the window of his sleeping compartment on the train.⁷ Freud notes that rather than being “*frightened* by [our] ‘doubles,’ [we] simply failed to recognize them as such.” Freud goes on to ask “is it not possible though, that our dislike of them [the reflection] was a vestigial trace of the archaic reaction which feels the ‘double’ to be something uncanny?”⁸ The uncanny itself seems to be produced by a slippage or inversion in which the “other” turns out to be the “same” (as in the case of Freud’s reflection), but it is also produced when established orders break down. The “other” posited by LaCapra turns out to be White himself because “the things Derrida discusses *are* inside White.” White’s rejection and distrust of Derrida can thus be read as the repression of those tendencies inherent in White that are made explicit by Derrida but that White himself fails to recognize. What is true of White and Derrida may be true of deconstruction and of history itself. Deconstruction may reveal history’s darkest secret by bringing it to light and, in so doing, provoking the fear and anxiety of the uncanny that is typically met by repression.

The fear, rejection, and repression of deconstruction may also be linked to another tendency inherent in the historical profession. The reconstruction of a historical event requires imagination in constructing a compelling argument and narrative. Deconstruction exposes the ordering of the events or argument, laying bare the authorial choices at work in it. But the interplay of imagination and reality at work in these choices is also brought into question in such a move. Of course, one can discern this interplay without recourse to deconstruction, for instance in Robert Finlay’s critique of Natalie Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre*.⁹ This critique was made from the position of a historian who was out to set the record straight and get to the available facts. In response, Davis put on her historian’s robe to present the full complement of footnotes, archival data, and source material that served to legitimate her imaginative narrative. A key issue in the exchange was whether Davis’s historical monograph was simply too literary, and both Davis

New Cultural History, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 111.

6. Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 78. This chapter was first published as “A Poetics of Historiography: Hayden White’s *Tropics of Discourse*,” *Modern Language Notes* 93 (1978), 1037-1043. LaCapra goes so far as to say that “the things Derrida discusses *are* inside White”; his assessment turned out to be prescient as White would come to suffer this same criticism over the issue of emplotment, most notably on multiple tellings of the Holocaust, at the now famous conference organized by Saul Friedländer, the proceedings of which were published as *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

7. Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, transl. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), XVII, 248, n. 1.

8. *Ibid.*

9. See Natalie Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); the review by Robert Finlay, “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre,” *American Historical Review* 93 (1988), 553-571; and Davis’s response, “On the Lame,” *American Historical Review* 93 (1988), 572-603.

and Finlay seemed to agree that being overly “literary” or imaginative was a bad thing for historians. In all of this both Finlay and Davis privileged the real over the imaginary. A deconstructive critique is more radical because it does not begin from a position that assumes that facts serve as a foundation of historical investigation or writing; indeed, it seeks to unsettle the hierarchical order that assumes that facts take priority over imagination. In doing so it announces the possibility that imagination is equally crucial to the historical endeavor whatever its relation to “reality.” This is quite an unsettling proposition for the working historian.

The point here is not to force the historian into a position of total relativism—White’s “ghostly ballet”—but to bring to light the conditions underlying the construction of a historical narrative. The proposition that imagination necessarily plays an active role in the writing of history may well be unpalatable to a discipline that models itself as a mirror of reality, such that its response is not to engage this role but to deny that it exists. But this would be like Freud’s response to his own image or White’s to deconstruction, proper historians failing to recognize themselves in their own work, the result of the “uncanny effect [that] is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced.”¹⁰

II. THE “LINGUISTIC TURN” AND THE METAPHYSICAL CONCEPT OF HISTORY

It is of interest that the exchange between Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, both historians by training, did not take place in journals devoted to the historical profession but in journals dedicated to literature and literary theory. White’s piece was first published in 1976 in *Contemporary Literature* and became of historical interest when it was included in his *Tropics of Discourse* in 1978. Similarly, LaCapra’s review article, which engaged *Tropics of Discourse* and thus pushed the issue into a historical framework, was first published in *Modern Language Notes* (1978). It was the later republication of this review as a chapter in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* in 1983 that coincided with the entrance of Derrida and deconstruction into historical discourse in the United States. LaCapra was instrumental in bridging the gap between literary criticism and the writing of history through the aforementioned work but also through his article, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” published in *History and Theory* in 1980 and republished in the 1982 volume, *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*.¹¹

This volume was based on the proceedings of a conference held at Cornell University in 1980 that brought together a group of “younger older (or older younger) scholars” such as Roger Chartier, Martin Jay, Hans Kellner, Mark Poster, E. M. Henning, Keith Baker, Peter Jelavich, David Fisher, and Hayden White.¹² In the Introduction, Kaplan and LaCapra asserted that “for at least a decade, intellectual

10. Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 244.

11. Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” *History and Theory* 19 (1980), 245-276. This article was published again in Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), which also contained the review of Hayden White.

12. *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 8-9.

historians have had a growing belief that their field is undergoing a far-reaching change. The change in direction is still difficult to discern. But the recent invasion of new theoretical perspectives and research practices from Europe has agitated the whole realm of historical studies.” In response to this belief, Kaplan and LaCapra sought to discern the relevance of “Critical Theory, hermeneutics, structuralism, and post-structuralism” to “research in intellectual history” by exploring “one of the more significant claims of figures who belong to these ‘schools’ (for example, Jürgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida)” that “their reconceptualization of problems has important implications for the understanding and for the writing of history itself.”¹³ Thus this volume brought the recent trends in theory to bear on the practice and writing of history, though it did so in a way that had two unforeseeable repercussions.

The volume presented a number of possibilities for the practice of history as articulated by this group of intellectual historians. The goal was to present a cross section of the recent innovations and various possibilities, but the volume also created the impression that all of these theories and theorists were of a piece. For instance, Henning’s article, “Archeology, Deconstruction, and Intellectual History,” does an excellent job presenting these two methodologies as well as the ways that they can be integrated into the practice of history, but it also creates the impression that Foucault’s “archeology” and Derrida’s “deconstruction” are part and parcel of the same method. Thus it is not surprising that subsequent discussions of the theorists included in the volume would fall under the common umbrella of “postmodernism,” “poststructuralism,” or the “linguistic turn.” This is the first consequence, that all the methods discussed were lumped together as one.

Martin Jay’s contribution, “Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn?,” broached this question by providing a lucid intellectual history of the rise of the interest in “language” in the twentieth century and the ways that “the linguistic turn in philosophy affected many other disciplines and came in many forms.” With his characteristic clarity, Jay describes the many variants of this “linguistic turn,” whether the French variants descended from Saussure that include Foucault and Derrida, the English tradition descended from Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, and Gilbert Ryle, or the German tradition in its Heideggerian form as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer or descended from the Frankfurt school as in the work of Habermas. Jay highlights those thinkers whose work and methodology “threaten to penetrate the defenses of that most conservative of cultural enterprises, the study of history, through the opening provided by intellectual historians who have allowed what they examine to influence how they examine it.”¹⁴ The essay is cautious, as the title suggests, and it is clear that Jay finds some approaches, Habermas’s for instance, more palatable than others. For our purposes it is important to note that Jay, guided by White’s essay, finds the Derridean variant to be one of the least palatable, even demonic.¹⁵ This is the second consequence, that deconstruction was identified as an especially dangerous option for historians.

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

14. Martin Jay, “Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn?,” in LaCapra and Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History*, 87.

15. *Ibid.*, 109.

But before examining how these consequences worked themselves out, let us first turn to France. It was not until the early 1980s that deconstruction entered into historical discourse in the United States, at least among intellectual historians, but in France Jacques Derrida had been drawn into this discourse much earlier and for different reasons. In 1972, Derrida published a collection of three interviews under the title *Positions*.¹⁶ It is the third interview with Jean-Louis Houbedine and Guy Scarpetta, “Positions,” that is of interest for our story both because of Derrida’s statements about the relation of deconstruction to history but also because of the context surrounding the interview. The interview took place in June of 1971 and came on the heels of a conflict involving Derrida, the journal *Tel Quel*, and the newspaper of the French Communist Party, *L’Humanité*. In 1969, Jean Pierre Faye, who had been one of the editors of *Tel Quel* before he broke with the journal on ideological grounds, published an article entitled “*Le Camarade Mallarmé*” in which he attacked *Tel Quel* as an enemy of the French left. The brunt of the attack was the allegation that *Tel Quel* had facilitated the introduction of a “language derived from Germany’s extreme-right” which had been “displaced, unknown to all, and introduced into the Parisian left.” Derrida had published a number of articles in *Tel Quel*, and while he was not mentioned by name in Faye’s article it was clear that he was the target. For Faye, Derrida was indicative of “*le malheur Heideggerien*,” the Heideggerian misfortune, which is the appropriation of a right-wing and ultimately National Socialist philosophy by an ostensibly left-wing philosopher. Thus, according to Faye, despite its pronounced support for and affiliation with the French Communist Party, *Tel Quel* was surreptitiously leading French youth away from communism and toward right-wing extremism.¹⁷ Philippe Sollers, the editor of *Tel Quel*, responded to Faye’s attack and accused him of defaming Derrida. Faye published a counter-response that was published in *Tel Quel*, and this provoked a final response by the entire editorial board of *Tel Quel*. The upshot of this sequence of events is that in June of 1971, *Tel Quel* broke with the French Communist Party and declared itself Maoist. This was the moment of Derrida’s interview with Scarpetta and Houbedine, who had been members of the French Communist Party but who had come over to join *Tel Quel*.¹⁸ Thus this particular interview was politically charged specifically as to what Derrida’s position on Marxism was, especially with regard to the relation of deconstruction to dialectical and historical materialism.

