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New directions in historical research: an approach from a discourse theory perspective

Words, displaced and mutilated words, words from others...that was the scarce alms the hours and centuries left him with.
Jorge Luis Borges

Words are deeds
Ludwig Wittgenstein

Abstracts

In the following pages attention is devoted to the ways in which trends of thought associated with the linguistic turn in the social sciences generate the domain of historical critique. After a few remarks on the critique of metanarratives that characterises the initial impulse of postmodern thinking, we shall concentrate on the specific modality that said critique acquires in relation to historical discourses. In the course to my argument, it will become clear that continuity and objectivity represent the primary targets of critical examination. In the late stages of this article, we will examine the implications of a historical

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discourse deprived of objectivity and continuity for the analysis of national narrative. Throughout this article we shall try to advocate the relevance of poststructuralist discourse for the critique of continuity and objectivity for the analysis of national narratives.

Key words

Post-structuralism, history, historicism, historical critique, discourse analysis.

Resumen

En el artículo siguiente presto particular atención a la manera como tendencias de pensamiento han sido asociadas desde el giro lingüístico en las ciencias sociales para penetrar el terreno de la crítica histórica. Tras realizar algunas observaciones sobre la crítica de metanarrativas que caracterizan el impulso inicial del pensamiento posmoderno me concentraré en especificar la modalidad, que esta crítica adquiere en relación con los discursos históricos. A lo largo de mi argumento, aclararé que la continuidad y la objetividad representan ambas los objetivos principales de la examinación crítica. Al finalizar este artículo examinaré las implicaciones que tiene la enunciación de un discurso histórico desprovisto de objetividad y de continuidad para el análisis de narrativa histórica. A lo largo de mi ensayo trataré de defender las críticas a la continuidad y la objetividad y su relevancia para el análisis de las narrativas nacionales desde discursos posestructuralistas.

Palabras clave

Posestructuralismo, historia, historicismo, crítica histórica, análisis del discurso.

In 1828, Victor Hugo devoted his narrative ammunition to criticise the ongoing works of restoration at the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. Utterly disappointed by the architectural preferences of the 'newcomers' he could only find solipsistic relief in the one thing that in his view remained immaculate within the cathedral's internal corridors, that is, the medieval spirit protected by the remains of gothic architecture. In a comparable move, we will devote our attention to the search for untamed spirits inhabiting famous edifices. A blend of 'layers' somehow identical to the one Hugo visualised in Notre Dame's walls surfaces the internal walls of Western philosophy. Its internal corridors show the traces of a haunting spectrum, that emulating Heidegger we shall characterise as 'the question concerning history'.

The philosophical weight of this question comes as no surprise if we consider the paramount role attached to historical development in formulating what was probably the most important theoretical ambition of modernity, that is, the possibility of an overlapping between the *ontic* and the ontological. Differently put, historical development became a privileged surface for the inscription of philosophical strategies in pursuit of a mediation between necessity and contingency. Of course, these strategies also inevitably contained elaborations on the intrinsic features of social change, which were accompanied by prescriptive arguments pointing towards the privileged agent of such a change.

The possibility of a juxtaposition between necessity and contingency appears linked to another argumentative tradition inherited by modernity from its immediate predecessor; religious thinking. As Karl Lowith accurately points out, the Judeo-Christian tradition regarded historical development, as a series of necessary moments within a teleological sequence. That is to say, historical development appeared as a series of events or processes united by a causal logic triggered by an identifiable origin and moving towards an equally intelligible end. I will not elaborate much on the differences between religious and modern teleologies. None the less, it is imperative to clarify that in the case of religious thinking, the articulation between the universal and the particular was a role reserved for the 'word of God', expressed through divine revelation.[1] The structural posi-

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[1] Lowith, K. *Meaning in History*, Chicago University Press, 1949, pp.2-19. For the structural position of divine revelation see Laclau, E. 'On the names of God' in Golding, S. (ed.) *The eight technologies of otherness*. London, Routledge, 1997. See also Laclau, E. *Emancipations*. London, Verso, 1996, pp.20-35.

tion of revelation was not without a replacement in the rationalistic project of modernity. As it happens, religious teleology was dethroned by secular rational eschatology. Thus modernity conceived historical progress as a tendential move towards the subsumption of the real into the rational.[2]

Among the most tangible effects of such a conception of historical development there was a conception of meaning in historical discourse as emerging out of a referential operation involving some form of metahistorical organising principle. Accordingly, the critique of a referential conception of language and meaning has substantial implications for the revision of historical discourse. Among other things the latter brings to the forum the ontological status of historical 'evidence' and the epistemological underpinnings of scientific history.

In the following pages attention is devoted to the ways in which trends of thought associated with the linguistic turn in the social sciences penetrate the domain of historical critique. After a few remarks on the critique of metanarratives that characterises the initial impulse of postmodern thinking we shall concentrate on the specific modality that said critique acquires in relation to historical discourse. In the course of our argument, it will become clear that continuity and objectivity represent the primary targets of critical examination. In the late stages of this article we will examine the implications of a historical discourse deprived of objectivity and continuity for the analysis of national narratives. Throughout this article we shall try to advocate the relevance of post-structuralist theory of discourse[3] for the critique of continuity and objectivity. In the final pages we consider the implications of a post-structuralist critique of continuity and objectivity for the analysis of national narratives.

