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## *Using Theory to Explore Historiography*

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay discusses the relationship between historiography and how the past is recorded and conceptualized. On the basis of methodologies and theories developed by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Leopold Ranke, and Michel Foucault, among others, it addresses silences, paradigm shifts, public and hidden transcripts, knowledge and power, as well as the ontology of race, gender, and class. The author argues that these ideas can act as the scaffolding for our understanding of history.*

**KEYWORDS:** *theory; historiography; Michel-Rolph Trouillot; Leopold Ranke; Michel Foucault; silences; paradigm shift; power; ontology; gender*

### *Introduction*

The study of history presents history as much more than just “the past.” History is a complex web of aspects that help, support, and connect to each other. Even though history may seem like nothing more than events, dates, and important names, the lessons one can learn from these events, dates, and important names can be valuable when studying other subjects or one’s everyday life.

#### *I. Ambiguity, Silences, and the Creation of Facts*

The most basic concept to understand when dealing with history, according to anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1949-2012), are the two sides of historicity: what is said to have happened and what really happened.<sup>1</sup> What is said to have happened is what remains in history books and documents, while what really happened is lost in time. Between the two sides of historicity, there is a grey area of ambiguity. What is said to have happened, as opposed to what really happened, is different in every way, yet it is also the same.<sup>2</sup> A person’s experience of an event can be completely different from what really happened, but, to some degree, it is also accurate. Being able to recognize this ambiguity and appreciate it is what should make history appealing; it allows us to interpret historical events and figures in an infinite number of ways.

The second most basic concept historians must understand is the concept of silences.<sup>3</sup> According to Trouillot, silences find a way into historical writing through four main steps: source creation, archive introduction, narrative creation, and historical conclusion. Explaining the presence of silences aids in the discussion of sources. Silences do not exactly represent reality.<sup>4</sup> There is no overseer of history ordering historians to exclude views of specific people or groups of people. Silences happen naturally. Just like witnesses to a crime give

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<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997; first published 1995), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

different testimonies while accidentally leaving out important details, various people see the world differently and can leave out crucial information. Silences come from the power which acts over people. The presence of silences is analogous to the cracks in a tower. The cracks allow sunlight, which in this case is power, to shine through. Because the cracks are not all the same size, varying amounts of sunlight can enter. Silences work in a similar way. They make different levels of power visible, so they cannot be studied collectively.<sup>5</sup>

The role of power starts with the creation of facts and sources. Power is an ever-present force in facts and sources. Although it is present, it appears and reappears at varying times. The presence of power cannot be avoided or deflected. Power only showcases the process-focused nature of the production of history. It shows that history itself is more valuable than how it comes to exist. Additionally, power shows the close relationship it shares with historical creation.<sup>6</sup> Since power is present in source creation, whoever has the power has the authority to dictate what is and what is not a source or a fact. There is always a reason behind the creation of a fact.<sup>7</sup> If a monarch wants to be favored in historical texts, he has the power to hire a historian to document his every accomplishment, regardless of size, benefit, or accuracy. He can order his historian to exaggerate or reword whatever he has done to the grandest scale, even if what he has done has been detrimental to his subjects or the country.

Creating facts inevitably creates silences.<sup>8</sup> Blurring the lines between reality and fantasy allows silences to seep into sources. By ordering a historian to create a different version of history, silences cannot avoid entering documents. In an example such as this, what is said to have happened prevails in history books (unless someone else has secretly documented a more accurate version of the specific events), while what has really happened is forgotten.

## *II. Primary Sources and Footnotes: A Paradigm Shift*

Paradigm shifts alter the way history is written. A single event or person can trigger a change in popular opinion, for better or worse. For example, Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517 dramatically changed the way history was written. Not only did Luther have the courage to go against the status quo regarding the Church's authority; he decided to make a very public statement by presenting almost one hundred reasons why what the Church was doing and teaching was problematic. This drastic change in thinking led to a divide amongst the public. They were either pro-Protestant or pro-Catholic, and their opinions and beliefs fell under one of those categories. Similarly, John Foxe (1516-1587) wrote one of the most popular books about the persecution of

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<sup>5</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 29.

English Protestants. All this caused a bitter separation among Europeans, which also spread to the Americas. This divide lasted for 500 years.<sup>9</sup> Any strong division among a large group of people will influence the way they view and write history. Therefore, different facts and sources and silences will be created, and the grey area of ambiguity between what is said to have happened and what actually happened comes into play.