Derrida was not evasive but he clearly did not want to commit to a position for or against Marxism. In response to a question by Houbedine about his reluctance to address the intersections of deconstruction and dialectical materialism in his work, Derrida responded: “Do me the credit of believing that the ‘lacunae’ to which you alluded are explicitly calculated to mark the sites of a theoretical elaboration which remains, *for me*, at least, *still to come*. And they are lacunae

16. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, transl. Alan Bass, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002).

17. Jean Pierre Faye, “*Le Camarade Mallarmé*,” *L’Humanité* (September 12, 1969).

18. See Christopher Norris’s “Introduction,” xvii–xviii; Alan Bass’s translator’s note, 103, n. 28, in Derrida, *Positions*; and Jason Powell, *Jacques Derrida: A Biography* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 103–106. See also François Hourmant, “*Tel Quel* es ses volte-face politiques (1968–1978),” *Vingtième siècle: Revue d’histoire* 51 (July 1996).

not objections.”¹⁹ To Derrida’s credit this theoretical elaboration did come twenty years later in the form of his lecture and then publication, *Specters of Marx*.²⁰ As to history, Derrida’s statements about it were in response to questions about the specifically Marxist variant of history often couched in the structuralist language of Althusser. In this light, Derrida’s statements are clearer and his criticism of history more precise: “What we must be wary of, I repeat, is the *metaphysical* concept of history. This is the concept of history as the history of meaning: the history of meaning developing itself, fulfilling itself.”²¹ It is the speculative variant of history, be it in the Hegelian or Marxist form, that proffers a linear teleology that both produces itself and recounts its production in the same breath. This “metaphysical concept of history is not only linked to linearity, but to an entire *system* of implications (teleology, eschatology, elevating and interiorizing accumulation of meaning, a certain type of traditionality, a certain concept of continuity, of truth, etc.).”²² Nor should one think that one could prune history of its metaphysical dimensions and thereby render it immune to Derrida’s criticism. The reason is that the metaphysical concept of history “is not an accidental predicate which could be removed by a kind of local ablation, without a general displacement of the organization, without setting the entire system to work.” Removing the metaphysical underpinnings of history, or to take it a step further, ignoring the ways that the project of history fits into, and may be directed by, a larger understanding of metaphysics, only serves to hide the problems detected by Derrida. In 1972, these problems are closely related to his critique of logocentrism as presented in *Of Grammatology*: “Logocentrism is *also*, fundamentally, an idealism. It is the matrix of idealism. Idealism is its most direct representation.”²³ Furthermore, this idealism “can always be found in the philosophies that *call themselves* nonidealist, that is, antiidealist.”²⁴ History, infected as it is with metaphysical baggage, ends up being an idealist endeavor no matter what its intentions.

Despite this critique, however, Derrida was not seeking to dismiss or discredit history entirely; indeed, history serves an important extra-textual function for Derrida. As he stated:

I have never believed that there were *metaphysical* concepts *in and of themselves*. No concept is by itself, and consequently in and of itself, metaphysical, outside all the textual work in which it is inscribed. This explains why, although I have formulated many reservations about the “metaphysical” concept of history, I very *often* use the word “history” in order to reinscribe its force and in order to produce another concept or conceptual chain of “history”: in effect a “monumental stratified, contradictory” history; a history that also implies a new logic of *repetition* and the *trace*, for it is difficult to see how there could be history without it.²⁵

19. Derrida, *Positions*, 62.

20. Derrida presented this as a lecture in two sessions on April 22 and 23, 1993 at the University of California at Riverside. It was later published in book form as *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Editions Galiléé, 1993).

21. Derrida, *Positions*, 56.

22. *Ibid.*, 57.

23. *Ibid.*, 51.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 57.

For Derrida there is a use and application for history that attempts to disrupt the assumptions of surety and continuity that are implied in its “metaphysical” variants. To be sure this is done through strategies of contradiction and repetition that privilege the search and re-search for a ghostly trace over the decidedly more material assumption of a past “as it really happened” or an ideologically driven telos that determines a historical scaffold. But this use of history is no ghostly ballet because, according to Derrida, “there is a powerful historical unity that must be determined first if one is not to take dross for gold every time that an emergence, rupture, break, mutation is allegedly delineated.”²⁶ Thus the history Derrida advocates is not a “free-for-all” where perspective and judgment are suspended; instead, he calls for contextualization that is ever wary of the ways that the historical project is always in danger of being “reappropriated by metaphysics.”²⁷

I want to suggest that Derrida’s statements hold differing meanings depending on context, and one might take dross for gold if one were to ignore this. If one reads Derrida’s statements on history unaware that they are a critique of the Hegelian/Marxist variant, his criticism of history will seem far-reaching and unwieldy. However, if the context and specifics of his critique are retained, his criticism will appear to be well-grounded and as such extendable to other types of history insofar as they surreptitiously though unwittingly smuggle in metaphysical tendencies to their projects. Thus, histories that emphasize “presence” and “reality,” and therefore that are obsessed with facts, archives, and the compulsion to get the story “right,” are fit objects of Derrida’s criticisms.

No matter how generalizable his critique of Marxist historiography, it is clear that Derrida had grave reservations about Marxist history. Indeed, *Tel Quel* and Derrida severed relations on precisely this issue soon after the interview was published. Derrida’s work, and specifically deconstruction, is at odds with historical materialism and, by extension, with the Marxist variants of social and intellectual history. This is significant because the 1970s marked the apex of a steady rise in social history in the United States, a type of history “fostered by the influence of two dominant paradigms of explanation: Marxism on the one hand and the ‘Annales’ school on the other.”²⁸ Indeed, the edited volume by Kaplan and LaCapra explicitly positioned itself in response to the rise of social history: “Within the profession, it is social history that has posed the greatest challenge to intellectual history—a challenge that can be seen in a variety of ways. Statistical research may reveal that the number of courses under the label ‘intellectual history’ has remained constant in the recent past. But the relative growth and the absolute excitement often seem to have passed to social history.”²⁹ In his earlier piece for

26. *Ibid.*, 51.

27. *Ibid.*, 57.

28. Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: History, Culture, and Text,” in Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History*, 1. See also Robert Darnton, “Intellectual and Cultural History,” in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

29. LaCapra and Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History*, 8. Kaplan and LaCapra cite the Darnton article, “Intellectual and Cultural History,” to substantiate the relative stability of intellectual history, but it is also of note that Darnton’s analysis reveals that the number of American doctoral dissertations in social history quadrupled between 1958 and 1978.

History and Theory, LaCapra described this challenge as a “crisis significant enough to open the question of the field’s nature and objectives,” and in response to this crisis he proposed “to define and to defend in relatively theoretical terms the approach to the field and specifically, to modern European intellectual history, that I have come to find most fruitful.”³⁰ With Derrida as his ally, LaCapra critically explored the current trends in intellectual history and offered alternative approaches to the study of the past. While the focus of his article is intellectual history, it is clear that the challenge of “social history” with its specter of Marx is the key pressure point:

The more recent elaboration of a social history of ideas has seemed to offer an answer . . . , for in its rigor and methodological sophistication it goes beyond the older forms of contextualization, and it promises to give intellectual history access to the remarkable achievements of modern social history. . . . But intellectual history should not be seen as a mere function of social history. It has other questions to explore, requiring different techniques, and their development may permit a better articulation of its relationship to social history. It may even suggest areas in which the formulations of social history stand in need of further refinement.³¹

LaCapra thus sought to revitalize intellectual history by drawing it away from trends in social history and instead offered new paths based largely on the work of Derrida.

But LaCapra’s confident assertions about the possibilities of deconstruction and the limitations of more conventional strategies coincided with other trends that made his call to rethink historiography appear more hostile and threatening than was his intent.³² These trends include the rise of subaltern studies following the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, and the emergence of New Historicism through the publication of Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* in 1980 and the founding of the journal *Representations* in 1983 that established the movement as a school of thought.³³ Both of these movements originated from figures associated with comparative literature and literary studies. It would be a stretch to say that there is a direct connection between the methodology espoused by LaCapra and that of either Said or the New Historicists, but given that 1) deconstruction and the work of Jacques Derrida had had its greatest impact in the field of literary criticism, 2) the work of LaCapra was closely linked to literary theory, and 3) Said himself and many of the New Historicists were scholars of literature who had now embarked on projects that encroached on the discipline of history, there was a growing sense among historians that a storm was gathering.³⁴ Something wicked this way comes. Many proponents of “proper his-

30. LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History,” in LaCapra and Kaplan eds., *Modern European Intellectual History*, 47.