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The difficulty concerning the validity of attributing to historical development an element of necessity dictated by a transcen-

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[2] See Lyotard's notes on Kant in 'The sign of history' in Attridge, D. [et. al.] *Post-structuralism and the question of history.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 163-183.

[3] See especially Laclau, E. and Mouffe, Ch. *Hegemony and socialist strategy.* London, Verso, 1985; Laclau, E. *New reflections on the revolution of our time.* London, Verso, 1990; *Emancipations.* London, Verso, 1996; Laclau, E. (ed) *The Making of Political Identities.* London, Verso, 1994; Howarth, D. Norval, A. Stavrakakis, Y. (eds) *Discourse theory and political analysis: Identities, hegemonies, and social change.* Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000; Howarth, D. *Discourse.* Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press, 2000; Torfing, J. *New theories of discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek.* London, Blackwell, 1999.

dental horizon became a target for fierce criticism as a result of the linguistic turn in the social sciences. Insofar as the latter postulated the constitutive character of representation *vis a vis* any form of objectivity, it could not accept a referential conception of language and meaning. The latter of course was an irreplaceable condition for eschatological conceptions of historical development since, as we suggested, all historical evidence becomes meaningful in reference to a governing principle that dictates its structural position in the historical dynamic. The vigorous critique of metanarratives that characterises the initial impulse of postmodernity triggers an equally strong revision of the ontological presuppositions of eschatological conceptions of historical development. Said impulse becomes clearly visible in the critique of historical narratives that we find in the works of Lyotard, Barthes or Baudrillard.[4]

One of the primary consequences of such a revision is the conviction about the need to re-examine the frontier dividing philosophy of history, historical discourse and the alleged exteriority of historical factuality. Philosophy of history appears increasingly conceived as a discursive mechanism through which the chaotic manifold of traces is partially organised, that is, transformed into 'history'. In other words the condition of possibility of 'meaningful' historical evidence derives from the introduction of an organising principle that would indicate the direction and the general dynamics of historical development, therefore allowing the positive identification of each element within the structure. In this sense, the meaningless dispersion of historical facts appears tamed through narrativisation and in this process historical traces are transformed into historical evidence. One of the primary assumptions of a post-structuralist conception of discourse is the instability of all sytems of meaning due to the inevitable failure of the former in the achievement of full closure. In other words, the discursive operation through which meaning is created is always only partially successful.

In terms of historical meaning, the gap between an irretrievable past and its discursive representations becomes a constitutive impossibility. It's impossible because historical discourse is always less than 'history' and constitutive since it is the lack

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[4] Lyotard, J. F. *The postmodern condition*. Manchester, Mancheter University Press, 1984; Baudrillard, J. *The illusion of the end*. London, Blacwell, 1992; Barthes, R. The discourse of history. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1967 and *A Barthes reader*, S. Sotang (ed.) London, Cape, 1982.

of total coincidence between these two entities that allows meaningful operations to take place. In other words, the very dynamic of historical discourse appears as a consequence of the irresolvable tension between impossibility-necessity with regards to the 'recuperation' of historical evidence. As a result, from a post-structuralist point of view, all historical discourse appears as internally split by the gap between an irretrievable factuality and its discursive representations. As a result, historical discourse becomes self-referential. If we accept this proposition, philosophy of history, scientific historiography and 'historical reality' can only be signifiers deprived of any external referent. Hence the possibility of establishing objective relations between 'historical evidence' and historical discourse evaporate.[5]

In the following pages our analysis concentrates on theoretical interventions whose common denominator is the combined critique of metanarratives and the more specific revision of historical paradigms and practices. In other words, in our analysis we will privilege those instances of

critique where epistemological and methodological aspects of historical discourse are at stake.

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We shall start by examining some theoretical interventions whose major point of coincidence derives from an examination of the relations between historical discourse and the political. One in addition to this, they are inscribed in a twofold modality of critique that targets, on the one hand, the paradigmatic underpinnings of continuity, objectivity and 'anthropologism'. On the other hand, it seems to concentrate on the critique in the terrain of 'history of ideas'. In this context the works of Michael Foucault, Quentin Skinner and Hayden White are of primary importance.

Let us start with some comments on the contribution made by Michael Foucault. Due to the inevitable limitations, my approach to Foucault's extremely complex and wide-ranging contribution will be quite specific indeed. Echoing the French historian Eugene Weber, I would say that instead of being exhaustive I will be suggestive.