31. *Ibid.*, 48.

32. LaCapra is careful both to announce the ways that his essay follows a “territorial imperative” (*ibid.*) and the limitations of alternatives to conventional approaches, deconstruction for instance (84).

33. See Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

34. LaCapra offers his criticism of New Historicism in *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 190-196.

tory” feared the threat from literary scholars who wanted to bring their techniques to the writing of history.

Thus, for instance, in 1986 J. G. A. Pocock took umbrage at the unwelcome visitor in the pages of the *Intellectual History Newsletter*, a key site of correspondence and exchange for intellectual historians in the United States.³⁵ In an article entitled “A New Bark Up an Old Tree,” Pocock asked intellectual historians to avoid the criticism of “failing to relate (they mean subordinate) ‘ideas’ to ‘realities.’” Pocock saw rising before him an intellectual historian who has embraced the recent trends emanating from France and literary theory, and thus he felt compelled to distinguish two types of intellectual historian. The first sounds suspiciously like a *mélange* of Dominick LaCapra and Hayden White:

It is possible to define “intellectual history” as the pursuit by the “intellectual” of an attitude towards “history,” and to write it as a series of dialogues between the historian himself, as intellectual, and his probably French or German predecessors, in the attempt to arrive at a “philosophy of history” or something to take the place of one. Such “intellectual history” will be a meta-history, meaning that it will be a reflection about “history” itself.³⁶

For Pocock this is the historian who has lost sight of the historian’s mission to “know what happened in various recorded instances,” and who has embarked instead on the grandiose but misguided mission of metahistory where reflection on history replaces the simpler goals of history itself. In response, Pocock provides an account of another sort of intellectual historian:

But it is also possible to imagine a “working historian” who desires to be a historian but not (in this sense) an intellectual, who desires to practice the writing of history but not to arrive at an attitude towards it, and who does not look beyond the construction of those narrative histories of various kinds of intellectual activity which he or she knows how to write.³⁷

Pocock’s claim is that the first type of intellectual historian (LaCapra, White) does not desire to be a historian at all, but rather seeks to be something else, perhaps a literary critic, a French philosopher, or some other sort of “intellectual.” The second sort of intellectual historian is, however, a historian’s historian. This is a historian who is not concerned with theory or reflection but instead focuses on the writing of history via the construction of narratives about “intellectual activity which he or she knows how to write.”

But it is just here where we return to the ghost story. Pocock felt compelled to reclaim intellectual history for “working historians,” and to do so he believed he had to exorcise the evil spirits from the house of history. For him the danger has come from outside this house, from those historians who do not desire to act like historians and who instead take their cues from other sources, perhaps literary criticism, New Historicism, or continental philosophy. But it is a danger nonethe-

35. The *Intellectual History Newsletter* was an annual publication available through the History Department at Boston University. In its initial format it included articles, conference reports, book reviews, and syllabi. It recently contracted with Cambridge University Press to publish the journal *Modern Intellectual History*. See volume 2 (1980), volume 7 (1985), and volume 8 (1986) of the *Intellectual History Newsletter*.

36. *Intellectual History Newsletter* 8 (1986), 8. Also cited in LaCapra, “Intellectual History and Critical Theory” in *Soundings in Critical Theory*, 201.

37. *Intellectual History Newsletter*, 8 (1986), 8. Also cited in LaCapra, “Intellectual History and Critical Theory” in *Soundings in Critical Theory*, 201-202.

less that threatens to ruin intellectual history for “working” intellectual historians by shifting the focus from the reconstruction of the past through narrative history to the critical reflection about the ways that historical discourses work. In particular, deconstruction seems to constitute a major threat to a tradition built on the confident and non-reflective construction of narrative.

Given its timing, Pocock’s piece smacks of nostalgia for a simpler time when history was history and the discipline was self-contained. John Toews’s review article, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” confirmed that the historical ground was shifting under Pocock’s feet.³⁸ Toews’s article is significant for several reasons. First and foremost, it was published in the *AHR*, the main journal of the largest professional historical association in the United States. The title announced that a “linguistic turn” had occurred leading to important changes in the field of intellectual history, and the fact that the *AHR* decided to publish this article signaled that its editors thought these changes were significant for the profession as a whole. Pocock may have wished away this trend in intellectual history but now it was presented front and center for all historians to see.

The scope of Toews’s review article also consolidated the sense that there was a school of thought or body of texts that all fell under the rubric or umbrella of the “linguistic turn” (as in the volume edited by LaCapra and Kaplan). Toews’s review discussed twelve books published between 1982 and 1986; some of these clearly indicated the infiltration of the linguistic turn as critical theory or philosophy into the writing of history (David Hollinger, LaCapra, Richard Rorty), others were about theorists or philosophers in this tradition (Allan Megill, Mark Poster), some used the study of discourse as their methodological scaffold (Jean-Christophe Agnew, Martin Jay, Peter Jelavich), and some indicated the way this trend informed more conventional historians (Pocock, Quentin Skinner).³⁹ Toews was careful to distinguish among these works but he was also eager to point out that they all share a common cause: “It is striking the extent to which they [the twelve books] virtually all assume, however, the validity of [the] general claim that intellectual history is an integral part of the interdisciplinary study of the history of

38. John Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (October 1987), 879-907.

39. The books reviewed were Jean Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986); David A. Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Peter Jelavich, *Munich and Theatrical Modernism: Politics, Playwriting, and Performance, 1890–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); LaCapra and Kaplan eds., *Modern European Intellectual History*; LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*; Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism, and History: Mode of Production versus Mode of Information* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1984); *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

meaning and that the pursuit of this study involves a focused concern on the ways meaning is constituted in and through language.”

But beyond identifying the shared assumptions about language among these intellectual historians, Toews’s article also bespoke an assurance that these assumptions are to the good for intellectual history: “A new self-confidence is clearly evident. The fears of being conquered and colonized by the perspectives and methods of social historians, so prevalent among intellectual historians just a few years ago, have diminished considerably, and one can even find warnings about the dangers of overconfidence and intellectual imperialism.”⁴⁰ Toews presented intellectual history as a revitalized leader whose turn toward language put it in a position to dictate the terms of historical methodology more generally. It is no longer a beleaguered subdiscipline facing obsolescence; to use Toews’s language, the colonized had become the colonizer. This imperial imagery created the impression that these historians were poised to assert their will and methodologies on the profession as a whole, and this played into the fears articulated by Pocock, who saw this development not as welcome but as a threat.

It is significant that in many parts of his article Toews presented deconstruction uncoupled from Jacques Derrida; indeed, deconstruction assumes a wider definition than that articulated by either Derrida or LaCapra. Thus, in his discussion of Roger Chartier’s essay “Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories,” Toews described Chartier’s argument in these terms: “deconstructing the opposition of elite and popular entails a reconsideration of the oppositions of creation-reception and production-consumption as well. . . . Meanings are never simply inscribed on the minds and bodies of those to whom they are directed or on whom they are ‘imposed’ but are always reinscribed in the act of reception.”⁴¹ Whether or not Chartier’s work is best described as “deconstruction,” this is the term that Toews used, and in so doing he released the spirit of deconstruction from the body of Jacques Derrida. To be sure, when Toews expanded his discussion to include LaCapra he was quick to state that “LaCapra develops this point into a general theory, often formulated in the terminology of Derrida, about the reading and interpretation of texts.”⁴² Nevertheless, his discussion of the use of deconstruction for historical investigation is presented throughout the text as a method not necessarily connected to Derrida. Moreover, Toews judged that deconstruction so characterized contains the potential for great damage to intellectual history: “the history of meaning has successfully asserted the reality and autonomy of its object. At the same time, however, a new form of reductionism has become evident, the reduction of experience to the meanings that shape it. Along with this possibility, a new form of intellectual hubris has emerged, the hubris of word-makers who claim to be makers of reality.”⁴³ Toews did not identify who these “wordmakers” were exactly, but his assertion about the “reality and autonomy” of the historical object is fundamentally at odds with the deconstructive critique of

40. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn,” 881.

41. *Ibid.*, 884. Here Toews is referring to Chartier’s “Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories” in LaCapra and Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History*, 37-38.

42. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn,” 884.

43. *Ibid.*, 906.

history. Furthermore, his claim about the primacy of experience and the need to “rethink the relationship between experience and meaning with the same critical intensity and sophistication that has been devoted to exploring the ways in which meaning is constituted in language” implies that the emphasis on language is off track, or at least out of balance. The main point is that deconstruction as presented in this article appears to be a chief threat to the integrity of intellectual history.

I don’t wish to exaggerate here. Toews’s article presents one of the least scary stories about the *arrivant* deconstruction, and it is indicative of an optimistic, albeit critical, survey of the potential benefits of the “linguistic turn.” But it is important to note that deconstruction was not the central focus of the article, and in some respects it was the least well received of all the linguistic theories under review. Thus as in earlier discussions deconstruction provided a bull’s eye for criticism of the entire phenomenon called “the linguistic turn,” despite the fact that it was not the center of the article. Instead, the central focus of the article was the ways that culture could be read as a text and thus interpreted using the various models of linguistic theory presented in the review.⁴⁴ It would be the cultural historian who would reap the benefits of the “linguistic turn” in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.

III. THE CULTURAL TURN

In 1987, a conference took place at the University of California, Berkeley on the topic of “French History: Texts and Culture.” The event was planned on the occasion of a month-long visit by Roger Chartier; Natalie Zemon Davis served as commentator-at-large. The proceedings of this conference were expanded to a volume edited by Lynn Hunt that was published in 1989 as *The New Cultural History*.⁴⁵ In some ways, the creation and reception of this volume is strikingly similar to the one edited by LaCapra and Kaplan in 1982, and there is some definite continuity between the two. Hunt’s volume builds on many of the issues raised in the earlier book, and the presence of Roger Chartier as a key contributor to both created a sense of affinity. Lloyd S. Kramer’s essay for the volume focused on “the literary challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra,” so here too the earlier volume was present in the latter.⁴⁶ But there are also significant differences, especially in terms of tone. Rather than a response to a perceived state of decline and crisis, Hunt’s volume was an optimistic affirmation of the new possibilities open to cultural history. In this respect, the tone was more like Toews’s review article. As with Toews, a key component—perhaps *the* key component—of this “new cultural history” was the interest in language and the “linguistic turn.” Furthermore, this emphasis on language led the “new cultural history” toward interdisciplinarity. Specifically, Lynn Hunt looks to anthropology and literature. In her introduction, she pointed out that

44. *Ibid.*, 881. Toews cites William J. Bouwsma, “Intellectual History in the 1980s: From History of Ideas to History of Meaning,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12 (Autumn 1981), 290.

45. Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History*.

46. Lloyd S. Kramer, “Literature and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra,” in *ibid.*

Although there are many differences within and between anthropological and literary models, one central tendency in both seems to fascinate historians of culture: the use of language as metaphor. Symbolic actions such as riots or cat massacres are framed as texts to be read or language to be decoded . . . the use of language as metaphor or model has proved undeniably significant and, I would argue, critical to the formulation of a cultural approach to history.⁴⁷

For Hunt, the cultural historian benefits greatly from the strategies of cultural anthropology and literary criticism in regard to their emphasis on deciphering the language that informs all human phenomena.

For our purposes what is essential are the ways that the linguistic theorists discussed in the earlier works on intellectual history are incorporated into the “new cultural history,” and the role that deconstruction plays in this amalgamation of linguistic theories. Hunt’s volume is divided into two parts: “Part One examines critically and appreciatively, the models that have already been proposed for the history of culture. Part Two presents concrete examples of the new kinds of work that are currently under way.”⁴⁸ Deconstruction as a method does not figure prominently in either section, and even in Kramer’s essay on White and LaCapra the term “deconstruction” never appears. Nevertheless, deconstruction haunts this volume, making ephemeral appearances in relation to the other methods and then disappearing from sight.

Foucault is probably the most important theoretical figure in the volume and his work held the most purchase for its contributors. Indeed, the very first essay in the volume is Patricia O’Brien’s “Michel Foucault’s History of Culture.” O’Brien presents an overview of Foucault’s methodology, argues that Foucault studies culture through the “prism of the technologies of power, which he located strategically in discourse,” and challenges historians of culture to employ Foucault’s “method and tools of analysis” to “rewrite the history of Western civilization” as a “new political history of culture.”⁴⁹ O’Brien’s treatment of Foucault is well measured and judicious, but one can see how the emphasis on “power” in Foucault and the domineering imposition of the “organizing hierarchy” in Derrida could lead one to see these thinkers as two of a kind. This is especially so if one has not actually read Foucault or Derrida but only about them.

In this light, Kramer’s assertion that “the call for a more varied approach to history carries the influence of a European tradition that evolves from Friedrich Nietzsche into the recent work of Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida and that examines critically the founding assumptions of knowledge” suggests that Derrida and Foucault are kith and kin.⁵⁰ As in the edited volume by Kaplan and LaCapra, the review article by Toews, and even the critique by Pocock, *The New Cultural History* pushed the less informed reader into thinking that Foucault in fact provided a deconstruction of Western historical paradigms in the sense that he exposed the moment where power is inscribed and the methods by which it is enforced,

47. Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History*, 16.

48. *Ibid.*, 10.

49. Patricia O’Brien, “Michel Foucault’s History of Culture,” in Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History*, 9, 46.

50. A cursory glance at the title of Megill’s *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* might also give one the same impression.

even though this is no deconstruction in the Derridean sense or as I have previously defined it. Instead, this is a popular (mis)perception of deconstruction as merely the destabilization of authoritative pronouncements.⁵¹ Foucault may have been a bigger influence on the “new cultural history,” but deconstruction was a far scarier threat to the historical profession so that when the new cultural or intellectual history was criticized it is the critique of deconstruction that is most often applied. All the bogeymen morphed into the one beast of deconstruction.

One of the most important features of this volume is the way it incorporates the extra-historical trends that had been making their way into the practice of history. Many of these are the same trends that previously provoked the ire of historians like Pocock. Thus we see the specter of literary criticism and continental philosophy in the articles by O’Brien and Kramer that reference the work of Foucault, Derrida, LaCapra, and White, and the presence of new historicism in the contributions by Thomas Laqueur and Randolph Starn. Furthermore, several other (unwelcome) guests are present in the volume. The inclusion of Aletta Biersack, a cultural anthropologist, is significant both because of her status as a nontraditional historian but also because of her substantive discussion of the use of Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins, and cultural anthropology in general, for the history of culture. Likewise, Hunt is keen to announce the importance of women’s or gender studies for the new cultural history. “In the United States in particular (and perhaps uniquely), women’s studies and gender studies have been at the forefront of the new cultural history.”⁵² The figures invoked are: Natalie Davis, whose work *Fiction in the Archives* “puts the ‘fictional’ aspect of the documents at the center of the analysis”; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, who “brings to bear both anthropological and literary styles of analysis”; and Joan Wallach Scott, who “has been particularly helpful in linking gender history with the analysis of discourse.” Of these three, only Scott is linked to deconstruction, but in all three historians of gender, Hunt tells us, “the rising influence of literary techniques of reading and literary theories can be clearly seen.”⁵³ Here women’s or gender studies, anthropology, and literary theory are all pushed together. Other figures are introduced in the volume as well, such as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson. But while the intention of the volume may have been a call to theoretical diversity, it also had the effect of conflating deconstruction with other trends in literary studies and also with those in cultural history, cultural anthropology, sociology, and women’s/gender studies. All this even though, like a ghostly apparition, deconstruction barely appears in the volume itself.

This same tendency is at work in another seminal article of the time, Jane Caplan’s “Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction: Notes for Historians.” In this essay Caplan attempted to disaggregate the disparate strands announced in her title, but in so doing she actually emphasized a more discrete reduction: “*Deconstruction*, finally, is one variant of the poststructuralist tendencies represented by such different contemporary thinkers as [Roland] Barthes, Foucault, [Jacques]

51. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

52. Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History*, 18.

53. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

Lacan, [Jean] Baudrillard, or [Julia] Kristeva.”⁵⁴ Caplan later presented Derrida as the progenitor of poststructuralism but throughout the article all of these theorists are considered to be representatives of deconstruction. This move takes on greater weight in relation to Caplan’s later statement that “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.”⁵⁵ What is important is the way that Caplan’s dismissal of deconstruction sticks to all of the figures listed above. If Foucault is a representative of deconstruction and deconstruction is incompatible with history, then Foucault’s work is incompatible with history.⁵⁶ My point is that if an informed and critical reader such as Caplan is willing to make these conflation, then the “average” historian is likely willing to follow her lead.

The upshot of this conflation is that it allows deconstruction to be applied to all sorts of subjects without need for recourse to Derrida’s work. Now deconstruction can be affiliated with a large number of theorists and methodologies as it is adapted in the service of cultural history, cultural anthropology, women’s and gender studies, subaltern studies, and cultural studies. In this process, the term “deconstruction” took on the weight of a political or ideological position for or against the new trends in American historical practice.⁵⁷

IV. THE END OF HISTORY

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama’s response to the decline of Soviet influence provided another twist to our tale. In an article entitled “The End of History?” published in *The National Interest* he postulated that the end of the cold war was in fact the end of “history” in the Hegelian sense of the term. By 1992, the Berlin Wall had come down, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and Fukuyama expanded his essay into a book, *The End of History and the Last Man*.⁵⁸ At the most superficial level,

54. Jane Caplan, “Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians,” *Central European History* 22:3/4 (1989), 267 (originally presented as a discussion paper for the German Women’s History Study Group).

55. *Ibid.*, 270.

56. Caplan certainly recognizes the ways that deconstruction indicts the project of history, and she echoes the anxieties of earlier thinkers. “There remains, however, a basic anxiety for historians in the face of deconstruction: namely that, in making the text ultimately undecidable, it abolishes the ground for privileging any one interpretation, and therefore makes the writing of conventional history impossible. . . . 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 writing and the real.” (*Ibid.*, 272–273). Caplan cites White and LaCapra to make this claim.