[5] See Jenkins, K. *On What is History? From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White.* Routledge, London, 1995 and *The Postmodern history reader* (Ed.). Routledge, London, 1997.; Kellner, H. *Language and historical representation: getting the story crooked*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989; Munslow, A. *Deconstructing history.* London, Routledge, 1997; Attridge, D. [et. al.] *Post-structuralism and the question of history.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987. For a psychoanalytic approach see Stavrakakis, Y. 'Lacan and History' *Journal for the psychoanalysis of culture and society*, Vol. 4, no. 1, spring 1999, pp.99-118; Copjec, J. *Read my desire: Lacan against the historicists.* MIT Press, 1994.

As a consequence, in the following paragraphs I will concentrate basically on those aspects of Foucault's work that are strictly related to the critique of continuity. In other words, I will privilege Foucault's conceptualisation of discontinuity and the way in which the latter operates as a tool for the review of 'traditional history'. An aspect that I wish to underline in relation to Foucault's argument is the implications that the critique of continuity has for the analysis of national narratives. Insofar as national narratives can indubitably be regarded as ideological tools for the creation of discursive unities, they fall within Foucault's critical enterprise.[6] Notions such as tradition, *devenir*, spirit or influence are central to national narratives and, above all, to the idea of 'national projects'.

It is precisely to these notions that Foucault directs a substantial portion of his critical ammunition. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault delineates the coordinates of a methodological approach that would allow no room for 'anthropologism'. As he puts it 'continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity'.[7] For Foucault, the main challenge was to subvert the tendency to dissolve all historical differences and discontinuities into the realm of a transcendental subjectivity, for in traditional history 'the discontinuous was both, given and unthinkable'. The French intellectual in turn salutes the emergence of a 'new form of history', where anthropologism and its consequent search for the origins of continuous historical sequences is displaced by a new set of questions that generate the conditions for transferring discontinuity 'from the obstacle to the work itself'.[8] In short, whereas in traditional history 'discontinuity was the stigma of temporal dislocation that was the historian's task to remove from history... it has now become one of the basic elements of historical analysis'.[9] The critique of traditional history fits into

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[6] Foucault, M. *The Archaeology of knowledge.* London and New York, Routledge, 1972, pp. 21-30.

[7] *Ibid.* p12.

[8] Such an epistemological break is clearly visible in the renewed approaches to the history of ideas where 'in place of the continuous chronology of reason , which was invariably traced back to some inaccessible origin, there have appeared scales that are sometimes very brief, distinct from one another irreducible to a single law... and which cannot be reduced to the general model of a consciousness that acquires, progresses and remembers'. *Ibid.* p. 9.

[9] *Ibid.* p.7.

Foucault's theoretical hunt for a new scientific method capable of transcending the search for lost origins and, above all, the hasty acceptance at face value of notions such as tradition, spirit or development. In subsequent works Foucault became highly critical of his own archaeological method[10] and showed an escalating preference for a theoretical mould fleshed out by a Nietzschean conception of genealogy. Even so, this displacement did not carry with it an overall abandonment of the critique of teleology, quite the contrary.

> Genealogy does not oppose itself to history as the lofty and profound gaze of the philosopher might compare to the molelike perspective of the scholar; on the contrary, it rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for origins.[11]

Despite the resemblances between archaeology and genealogy, the latter incorporates a hitherto marginalised enquiry on the relations of power and the regimes of truth that operate at the heart of scientific discourses. Genealogy then constitutes the theoretical matrix for 'effective history' which 'differs from traditional history in being without constants'.[12] The genealogist then concentrates his attention on the ways in which power, knowledge and the human body are imbricated in the ideological disciplining of subjects. As Howarth accurately points out, there are three aspects where genealogy and archaeology differ from one another.[13] Namely, all traces of value-free observation of scientific discourses are erased allowing critique to occupy a central role in the genealogist's intervention. Consequent to it, questions of truth, knowledge and meaning are no longer 'suspended' becoming in turn objects of exhaustive analysis. In addition, what Rabinow and Dreyfus labelled the 'illusion of autonomous discourse'[14] is eclipsed by a genealogical approach deeply concerned with 'the centrality of power and domination in the constitution

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[10] Dreyfus, H. and Rabinow, P. *Michael Foucault. Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics.* 2nd edition, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1983; Howarth, D. *Discourse.* Buckingham and Philadelphia, Open University Press, 2000, pp. 48-85.

[11] Foucault, M. 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History'. In Rabinow, P. *The Foucault Reader.* London, Penguin, 1984, p. 77.

[12] *Ibid.* p.87-88.

[13] Howarth, D. p.72.

[14] Dreyfus, H. and Rabinow, P. *Michael Foucault. Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics.* Part one.

of discourses, identities and institutions'.[15] Let us briefly examine two critical approaches to 'traditional history' for which Foucault's work is fairly significant.