57. This became even more the case when it was revealed in 1987 that one of the chief proponents of deconstruction in the United States, Paul de Man, had written for the collaborationist press in Belgium between 1941 and 1942. See Alan B. Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies about the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 62. This development also brought back the argument presented by Faye about the ways that Derrida and deconstruction were tainted by the influence of Heidegger. The Paul de Man affair was soon followed by the English translation of Victor Farias’s *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) and brought the issue to an incendiary level.

58. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

Fukuyama's work irritated historians by the mere suggestion that the historical endeavor had ended, but the more salient point is that it claimed the demise of an ideological conflict that had provided markers by which to situate historians. In the absence of an "enemy," in the Schmittian sense of the term, it became difficult to discern who was "friend" and who was "foe."⁵⁹ However, throughout the 1990s, cultural identity fragmented, and rather than the stasis predicted by Fukuyama, academics entered into a period of culture wars. It is ironic that Fukuyama's resurrection of the Russo-French theorist Alexandre Kojève led some to the conclusion that Fukuyama himself was a "postmodernist," and in this light was somehow related to other postmodern phenomena such as deconstruction. But such identification was especially problematic given that Kojève relied so much on Hegel and that postmodernism drew so much from Derrida's critique of the metaphysical concept of history of which Hegel is a paradigm case.⁶⁰

This period represents a high-water mark for deconstruction in the practice of history brought about by the work of LaCapra, Hollinger, and Megill, the review article by Toews, the article by Caplan, the work of Joan Scott in *Gender and the Politics of History*,⁶¹ as well as by the expansion of uses that appropriated the name "deconstruction." As one might expect, the increased presence of deconstruction also provoked increased anxiety. John M. Ellis's 1989 *Against Deconstruction* attempted to exorcise the demon from literary studies, and G. R. Elton's 1990 Cook Lectures at the University of Michigan warned historians of the dangers of "philosophy" for the practice of history.⁶² Fukuyama's claim about the end of history; the ideological free-for-all that resulted from the fall of the Soviet Union; the ascent of multiple academic fields that now claimed to do historical analysis (most notably literary studies, gender studies, subaltern studies, and cultural studies); and the willingness of many historians (Hunt, LaCapra, White) to incorporate "foreign methodologies" into the practice of history forced many historians to re-evaluate their own work and to ask a larger question: who controls "history" and historical claims?

Joan Scott's "The Evidence of Experience" published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1991 pushed the envelope further. Toews's review article had been adamant that the success of the "linguistic turn" for history must rest on the "irreducibility of experience," and Hunt's Introduction echoed this claim. By contrast, Scott took issue with the idea that the "evidence of experience" and the stability of the ex-

59. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, transl. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

60. Note that also in 1989, Derrida's work turned overtly toward the political in his talk "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundations of Authority'" presented at the Cardozo Law School. In response to Fukuyama's conjuring up the ghost of Kojève, Derrida conjured the specter of Marx in his most "historical" work presented as a lecture at the University of California, Riverside in 1993 and then published as *Spectres de Marx* in 1993. For an investigation into Derrida's move into the "political," see David Bates, "Crisis between the Wars: Derrida and the Origins of Undecidability," *Representations* 90 (Spring 2005), 1-27.

61. See Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 6-7.

62. John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); the Cook lectures are included in G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

periencing subject are the linchpins of historical writing. Scott pointed out that the innovations in, and expansion of, historical methods, subjects, and types of evidence had led to a “crisis for orthodox history by multiplying not only stories but subjects, and by insisting that histories are written from fundamentally different—indeed irreconcilable—perspectives or standpoints, none of which is complete or completely ‘true.’”⁶³ This might seem to indicate—and it did so to “conventional historical understanding”—an enhancement of the importance of experience in history in that recent innovations were judged worthwhile because they incorporated into history the experiences of those heretofore excluded from historical view. In this way those who applauded these innovations “rested [their] claim to legitimacy on the authority of experience, the direct experience of others, as well as the historian who learns to see and illuminate the lives of those others in his or her text.”⁶⁴ But Scott disagrees with this assessment. For her, the category of experience and the “project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white, as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause.” Far from being an unfettered basis on which to construct a history, experience is itself a product of the categories of representation that shape it into what it is. As a result, historians must look beneath historical experience to decipher these categories and their premises in order to understand both the experience of those they are studying and also how they themselves are undertaking this study. Moreover, given our earlier discussion of deconstruction, it should be clear that it is an appropriate method for providing the sort of critical examination Scott desires. Indeed, Scott echoes Derrida’s criticisms of the “metaphysical concept of history” both in her diagnosis that “the project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead it reproduces its terms,” but also when she states that “it operates within an ideological construction that not only naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual, and homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals.”⁶⁵

But what is most striking about Scott’s attack on conventional history is that her criticisms are not reserved for the “old school” but are applied equally to the “innovators” as well:

Feminist historians critical of “male-stream” histories and seeking to install women as viable subjects, social historians insisting on the materialist basis of the discipline on the one hand and on the “agency” of individuals or groups on the other, and cultural historians who have brought symbolic analysis to the study of behavior, have joined political historians whose stories privilege the purposive actions of rational actors and intellectual historians who maintain that thought originates in the minds of individuals. *All seem to have converged on the argument that experience is an “irreducible” ground for history.*⁶⁶

63. Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” reprinted in *Practicing History*, ed. Gabrielle Spiegel (New York: Routledge, 2005), 201. Originally published in *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1991).

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*, 203, 205. See Derrida, *Positions*, 51, 57.

66. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 205. The emphasis is mine.

This statement is an indictment not only of the strands of historical investigation that one might expect to be hostile to deconstruction (social historians) but also those who had appeared to be accepting or at least tolerant of it (feminist history, cultural history, intellectual history). The latter is an instance of what Derrida termed the “reinscription” of the metaphysical concept of history in which this concept continues to operate even in the work of those who ostensibly eschew it. By revealing this, and by in effect showing how deconstruction can make this apparent, Scott drove a wedge between deconstruction and those historical schools that (mis)appropriated it under the umbrella of postmodernism, poststructuralism, or the linguistic turn. This left deconstruction vulnerable not only to the attacks of conventional historians who saw it as indicative of “postmodernism,” but also of those postmodernists who sought to distinguish their brand of “new history” from the conventional variety.

These attacks converged in the joint effort of Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob titled *Telling the Truth about History* published in 1994.⁶⁷ Hunt, of course, was the editor of the volume on the “new cultural history” and a prominent cultural historian, Appleby a renowned scholar of American history, and Jacob a well respected historian of science. It is worth noting that two of the three would go on to be presidents of the American Historical Association (Appleby in 1997, Hunt in 2002), that the book was published by a trade press (W. W. Norton), and that it is still available in paperback. All this is to say that it was and remains a highly influential book for students of the practice of history. In their chapter on “Postmodernism and the Crisis of Modernity,” the authors presented “postmodernism” writ large as fundamentally incompatible with, and irrefutably dangerous for, the practice of history. This was a change of position for Hunt, as she had earlier championed the possibilities of postmodern strategies, but it is not inconsistent with her skepticism and criticisms of deconstruction in *The New Cultural History*. The authors never disaggregate what is or isn’t “postmodern” but instead focus on what they assume to be some of its common threads, in particular that: “The nature of historical truth, objectivity, and narrative form have all been targeted by postmodernists. The mastery of time becomes the willful imposition on subordinate peoples of a Western, imperialistic historical consciousness; it provides no access to true explanation, knowledge, or explanation.”⁶⁸ This large claim about the questioning of “truth,” “objectivity,” and “narrative form” is coupled to a specific example that appears to be culled from subaltern studies (though it is uncited), thereby creating that the impression that the second is the necessary result of the first. This section is then followed by a discussion of the ways that the “postmodernists” are influenced by Nietzsche and Heidegger, who both made “notoriously antidemocratic, anti-Western, and antihumanist pronouncements and were associated sometimes fairly, sometimes not, with anti-Semitism;” they point out that “Hitler cited Nietzsche in support of his racial ideology, and Heidegger himself joined the Nazi Party.” Here we are back at the criticisms leveled at Derrida in 1968, that his philosophy was untenable because it was indebted to the

67. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994).

68. *Ibid.*, 205.

work of the Nazi Martin Heidegger.⁶⁹ Rather than engage the issues raised by historians such as LaCapra or Scott, the authors evaded them by either presenting straw men (the denunciation of time) or condemning the whole endeavor as secretly National Socialist.

The authors continue to build on earlier trends by presenting Foucault and Derrida as parts of a two-headed beast, but added to this conflation is the filiation to Heidegger and by association to National Socialism: “The foremost contemporary apostles of postmodernism are two French philosophers, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Much of postmodern thought can be traced to their influence and through them back to Nietzsche and Heidegger.”⁷⁰ Foucault and Derrida are then presented as a joint endeavor: “both Foucault and Derrida sought to challenge the most fundamental assumptions of Western Social Science. Put most schematically, they deny our ability to represent reality in any objectively true fashion and offer to ‘deconstruct’ (a word made famous by Derrida and his followers) the notion of the individual as an autonomous, self-conscious agent.”⁷¹ I am not interested here in the merits of this claim but in the way that the authors present Derrida and Foucault as coterminous and equally committed to the project of deconstruction. This is especially important as they enfold other theorists and groups of historians into the term “postmodern” only to return to the influence of Heidegger on this movement: “This debt to Heidegger has further embroiled postmodernism in political controversy, for his unrepentant membership in the Nazi Party has long raised questions about the political meaning of his work.”⁷² Here, White’s ghostly ballet is replaced by another specter, the specter of Nazism.

In the edited volume by Kaplan and LaCapra we saw how the varying strands of “postmodern” thought were linked together, but we also saw the ways that deconstruction presented problems and unease for many of the historians involved in the endeavor. Toews’s review article offers a similar concern about and distrust of deconstruction, one that is repeated in Hunt’s *New Cultural History*. However, the underlying effect of these works is that deconstruction was uncoupled from Derrida and joined to the phenomenon of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and the linguistic turn as a whole. In *Telling the Truth about History*, this trend results in a backlash against “postmodernism” in which deconstruction is retied to the person of Derrida and by association to Martin Heidegger and National Socialism, and is then used to indict the whole movement. It is no accident, to my mind, that deconstruction is linked to the representation of pure evil. It is presented as something too monstrous, too horrifying to consider, and thus something that needs to be banished from consideration. This is why Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob conclude “in the final analysis, then, there can be no postmodern history.”⁷³

In 1995, *History and Theory* published a forum on *Telling the Truth about History* in which Joan Scott, Raymond Martin, and Cushing Strout all offered their

69. *Ibid.*, 207.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*, 208.

72. *Ibid.*, 210.

73. *Ibid.*, 237.

thoughts about truth in history,⁷⁴ and in many ways this marked the beginning of the demise of deconstruction.⁷⁵ In 1999, Lynn Hunt completed her re-evaluation of “postmodernism” in a volume that returned to the issue of methods in cultural history, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, co-edited with Victoria E. Bonnell.⁷⁶ Unlike Hunt’s earlier volume, this series of essays on the state of cultural history contains no essays by anthropologists or figures associated with literary studies. In their stead we find historians and sociologists (Bonnell is a professor of sociology). It is interesting that the editors chose to identify themselves and the contributors as “social historians”: “Most of the contributors to this volume, like its two editors, were originally trained in social history and/or historical sociology.”⁷⁷ This is important because the editors set this volume up as a counter to the crisis of what Hunt and Bonnell now refer to as the “cultural turn”:

The cultural turn and a more general postmodernist critique of knowledge have contributed, perhaps decisively, to the enfeebling of paradigms for social scientific research. In the face of these intellectual trends and the collapse of communist systems in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Marxism as an interpretive and political paradigm has suffered a serious decline. The failure of Marxism has signaled a more general failure of all paradigms. Are the social sciences becoming a branch of a more general interpretive, even literary activity—just another cultural study with claims only for individual authorial virtuosity rather than for a more generally valid, shared knowledge?⁷⁸

Here the aforementioned trends converge (the danger of postmodernism, the fall of Marxism, the rise of cultural studies) and crystallize around Hunt and Bonnell’s fear that history is losing its status as a “social science” capable of providing “generally valid, shared knowledge.” This valorization of “science” was decidedly absent from the earlier volume. Their defense of history as a “social science” is specifically linked to the dangers inherent in Derrida and Foucault:

During the 1980s and 1990s, cultural theories, especially those with a postmodernist inflection, challenged the very possibility of or desirability of social explanation. Following the lead of Foucault and Derrida, poststructuralists and postmodernists insisted that shared discourses (or cultures) so utterly permeate our perception of reality as to make any supposed scientific explanation of social life simply an exercise in collective fictionalization or mythmaking: we can only elaborate on our presuppositions, in this view: we cannot arrive at any objective, freestanding truth.⁷⁹

This is the ghost story fully formed. It is a tale of the evil specter now named Foucault/Derrida that is the source of the “cultural turn” and that threatens to lead us to a world of total relativism and nihilism. Hunt and Bonnell are not interested

74. Joan Scott, Raymond Martin, and Cushing Strout, Forum on *Telling the Truth about History, History and Theory* 34, no. 4 (1995), 320-339.

75. This is enunciated in Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering our Past* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997); and Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

76. *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

77. *Ibid.*, 5.

78. *Ibid.*, 4.

79. *Ibid.*, 3.

in the ways that collective fictionalization or mythmaking might play a role in the scientific explanation of social life, but only in disallowing this avenue of investigation because they claim it precludes “objective, freestanding truth.” If you are for objective truth then you must join Hunt and Bonnell in purging the poltergeist from the house of history.

To do so, Hunt and Bonnell choose historians and sociologists who have joined them on their crusade. Whereas in the earlier volume the intellectual historian was quite sympathetic to (if critical of) deconstruction and the postmodern in general, in this volume Hunt and Bonnell enlist Jerrold Siegel, who is far less so. Siegel’s contribution, “Problematizing the Self,” indeed takes explicit issue with the “post-modern” critique of the stable self.⁸⁰ Siegel provides a substantive engagement with Derrida in an attempt to outline the ways that his destabilized presentation of the “self” is akin to Nietzsche and Heidegger in that “these thinkers aspired to a higher kind of freedom and power, attainable by way of the dissolution of stable self-hood.”⁸¹ Part of Siegel’s project is to show this position to be untenable, but the other part is to re-anchor knowledge, and thus historical understanding, to the stable self who is the locus of experience. Siegel terms this experiencing, thinking, and judging self “self-hood,” and by the nature of its construction his “self-hood” is at odds with Joan Scott’s formulation about the evidence of experience but also with Derrida’s critique of the privileging of presence. The larger point is that Siegel represents the field of intellectual history in the volume, and his evaluation of Derrida is resoundingly negative.

Hayden White, who contributed the Afterword to the volume, was left as a lone voice in the wilderness. White does not agree with the contributors to the volume in their assessments of “structuralism, poststructuralism, modernism, and post-modernism,” all of which he regards as “ideologically progressive movements in their opposition to the pieties of capitalist society and bourgeois culture,” nor with their readings of these movements (though he says he will not “correct their misconceptions of what they seem to be”⁸²). What is ironic given White’s assessment of Derrida in 1976 is that in defense of his position White states “that the significance of the cultural turn in history and the social sciences inheres in its suggestion that in ‘culture’ we can apprehend a niche within social reality from which any given society can be deconstructed and shown to be less an inevitability than only one possibility among a host of others. I support such a deconstructive enterprise.”⁸³ But White’s words seemed to hang in the air as a reminder of the ghost and monster, the danger and evils of a cultural turn that was the *raison d’être* for the volume.

The tide had turned, and by the year 2000 it appeared that history had indeed moved beyond deconstruction. In *History and Reading: Tocqueville, Foucault, French Studies*, LaCapra conceded that the high-water mark of theoretical activity had passed even as he again attempted to find common ground between historical

80. Jerrold Siegel, “Problematizing the Self,” in *ibid.*, 281.

81. *Ibid.*, 284.

82. Hayden White, “Afterword,” in *ibid.*, 315.

83. *Ibid.*, 316.

and literary studies.⁸⁴ His own movement into the area of trauma studies showed a shift in emphasis in which Freud appears to hold a more prominent place in his historical investigation, though his works on trauma still show a debt to, and deep engagement with, Derrida and deconstruction. This is not to say that the issue of “postmodernism” or even “postmodern” history had been put to rest, but figures such as Keith Jenkins and Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth now appeared as outliers rather than innovators.⁸⁵ The title of the *History and Theory* Theme Issue, *Agency after Postmodernism*, implied that the moment was over, even though the volume itself addressed “postmodernist thought and its effects on historiography as a watershed.”⁸⁶ Thus, in his Introduction, Gary Shaw opined that “while many scholars have recently offered sharp, sometimes even strident or exasperated criticisms of the movement, I think it is as important to stress the contributions of postmodernism and the linguistic turn. It seems to me appropriate to continue to speak of the postmodern moment as our moment;”⁸⁷ but he also claimed that this “Theme Issue offers examples of how scholars are beginning to do the important work of going through the postmodernist controversy to reconstruct a richer and subtler notion of agency and its self.” Still, the subtleties presented by the contributors to this Theme Issue would be lost on many historians in the early twenty-first century especially after the terrorist attacks on Washington, DC and New York on September 11, 2001. The Theme Issue was not quite a post-mortem but there is a sense that an era had come to a close and a re-evaluation was necessary.⁸⁸

V. FEAR FACTOR: THE GHOST AT BAY

The relation to the aftermath of 9/11 is eerily foreshadowed in Carolyn Steedman’s “Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust” (2001).⁸⁹ This article is something of a novelty because it is a sustained engagement with a text written by Jacques Derrida, rather than one about Derrida: *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. I would like to explore and relate to a change in the intellectual climate two aspects of this article.⁹⁰ First, Steedman’s article is centered around what she saw as the disconnect between Derrida’s understanding of the term “archive” and historians’ understanding of it based on their experience in actual archives. Steedman tells us that “a more serious purpose here is to understand why historians and deconstructionists must continue to talk right past each other, to suggest why this mutual incomprehension may be no bad thing—or at least—nothing to worry about, and along the way to know a little more about

84. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Reading: Tocqueville, Foucault, French Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

85. These issues were discussed in *Rethinking History* 8, no. 4 (2004).

86. David Gary Shaw, “Happy in Our Chains? Agency and Language in the Postmodern Age,” *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 40 (2001), 2.