In Quentin Skinner's view, one fundamental problem with traditional history of ideas consists in 'the unconscious application of paradigms whose familiarity to the historian disguises an essential inapplicability to the past'.[16] There were various instances in which such 'unconscious application' becomes visible, however we will concentrate on just two of such instances. They belong to what Skinner denominates 'mythologies' of doctrine and coherence. In the case of the former the historian would try to 'convert scattered or quite incidental remarks made by a classic theorists into his doctrine'.[17] This brand of mythology could also adopt an inverse orientation leading the historian to criticise the theorist in question for not having an explicit doctrine on a deter-

mined issue. As for the second type of mythology it proceeds by 'giving the thoughts of various classic writers a coherence and an air of a closed system which they may never have attained or even wanted to attain'.[18] As a result of this mythological temptation historians would attempt to 'sort out' any apparent contradiction in the belief that 'one must solve anomalies'.[19]

Skinner's critique of the traditional historian's determination to 'solve anomalies' and to exclude statements that seem to threaten the author's doctrinarian coherence, clearly resembles Foucault's reading of traditional history of ideas as implanting a reassuring unity in a constitutively heterogeneous domain. In the case of Skinner, his new proposed methodology is designed according to the theoretical insights derived from speech-act theory and the Wittgenstenian conception of language games.[20] In James Tully's opinion, Skinner's methodology was designed as an instrument that would reveal the

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[15] Howarth, D. .*Discourse* p.72.

[16] Skinner, Q. 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' in *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, 1969, p.7.

[17] *Ibid.* p.7.

[18] *Ibid.* p. 11.

[19] *Ibid.* p.13.

[20] Tully, J. 'The pen is a mighty sword' in *Quentin Skinner and his critics*. p.9. For the connections between post-analytical philosophy and discourse theory see Laclau, E. *Hegemony and socialist strategy*. London Verso, 1985, p.108 and 'Politics, polemics and academics: an interview by Paul Bowman' *Parallax*, vol. 5, no.2, 1999, pp.93-107.

contingency of discursive formations and the lack of any transhistorical rationality underlying ideological transformations.[21]

The work of Hayden White on history and narrative also falls within the coordinates delimiting the theoretical space we are exploring.[22] White's primary concern is the 'explanatory effect' of historical discourse and the latter's ambiguous location within the science-art divide. Two aspects of White's work are especially attractive for our approach. In the first place there is his characterisation of the 'metahistorical' components of historiographic discourse.[23] In a sort of retroactive response to the 'wars of the sixties' regarding the relation between history and narrative, White seeks to undermine the conviction about an immanentist conception of narrativity. In other words, the narrative structure of historical discourses is not conceived as a 'referential' operation by which the inherent causality of historical processes is trans-parently recovered. Narrative structure becomes internal to historical discourse insofar as the former represents the 'metahistorical' condition for the 'explanatory effect' of the latter. For White these metahistorical components constitute philosophy of history and they are logically inseparable from historical discourse. Needless to say such an assumption leaves very little room for objectivity within the historiographic domain. In White's view self-referentiality becomes the defining trait of historiographic explanation; moreover the 'explanatory effect' of historiography is purely internal and derives from rhetorical mechanisms that render possible the 'emplotment' of historiographic accounts of the past.[24] Using a 'formalist' method, White seeks to identify the 'structural components of historical discourse'. In so doing, he directs his attention to the ways in which the 'historical field' is 'constituted as such' prior to any historiographic representation.[25] It is only after this primary constitution that historical

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[21] *Ibid.* p. 21.

[22] Hayden White is particularly receptive to Foucaultian postulates, see White, H. *The Content of the Form: narrative discourse and historical representation.* Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1987, chapter 5 and also 'Foucault decoded: notes from underground' in *History and Theory*, no. 12, 1973, pp.23-54.

[23] White, H. *Metahistory: the historical imagination in 19th century Europe.* Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1979.

[24] White, H. *The content of the form* and 'The historical text as a literary artefact'. For an overview of White's impact see Vann, R. T. 'The reception of Hayden White' *History and Theory*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1998.

[25] White, H. *Metahistory.* Introduction.

explanation becomes possible. The structural components allowing emplotment, -i.e. the narrativisation of historical events- represent for White the 'metahistorical' dimension inherent to every historiographic discourse. Furthermore, 'historical consciousness' can only be conceived as a particular constitution of the historical as historical by some metahistorical presuppositions. White fleshes out his argument by isolating four distinctive modes of historical consciousness defined according to their tropological underpinnings.[26] In sum, by criticising the immanence of historical narrativity White undermines the conception of historiographic discourses as autonomous entities. All traces of positive objectivity and transcendental referentiality are erased from the picture. Furthermore, White's argument clearly points towards the impossibility of dissociating the critique of metanarratives from the critique of scientific history.[27]

The most important consequence of this move is the centrality that power relations acquire for the scientific valida- tion of historiographic statements. In White's view, there is no apodictic theoretical base for claiming the legitimate authority of one 'metahistorical' construction over another in terms of its 'realism'.[28] Therefore the election of a historical perspective is not grounded on epistemological convictions but on aesthetic or moral ones.[29]

One of the shared assumptions among Foucault, Skinner and White is that of the ultimately contingent grounds on which any historical objectivity rests. This of course implies the denial of a transcendental order validating historical explanation. In different ways the three of them pursue the analysis of the ways in which contingency is partially occluded. In the case of Foucault, his attention is devoted to the disciplining effect of discursive practices, for Skinner the aim is to show the precarious nature of ideological paradigms whereas, in the case of White we find an effort to bring to the surface the metahistorical presuppositions beneath any claim of historical access to reality. In addition, the 'explanatory effect'

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[26] The four modes of historical consciousness identified by White in traditional history derive from the primacy of either metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony.

[27] For a similar argument see Jenkins, K. *The postmodern history reader.* pp. 1-29.

[28] White, H. Op. cit. p.11.

[29] *Ibid.* p. 11.

of historical discourse that White targets can only function within a certain 'regime of truth', that is a series of discursive practices whose sedimentation (normalisation) legitimates the claims to truth made in the name of historical evidence. In other words, contingent origins and sedimented discursive practices operate as constitutive moments in the construction of historical narratives. From a discourse theory perspective, it could be argued that these three approaches pursue a reactivation of the contingent origins of historical objectivity. In the following paragraphs we will concentrate on the conceptual status that reactivation and sedimentation acquires within discourse theory.

In *New reflections on the revolution of our time*.[30] Ernesto Laclau partially recuperates Husserl's analysis of the routinisation of scientific disciplines in order to ascertain the centrality of power relations in the constitution of any 'objectivity'. In so doing Laclau takes Husserl's distinction between 'sedimentation' and 'reactivation' and develops it in a different direction. In this renewed version the former distinction overlaps with a new one, whose two poles are the domain of 'the political' on the one hand and that of 'the social' on the other. Laclau's argument is deeply connected with Foucault's critique of the search for origins since the former rejects all possibility of transparently retrieving the 'original' moment in which a certain objectivity is constituted.[31] For Laclau 'the sedimented forms of objectivity make up the field of what we will call *the social*' whereas 'the moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible constitutes the field of *the political*'.[32] We saw the way in which Foucault defined genealogy as 'opposed to the search for origins'; in the case of discourse theory, the task of the discourse analyst would be the reactivation of the contingent nature of every objectivity for 'the moment of the original institution of the social is the point at which its contingency is *revealed*, since that in-

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[30] Laclau, E. *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. London, Verso, 1990, pp. 33-39.

[31] Laclau and Mouffe point out the mutual assumptions as well as the core disagreements between their approach and Foucault's in *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, 1985. pp.105-107. Laclau and Mouffe are highly critical of Foucault's elaboration of the relation between discursive and non-discursive entities, nonetheless this is not equivalent to the claim that both languages cannot be productively articulated in the context of ideological critique, see Howarth, D. 'Archaeology of political discourse? Evaluating Michael Foucault´s contribution to the critique of ideology' Essex Papers in Politics and Government, Sub-Series in Ideology and Discourse Analysis, Colchester, Department of Government, University of Essex, 1992.

[32] Laclau, E. Op. cit. p. 35. My emphasis.

stitution as we have seen, is only possible through the repression of options that were equally open. To reveal the original meaning of an act, then, is to reveal the moment of its radical contingency –in other words, to reinsert it in the system of real historic options that were discarded-... by showing the terrain of original violence, of the power relation through which that instituting act took place'.[33]

The 'original act of violence' that vitiates the sedimented discursive practices in Laclau's analysis can be linked to the 'ignoble beginnings' that Foucault attributes to scientific discourses. The crucial point here is that discourse theory regards antagonism and dislocation as inevitable dimensions of all objectivity, one in which the traces of power relations and the other where the limits of said objectivity are shown. Instead of a retrieval of transcendental origins, the objective would be a reactivation of the contingent emergence as well as the discursive practices by which a certain objectivity is sedimented, naturalised. It is important to point out that these theoretical languages do not advocate a conception of meaning based on mere dissemination. Although the insta-

bility and dissemination of meaning are ineradicable from any discursive formation (they are a condition of possibility of discourse) it is not tantamount to say that regularity, a partial fixation of meaning is completely absent. In other words, Foucault's notion of 'regularity in dispersion', White's 'metahistory' and Laclau and Mouffe's notions of 'articulation' and 'hegemony' emphasise the instances of precarious fixation of meaning within discursive formations. Here again we return to the undecidable relation between impossibility and necessity that vitiates historical discourse.[34]

To sum up, once we abandon the imperative of objectivity and the steady flux of continuity the target of historical research becomes the reactivation of the contingent origins of all objectivity and the meticulous examination of such discursive practices that intervene in such sedimentation (through institutional channels).

The centrality of power relations and the primacy of ideological mechanisms in the sedimentation of discursive practices constitute the key for our examination of the implications of a critique of continuity for the analysis of na-

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[33] *Ibid*. p. 34.

[34] See also Stavrakakis excellent analysis of 'history as a fantasy construction' in 'Lacan and History', Op. cit.

tional narratives. Our attention will be specially devoted to the renewed perspectives that ideological critique and a paradigmatic revision bring to the surface.

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In recent decades there has been one systematic effort to disentangle the conditions for the emergence of national narratives in dissimilar historical and geographical contexts. As a result the analysis of national narratives acquired an unprecedented degree of sophistication. Above all, there have been a series of theoretical interventions ascertaining the eminently ideological nature of national narratives. According to these views the tendency to naturalise contingency through eschatology becomes particularly visible in national narratives. As we shall see, the critique of continuity in this terrain emanated from various analytical positions.

Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm characterise nationality as an ideological product deprived of any objective foundation.[35] Although none of these authors could be included in the post-structuralist field, it is interesting to recast their dismissal of objective conditions such as race in the formation of national imaginaries. Arguably, the two outstanding features of Gellner's theoretical model of analysis are a quantitative perspective and a conception of nationalism as a legitimating ideological device operating from top to bottom. Concerning the first aspect, Gellner argues that despite the usual reference to objective conditions, the construction of nationalist discourses belongs to the terrain of ideological representation. Nonetheless, the author points out that this assumption does not reduce the production of nationalist discourses strictly to the predicament of some 'thinkers or preachers'.[36] That is to say, there are material conditions external to the ideological domain that determine the emergence of nationalist ideologies and above all their viability as legitimating devices for political action.[37] Although his characterisation of nationalism as eminently ideological is commensurable with post-structuralist approaches to this issue, Gellner's differentiation between the ideological and the

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[35] Gellner, E. *Nations and Nationalism. New perspectives on the past.* London, Blackwell, 1983; Hobsbawm, E. *Nations and nationalism since1780: Programme, myth, reality.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[36] *Ibid.* p.123.

[37] *Ibid.* pp.123-136.

material conditions is extremely close to a distinction between discursive and non-discursive entities that post-Marxism overtly rejects.[38] The second distinctive characteristic of nationalist ideology in Gellner's perspective is inevitably connected with his previous assumptions and it emerges as a result of the combination between the ideological/material distinction, in his view 'generally speaking, nationalist ideology suffers from pervasive false consciousness'.[39] To sum up, in Gellner's analysis of nations and nationalism we could say that despite the ideological nature he attributes to the emergence of nationalist discourses the latter are ultimately determined by material conditions external to them. Secondly, insofar as nationalist ideology is a mechanism implemented from top to bottom (i.e. from the state into a certain political community) the latter can only be regarded as a fictitious illusion driven by strategic ambitions, hence the

definition of nationalist ideology as an expression of false consciousness. In *Nations and nationalism since 1780*,[40] Eric Hobsbawm echoes Gellner's characterisation of nationalism as an ideological product. For the Marxist historian, the definition of national identity in terms of objective conditions such as common language, ethnicity or a shared past, as well as those approaches concentrating in strictly subjective conditions are, on the whole, insufficient.[41] Instead Hobsbawm regards the emergence of nationalism as being strictly political and in so doing he somehow reiterates Gellner's argument concerning the centrality of the state for the emergence of nationalist ideologies 'nations do not make states and nationalism, but the other way round'.[42] Thus for Hobsbawm, the ideological matrix of nationalism is inseparable from the political primacy of the state that characterises modernity. For this reason, nationalism and modernisation

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[38] See Laclau, E. 'Discourse' in Goodin, R. and Pettit, P. (eds.) *A Companion to contemporary political philosophy*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1993; for Laclau's approach to the distinction between idealism and materialism see 'Post-Marxism without apologies' *New Left Review*, no. 166. See also Howarth, D. *Discourse*, pp. 111-116.

[39] Gellner, E. Op. cit. p.124.

[40] Hobsbawm, E. *Nations and nationalism since1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[41] With regards to the objective argument Hobsbawm criticises traditional definitions of nationalism ranging from Herder to 1830's nationalist theories in Germany. The subjective argument is exemplified by Renan's idea of the nations as a 'daily plebiscite' and Karl Renner's characterisation of national identity as an individual choice.

[42] *Ibid*. p.10.

become concomitant phenomena, especially when the latter is situated at the point of intersection of politics, technology and social transformation. At this stage of his argument though, Hobsbawm distances himself from Gellner in virtue of the latter 'preferred perspective of modernisation from above'.[43] In Hobsbawm view such perspective prevents Gellner from perceiving the uneven development of nationalist ideology within social groupings and therefore leads him to an overstatement of the unifying capacity of nationalism. The main problem with Gellner's approach derives from the lack of awareness concerning the multiple forms of identification overlapping with nationalism during modernisation processes. To this respect, Hobsbawm seeks to recuperate the inherent tensions that the principle of nationalities generated along the modernisation process 'the more one and indivisible it claimed to be, the more heterogeneity within it created problems'.[44] This is tantamount to saying that despite the unifying goal of nationalist ideology, a certain dimension of exteriority (of heterogeneity) is inevitably present, rendering the process of nation-building highly exclusionary. In other words, the dimension of exclusion that Gellner links with material conditions appears in the case of Hobsbawm to be associated with the intrinsic limitations of nationalism's all-encompassing enterprise. Exclusion is therefore not a feature of nationalism dictated by the existence of material conditions limiting its unifying power but derives from the internal fissures within nationalist ideology itself. Homogeneous unification becomes a self-defeating endeavour.