87. *Ibid.*, 4.

88. *Ibid.*, 7. One interesting aspect of the Theme Issue is the way many of the authors rely on the volumes by Hunt; *Telling the Truth about History*; and the review article by Toews.

89. Carolyn Steedman, “Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust,” *American Historical Review* 106 (2001), 1159-1180.

90. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, transl. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

what it is that historians do in archives, and in writing about what they have found there."⁹¹ There is some irony in an investigation into Freud that positions itself around the confident assertion that there is "nothing to worry about." The implication here is that the "deconstructionist," Derrida himself in this case, doesn't understand what historians "do" in the archive. This implication effectively cuts off the more important, and potentially threatening, aspect of Derrida's meditation on Freud and the archive, namely, the question as to *why* we historians ascribe such authority to the archive as the source of legitimation and truth. Steedman homes in on Derrida's discussion of the *arkhe*, a place where things begin, and its relation to the *arkheion*, or superior magistrate's residence, in the Greek city-state as the site where official documents are stored. Derrida's emphasis on civic law and the *arkheion* raises the "puzzling question" for historians "of what on earth an archive was doing there in the first place, at the beginning of a long description of another text which dealt with Sigmund Freud and the topic of psychoanalysis."⁹² The text in question is Yosef Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, which seeks to understand Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in terms of a conflict about Judaism as a historical and religious phenomenon.⁹³ Steedman's obsession with the archive as the source of historical facts leads her to quickly dismiss Freud's book as "famously based on no historical evidence whatsoever" and by extension Derrida's book because it has nothing to do with "real archives."⁹⁴

But in so doing she misses a key strand of the argument that makes the relation of the *arkheion* to the work by Yerushalmi, or more specifically, by Freud more apparent. Steedman never makes the connection to Moses and his ark, the Ark of the Covenant. This is the sacred container that held the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Thus the origins of the Hebrew people and their laws are to be found in an archive of sorts. Moses thus serves as the originator of this tradition, though the issue becomes cloudy because the Ten Commandments were revealed to Moses by God (Moses is the author of these laws but his authority is predicated on his relation to God). This is all tied to history when one considers Moses as the author of the Torah, or Pentateuch, the five books wherein the history of the Jewish people is told. Here, Moses is the first historian but the validity of his claims rests on the authority of God. Thus Freud's attempt to revise our understanding of Moses based on psychoanalysis may contain no "historical evidence whatsoever," but does the account that he is debunking meet Steedman's criteria for historical evidence? And if not, on what authority does she let one account stand while the other is condemned? Derrida's meditation on the "archive" is an attempt to see it as a site where some ideologies, practices, and methods are legitimized or granted authority while others are suppressed, suspended, or outlawed.

The great irony of Steedman's article is that this is exactly what she does to deconstruction. The way she does this is by recourse to personal experience. Ulti-

91. Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever," 1164.

92. *Ibid.*, 1159.

93. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

94. Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever," 1160, 1162.

mately, Steedman claims that she can show Derrida's account to be inappropriate for historians based on her personal experience in the archive. "Archive Fever, indeed? *I can tell you all about archive fever.*"⁹⁵ What follows is a well-researched account of the possible origin of an actual medical condition where one gets sick from working in an archive. Historians, including Steedman, have caught archive fever, whose source is dust coming off the jackets and pages of old manuscripts made from animal skins. This dust contains spores from the "external or cutaneous form of anthrax."⁹⁶ So archive fever is not just a catchy title but a real hazard encountered by working historians. Steedman's research and article were written before the events of September 11, 2001, but it was published at a time of increased anxiety and fear about terrorist threats and particularly the threat of letters filled with anthrax powder.⁹⁷ Thus the article played into a heightened sense of fear in the country and among historians, and it also continued the trend toward re-grounding the subject on the bedrock of experience in the face of threats internal and external. But here, too, Steedman evades Derrida's investigation into the authority of the archive by discussing her own harrowing experience in the archive with little or no reflection as to *why* she affords this place such authority or worth. Instead, Steedman tells us:

The historian's massive authority as a writer derives from two factors: the ways archives are, and the conventional rhetoric of history writing, which always asserts (through footnotes, through the casual reference to PT S2/1/1) that you know because you have been there. The fiction is that the authority comes from the documents themselves, as well as the historian's obeisance to the limits they impose on any account that employs them. But really it comes from having been there (the train to the distant city, the call number, the bundle opened, the dust) so that then, and only then, you can present yourself as moved and dictated to by those sources, telling a story the way it has to be told.⁹⁸

Here, personal experience becomes the basis for the authority of the historian, and while Steedman attempts to head deconstruction off at the pass by asserting that it should come as no surprise that deconstruction made "no difference for this kind of writing [history]" because "there is actually *nothing there*: only absence, what once was: dust," the recourse to this nothingness is based entirely on the living, breathing presence of the historian who actually goes to the archive, experiences documents, and thus knows what happened. Steedman's article is indicative of the return to a quest for a stable subject that can provide the grounds for a knowable past. But it is also indicative of the demise of deconstruction as a viable option and therefore as a live threat to the historical profession. Steedman confronts Derrida on, ostensibly, his own terms to demonstrate his misunderstanding of the archives for historians and for history in general. In my reading, she does this by avoiding or repressing those aspects of deconstruction that are the most troubling and that only appear in the ways that the archive itself makes her physically sick.

95. *Ibid.*, 1164.

96. *Ibid.*, 1168.

97. See LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 32-33, n. 18.

98. Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever," 1176.

But as in any ghost story, the calm would not last. The anxiety and the fear that resulted from the terrorist attacks and the wars that followed led to a general re-evaluation of postmodernism and its role in producing a fragmented and hostile intellectual and cultural environment. Coupled to this evaluation was the call to return to more stable grounds, though now the bedrock was not only experience but also judgment. Bruno Latour's "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," published in *Critical Inquiry* in 2004, suggested that the critical modes of the previous decades (deconstruction included) had run their course and in the new climate of danger, new methodologies were necessary. It is worth noting that Latour had been something of a poster boy for "postmodern" critical inquiry into science in the late twentieth century, and that *Critical Inquiry* is a journal sympathetic to such methodologies. It is also worth mentioning that Jacques Derrida died on October 8, 2004. Latour wanted to impress upon his readers the ways things had changed. "Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism."⁹⁹ For Latour these wars are all related, and while his own emphasis is on the history of science, his arguments coincide with larger trends. Thus the stakes are high as Latour informs us: "entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives."¹⁰⁰ The first example provided by Latour where "critique" (which seems to be the stand-in for postmodernism or deconstruction) is indicted is in reference to global warming. Latour indicates that the critique of stable scientific "facts" has allowed conservatives to deny that global warming is a "fact."

It is not only in the realm of science but also in the realm of politics where these postmodern theories have been hijacked to nefarious ends. Latour's anxiety and outrage is palpable when he tells us that "I am now the one who naively believes in some facts because I am educated, while the other guys are too *unsophisticated* to be gullible: 'Where have you been? Don't you know that the Mossad and the CIA did it?'"¹⁰¹ What has happened here? Latour is telling us that it is the sophisticated intellectual who naively believes in facts, while the realm of questions and critique now belong to the *unsophisticated*. These unsophisticated proponents of critique, these destabilizers of facts, these postmodernists, are now akin to revisionist conspiracy theorists who claim that the Mossad and the CIA blew up the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Suddenly, the specter of deconstruction has returned with all its force and fury. "Let me be mean for a second. What is the real difference between conspiracists and a popularized, that is teachable version of social critique inspired by a too quick reading of, let's say, a sociologist as eminent as Pierre Bourdieu (to be polite I will stick with the French field com-

99. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004), 225.

100. *Ibid.*, 227.

101. *Ibid.*, 228.

manders).”¹⁰² Latour gives himself some wiggle room by allowing that a careful reading of these theorists (his own?) would lead to a different conclusion. But it is clear that in this day and age one cannot leave these dangerous texts and methodologies unguarded. “Do you see why I am worried? Threats might have changed so much that we might still be directing all our arsenal east or west while the enemy has now moved to a different place.”¹⁰³ This new climate of war, so many wars, is clearly different from the ideological clash of old, and it appears that Latour holds “critique” responsible for its inability to guide us in this dangerous new world.

Latour has had enough of both the positivist worship of facts and the groundless relativism of critique run amok. But while the former is deemed problematic, the latter is deemed downright dangerous:

This is why, in my opinion, those of us who tried to portray sciences as matters of concern so often failed to convince; readers have confused the treatment we give of former matters with the terrible fate of objects processed through the hands of sociology, cultural studies, and so on. And I can’t blame our readers. What social scientists do to our favorite objects is so horrific that certainly we don’t want them to come any nearer. “Please,” we exclaim, “don’t touch them at all! Don’t try to explain them!” Or we might suggest more politely: “Why don’t you go further down the corridor to this other department? They have bad facts to account for; why don’t you explain away those ones, instead of ours?”¹⁰⁴

The quote may be whimsical but the attack on cultural studies, sociology, and so on, is serious. The criticism is all the more serious given the ways that Latour relates these methodologies and fields of study, identified as they are with deconstruction, to disastrous results, whether the denial of global warming or terrorist attacks. The bottom line is that these methodologies lack any basis for sound judgment. For Latour,

Critique has not been critical enough of all its sore-scratching. Reality is not defined by matters of fact. Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could be also be called states of affairs. It is this second empiricism, this return to the realist attitude, that I’d like to offer as the next task for the critically minded.¹⁰⁵

In essence, the prior emphasis on the incontrovertibility of “facts” led to the postmodern critique that exposed this as a fallacy. But another error occurs when the overthrow of facts leads to the sort of relativistic nihilism that is as much at home providing fodder for revisionist conspiracy theorists as critics of colonialism. In an attempt to disarm the apparatus of critique, Latour calls for social theorists to replace “matters of fact” with “matters of concern.” Latour sees the realist attitude, this “second empiricism,” as our last best hope in a troubled world. In this he is heartened because “it is not only the objects of science that resist, but all the others as well, those that were supposed to have been ground to dust by the

102. *Ibid.*, 228-229.

103. *Ibid.*, 230.

104. *Ibid.*, 240.

105. *Ibid.*, 232.

powerful teeth of automated reflex-action deconstructors.”¹⁰⁶ Here deconstruction takes the form of a monster grinding any possibility for truth to dust. But the issue here is judgment and Latour’s assumption is that deconstruction, postmodernism, critique, or perhaps those who practice these methodologies, lack this crucial attribute. To his mind, a return to a realist attitude predicated on experience is the only way to achieve his emphasis on “matters of concern.”

“Is it not time for some progress? To the fact position, the fairy position, why not add a third position, a *fair* position?”¹⁰⁷ Exasperated by “positivism” (the fact position), and scared to death by “critique” (the fairy position), Latour calls for a position from which one can act fairly. But here we once again see the desire for an Archimedean point on which one can rest judgments of fact and fiction, good and bad, right and wrong. Furthermore, for Latour “the critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles.” The critic should not be engaged in deconstruction but in construction. His point is eerily similar to the one presented by Hayden White in 1976 when he dismissed Derrida with the question: “When the world is denied all substance and perception is blind, who is to say who are the chosen and who are the damned? On what grounds can we assert that the insane, the criminal, and the barbarian are wrong?”¹⁰⁸ Latour’s fear is akin to White’s, but in the post-9/11 world the crisis feels more acute because Latour holds deconstruction, at least in part, responsible for the many wars, cultural and intellectual, that threaten our time, and responsible too for disarming us of tools that we could use to find our way through these wars.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE GHOST RETURNS AS HISTORICAL REVISION

All of this points to the larger issue of the ways that deconstruction and critique have been appropriated and the ways that what Derrida calls the “metaphysical concept of history” has been re-inscribed in this appropriation. Up until the 1970s, the dominant modes of historical investigation were unmarked in the sense that variations of one general narrative, largely a white male European narrative, laid claim to the field. In the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism in general and deconstruction in particular opened up the possibility of multiple narratives and multiple subject groups. This is what precipitated the crisis for orthodox history—in the words of Scott “by multiplying not only stories but subjects and by insisting that histories are written from fundamentally different—indeed irreconcilable—perspectives or standpoints, none of which is complete or completely ‘true.’”¹⁰⁹ But the crisis was not isolated to “orthodox historians;” even proponents of the new diverse and differing narratives began to search for firmer ground on which to set their own identity. As identity politics came into play, a truncated deconstruction appeared that simply sought to invert power dynamics rather than to destabilize them.¹¹⁰ From this perspective the organizing principle of historical

106. *Ibid.*, 243.

107. *Ibid.*

108. White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 282.

109. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 201.

110. Derrida, *Positions*, 41-42.

investigation was no longer put into question but simply redeployed to make the colonizer the colonized. Uncoupled from Derrida's critique of the "metaphysical" concept of history (a "history" that provides an ideological scaffold upon which "it" organizes itself but then presents itself as objective and neutral "historical truth"), deconstruction now served to reinforce identity as ideology. This move validates Derrida's reservations about "history" and the possibility of conceptualizing "history" without smuggling in the metaphysical baggage.

Thus in both conventional history and in the new histories the rejection of deconstruction is the repression of the realization that there is no stable foundation on which to ground our identities or our histories, an insight made explicit by deconstruction. It is precisely the fear inspired by the possibility of history or identity that is not predicated on a stable and definitive ground that sends thinkers orthodox and iconoclast alike "back" to the bedrock of experience and to the stable subject, back to the archive where origins can be found because we "know" they are there because we experienced them. The *unheimlich* realization that history and identity are moving targets is revealed by deconstruction, but it has been met more often than not by fear and repression even among those postmodernists who are ostensibly its proponents.

The problem here is that once all subject groups have recourse to history there can be no agreement on "truth" if the foundation of evidence is experience. In essence this is the source of the culture wars in which each group defends its narrative as more "real" than the others. This is a structural impasse where the validation of one worldview (or point of view) comes at the expense or suppression of another. After the attacks of 9/11 and the "wars on terror," the cultural wars and identity politics took on a much more sinister character. To confront identity politics and to return history to the firm ground of evidence—a ground from which judgment about true and false, right and wrong, good and evil could be formed—history must first exorcise the demons that unleashed this perspectivalism. Faced with a subject position that is jeopardized by other subjects claiming equal or greater authority, the historian retreats into the fortress of the subject and the essentializing metaphysical logic that presents historical "truth" as singular and foundational (and thus restricted and restricting), rather than confronts the possibility that the stable subject and history are themselves non-essentialist constructions. The battle against identity politics was waged against the "relativism" of deconstruction via a return to identity itself through investigations predicated on experience, memory, and truth. Works by Martin Jay, Jerrold Seigel, and Ernst Breisach attest to this trend, as does the recent emphasis on testimony and oral history.¹¹¹ All of these works also point toward the return of an emphasis on "presence" as the essential category for the production of history.¹¹² In this

111. Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodern Challenge and Its Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On the last point see Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 2-8.

112. See Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Hans Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Eelco Runia, "Presence," *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (February 2006), 1-29; "On Presence" forum edited

respect the gains of postmodernism have been lost as we return to a logic of essentialism and the reinscription of the “metaphysical concept of history” based on the privileging of presence.

But the specter of deconstruction has not been laid to rest, and the sureties of experience and presence for the project of history are more tenuous than they may appear. Much like the specter, history is a *revenant* brought back to the present by the historian. It visits us but does not belong to our time or place. This is to say that it has no ontological properties of its own but exists through the mediation of the historian. By revealing the play of *différance*, deconstruction unhinges the past from the “as it really happened” and returns it to the realm of possibilities. To be sure, historians must arrest certain of these possibilities in their telling of their story, but this does not negate these possibilities of the past that can return. Furthermore, deconstruction reveals the moment of decision when the story is structured according to a hierarchical ordering that privileges certain possibilities and discounts others (presence/absence, stable/relative, postmodern/traditional). In this way, deconstruction reveals the legitimizing strategies of the author/historian while upsetting the authority of this particular telling. This in turn creates the possibility of a revised history or interpretation based on a reevaluation of the possible ordering strategies. Deconstruction haunts history as the spirit of revision and lays open the possibility of new tellings, new readings, and new facts. It also forces the historian to confront her or himself in the creation of the history revised. This is the double, the *Unheimliche*, the ghost that terrifies us because in it we see our “darker purpose” and the limits of the project of history. “‘*Unheimlich*’ is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light.”¹¹³ For history to yield uncomplicated “truth” this secret must remain hidden, but each time a historical account of an event is revised, the very act of revision reveals the instability of historical truth and the possibility of recounting what “actually happened.” This is a moment of possibility and communication when the understanding and presentation of historical events is put into play so that it is not “owned” by anyone. But this is also a source of great anxiety for a discipline with “scientific” aspirations to know the “truth.”

The spectral nature of history is revealed in every historical revision that discloses this moment of possibility, but ironically this specter is typically exorcised under the name of deconstruction. As Freud said, “in this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix ‘*un*’ [‘un-’] is the token of repression.”¹¹⁴ Thus, as we have seen, the deconstruction itself is repressed and the mantle of “truth” is awarded to the revised version . . . that is, until the next revision when the specter of deconstruction rises, as if from the dead, to haunt history once more.

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by Runia and Elizabeth J. Brouwer, *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (October 2006), 305-374.

113. Schelling quoted by Freud in “The ‘Uncanny,’” 224.

114. *Ibid.*, 245.