The main point of intersection in these approaches to the question of nationality is the characterisation of the former as an ideological fabrication. In the case of Hobsbawm, we underlined his insightful point about the intrinsically exclusive nature of nationalist ideology. Nonetheless, in Hobsbawn's and Gellner ideology, the dichotomy between material and ideological dimensions conditioning the development of the principle of nationalities is still at work. Moreover for them, the very concept of nation is inseparable from the political dimension of the state, the latter being the ultimate source of power fróm where nationalist ideology emanates.

As we suggested, the analysis of national narratives became a fertile terrain for the application of

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[43] *Ibid.* p.11.

[44] *Ibid.* p.21.

discourse-oriented perspectives. In addition to the critique of the alleged 'objective' conditions for the emergence of national communities, these perspectives emphasised the relevance of rhetorical mechanisms for the creation of meaning in historical discourses about the nation. In his contribution to *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha suggests that nationalist discourses characterise themselves for conceptualising the nation as a continuous narrative based on 'the narcissism of self-generation' and the 'primeval presence of the Volk'. However, Bhabha argues, 'to encounter the nation as it is written always displays a temporality of culture and social consciousness more in tune with the partial, overdetermined process by which textual meaning is produced through the articulation of difference in language... if the problematic "closure" of textuality questions the "totalisation" of national culture then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life'. The 'most progressive' developments in this direction in his view take a 'discursive conception of ideology–ideology (like language) is conceptualised in terms of the articulation of elements'.[45] We can now argue that national narratives can be rightly portrayed as discursive mechanisms aiming to suture the lack of a transcendental referent for national identification and that, the said operation usually takes the form of a historical discourse where the 'nation' emerges out of a continuous and necessary development. As Bhabha puts it 'the nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns it into the language of metaphor'.[46]

This movement takes us to conceptions of nationality and nationalism that shift the emphasis from the domain of the state to the conditions of possibility of the national community as an 'imagined community'. Benedict Anderson criticises Gellner for equating 'invention' to 'falsity', as if there were 'true' communities existing juxtaposed to national ones.[47] For Etienne Balibar, the very notion of false consciousness looses all relevance when the distinction between imagined and real communities is dissolved 'every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary... it is based on the

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[45] Bhabha, H. (ed.) *Nation and Narration*. London, Routledge, 1990, p.3.

[46] *Ibid.* p.291.

[47] Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities*. 2nd edition, London, Verso, 1991, Introduction.

projection of individual existence into the weft of communitarian narrative... but this comes down accepting that, under certain conditions, only imaginary communities are real'.[48] In Balibar's analysis, the primary assumption is instead of 'states creating nations' we must have nations in order to have states.

> In the case of national formations, the imaginary which inscribes itself in the real is that of the 'people'... the fundamental problem therefore is to produce the people. Or again, it is to produce the effect of unity by virtue of which the people will appear, in everyone's eyes, 'as a people', that is, as the basis and origin of political power.[49]

The main object of analysis is no longer, the institutional devices through which the state subordinates citizens to its sphere of action; the assumption is that prior to that moment, political legitimacy of the state must have already been decontested. In this sense, the researcher's efforts must be directed to the moment of contestation, the pre-sedimented nature of political antagonism.[50] That is, there must be a displacement in the object of analysis that takes us from the analysis of the state, to the domain of communitarian identities. More precisely, the core analytical object becomes the ways in which a 'general will' can be constructed out of a plurality of social groupings. In order for these new forms of communitarian representation to emerge there must be deep transformations in the discursive horizon and the ways in which these operate are less related to state power than they are to forms of biopower.

At this stage, the analysis of nationalism is traversed by the examination of the discursive construction of national identities. Let us point out that neither Balibar nor Anderson overlook the importance of institutional mechanisms in the emergence of national communities. Anderson for instance insists on the enormous impact of print-capitalism and imperial bureaucracy in the early stages of nationalism. However, in Anderson's view the key transformation for the emergence of national communities occurs at the cultural level. In fact he sustains that the emergence of nationalism would have been impossible without 'a new way

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[48] Balibar, E. *Race, Nation, Class: ambiguous identities.* London, Verso, 1991, p.93.

[49] Balibar, E. Op. cit. p.93.

[50] See Norval, A. 'The things we do with words: contemporary approaches to the analysis of ideology' Colchester, Department of Government, University of Essex, 1999.

of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together'.[51]

In Benedict Anderson's view, national narratives must be considered as 'cultural artefacts of a particular kind' which to be fully understood have to be analysed in terms of the way in which 'they have come into historical being'. Following these consideration Anderson introduces a more sophisticated analysis of the historical conditions rendering possible the emergence of national imaginaries; 'their creation at the end of the 18th century, was the *spontaneous distillation* of a complex crossing of discrete historical forces but that, once created, became *modular*, capable of being translated, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations'.[52]

In the first place, the notion of a 'spontaneous distillation' represents a move away from Gellner's and Hobsbawm's approach to the flow of power in the creation of national imaginaries. For in their arguments, there was no room for spontaneity insofar as the emergence of nations and nationalism was seen as the consequence of strategic projects emanating from the sphere of the state. Furthermore, the very notion of spontaneous distillation implies a circulation of power that cannot be ascribed to an 'originary' centre such as the state; instead we have a complex set of historical forces 'crossing each other' in a form that resembles the idea of an overdetermination. As Anderson points out, national imaginaries become 'modular and capable of being translated'. Accordingly, we have cultural artefacts coming into historical being through a complex set of power relations that involve different spheres of the social. Now, if nations are cultural artefacts that come into being in dissimilar conditions, we can argue that the moment of coming into being cannot be separated from the moment when the acquisition of meaning takes place. Since the being of a cultural entity must necessarily entail a certain investment of meaning. Meaning then, is the essential condition for nationalities to emerge as 'historical beings' and also of their dissemination across diverse cultural horizons. This is, in the end, the main reason for conceiving of nationalism as an ideological product since ideology appears as the specific terrain where the creation of meaning

[51] Anderson, B. Op. cit. p.36. In turn Balibar prioritises the function of schooling in the construction of national communities.

[52] *Ibid*. p.3. My emphasis.

occurs. In the same line of thought, we must stress that the 'modulairity' of national narratives (that is to say its capacity to disseminate) can only be the result of meaning being tropologically displaced into dissimilar historical conditions. If they 'transplant' their meaning into different social and political terrains there must be rhetorical -i.e. tropological- devices allowing said transplantation of meaning to take place. That is the condition of possibility for them to 'merge and be merged with' a variety of political and ideological constellations. Here again we must stress that the concept of transplantation should not be understood as an unproblematic transference from an originating source to set of contiguous scenarios. What we have instead is an incessant circulation, a multifarious dispersion of signifiers that is partially interrupted by unstable fixations determined by specific historical conditions.[53] The crucial aspect here is that, tropology somehow becomes the grammar of dissemination and the condition of possibility for the emergence of national narratives.

In our previous pages, we have tried to show the relevance that a critique of objectivity and continuity in historical discourse has for the analysis of national narratives. By now, it should be clear that, said implications are not restricted to the ontological level but penetrate the epistemological and methodological dimensions as well. In the first place, there is a denial of any transcendental or objective referent for national identification. In other words, nationalism appears fully ascribed to the operation of ideological mechanisms of identification. These contemplate but at the same time go beyond the analysis of state intervention, putting the emphasis on the conditions of possibility for the emergence of imagined communities. On the one hand then, a research methodology based on these premises would seek to reactivate the antagonistic strategies involved in the creation of the 'national people'. In this case, the tropological articulation of differences into national narratives would be the paramount target of investigation.[54] Simultaneously there must be a meticulous examina-

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[53] The contributions made from postcolonial and subaltern studies to this issue are extremely insightful. In this respect one can mention Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridisation' and Angel Rama's analysis of 'narrative transculturation'. See Bhabha, H (ed.) *Nation and Narration*. London, Routledge, 1990; Rama, A. *The Lettered City*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1996; Beverley, J. *Subalternality and representation*. For a critical approach see Hallward, P. *Absolutely Postcolonial: writing between the singular and the specific*. Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2001.

[54] This is precisely what Balibar conceptualizes as the 'primary moment of inculcation' of national identity. A moment of 'fixation of affects of love and hate'. The ideological interpellations

tion of the institutional modalities that the national narratives acquire. With regards to the latter, historical discourse becomes a privileged object of analysis given the importance it has for the emergence of national communities. As Balibar puts it 'the history of nations is always already presented to us in the form of a narrative which attributes to these entities the continuity of a subject. The formation of the nation thus appears as the fulfilment of a 'project' stretching over centuries in which, there are different stages in the moments of coming to self-awareness'.[55] Such representation, Balibar concludes, 'constitutes a retrospective illusion but it also expresses constraining institutional realities'. To conclude, the contingent origins of national narratives is occluded through institutional sedimentation, that is, through discursive practices that contribute to the fixation of meaning and the consequent emergence of national narratives as 'retroactive illusions'.

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In this article, I have tried to make manifest the relevance that the critique of metanarratives has for a re-examination of the epistemological and methodological status of historical discourse. In the first place, the relation between historical discourse (in the form of a philosophy of history or scientific history) and historical traces can only be conceived as one of undecidability, that is, of an irresolvable tension between necessity and impossibility. The paramount importance of such a conception becomes apparent in relation to the critique of continuity and objectivity that it fosters. Nonetheless, the critique of continuity and objectivity does not imply the rejection of historical discourse as such. Instead it points out the need for a conceptualisation of historical research in terms of a reactivation of contingent origins and a meticulous analysis of the ways in which said contingency is partially occluded through mechanisms of institutional sedimentation. Recent developments in the analysis of national narratives show the fruitful terrain of research that such an approach to historical discourse can provide.

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as citizens of a nation is an 'apriori condition of communication between individuals' it operates 'not by suppressing all differences but by relativising them and subordinating them to itself'. Balibar, E. Op. Cit. p. 94.

[55] Balibar, E. Op. cit. p.86.

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