Leopold Ranke (1795-1886) focused on one aspect of historicity: what “essentially” happened.<sup>10</sup> Historians should take into account the norms in thought and behavior when analyzing documents or texts from any time period. Giving the public the ability to access documents is the best way to spread the knowledge of these norms. These documents regarding norms and values could be considered first-hand accounts or primary sources. Using primary sources opens up the possibility of learning about the history of everything.<sup>11</sup>

Ranke emphasized the need to keep a record of sources and to critique those sources when writing history. He used footnotes to cite his sources and, thus, increase the credibility of historical writing. Anthony Grafton has argued that even though other historians, such as Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), had used footnotes, Ranke used them most successfully.<sup>12</sup> Ranke also created a new form of learning: the seminar. In the seminar, which was limited to those who had the proficiency to interpret primary sources, Ranke introduced the visual method of learning. Historian Jeremy Popkin references philosopher Frederick C. Beiser when indicating that Ranke believed that history had legitimacy as a field separate from philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Ranke further maintained that historians, instead of the general public, should judge each others’ writing.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Ranke believed in peer reviewing. By insisting that history was a valid field of study, Ranke strengthened its respectability and credibility. It is important for the historical field to be regarded as credible and objective because the way the public thinks of history is the way the future will perceive it. It can be argued that Ranke jumpstarted a paradigm shift in the production of history. He was able to communicate different means of teaching and learning about history and how to analyze primary documents. Today, the teaching and writing of history is unthinkable without the use of footnotes and primary sources; that is what

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<sup>9</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 52.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 77, 95 note 11, citing Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>13</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 78, 95 note 13, citing Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 260.

<sup>14</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 78-79.

paradigm shifts do. Because of Ranke, the methods of teaching and learning about history have been forever altered.

### *III. Structure, Transcripts, and the Problem with Truth-Seeking*

History includes further, complex factors, such as structure and agency, hidden transcripts, power and knowledge, and gender. Structure and agency, acting as the glue that holds the framework of society together, are the most central. Because of its connotations, there are problems associated with the term "structure." According to sociologist William H. Sewell, structure suggests something rigid, like a building, impossible to change or alter. Agents, or the enforcers of structure, are simply trying or allowing the structure to be maintained.<sup>15</sup> However, structures change all the time. Paradigm shifts, in changing the values and beliefs in a society, break down and create new structures. In the case of Martin Luther, after he had made the public aware of the Church's potential flaws, there was a new way of looking at the Church: a new structure, or a new set of basic rules for analyzing the Church and its authority. No longer could people accept the Church without pondering its authority and power; the public viewed the Church with a critical eye. The agents (the public) helped this new format to continue until the end of the European Wars of Religion and the beginning of the Enlightenment. This structure was, thus, not permanent and was able to break down.

From structure come the two types of unspoken transcripts in society: the public transcript and the hidden transcript. Political scientist James C. Scott describes the public transcript as the relationship between a ruler and the ruled, or a dominant and a subordinate.<sup>16</sup> There is a certain degree of acting that comes with this type of transcript. The public transcript is not tangible, but it can be seen by anyone. The ruler-to-ruled relationship plays out in everyday life, even in modern times. Whether carried out to a smaller extent, by a parent and a child, or to a larger extent by the president and an intern, this relationship exists. One needs to be able to assume these roles. For instance, there is a strong power dynamic between a king and his subjects. The king needs to play the role of the powerful being who intimidates and awes his subjects. The subject needs to defer to the king's every word and action. The king cannot be a friendly, easy-going man. He needs to show his superiority and wealth to his subjects to reinforce the notion of hierarchy; he is at the top while the subject is at the bottom. The subject cannot simply approach the king and shake his hand; he needs to show that he knows his place. It is easy to see this power dynamic because the difference in positions is clear as day. However, there is another type of relationship that is not easily observed.

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<sup>15</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (July 1992): 1-19, here 2.

<sup>16</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 2.

While the public transcript is the obvious dynamic between people of opposite status, the hidden transcript is the behind-the-scenes relationship that supports or opposes the public transcript.<sup>17</sup> With subordination comes the justification to launch or maintain a below-the-surface character who will not be seen by the dominant figure. This character could either confirm or deny the roles in the public transcript. If people of a lower position have a reason to create their own world outside of the public transcript, people of a higher position can create a world of their own as well. Therefore, even for the mega-powerful, there is a difference in transcripts.<sup>18</sup> The elites have their own mutually understood, but never openly questioned expectations. Glamour and wealth bestow upon people the burden of keeping the illusion of happiness and perfection alive. One must act as if life is a never-ending cycle of joy and celebration, even if it turns out to be the opposite. If one is rich but has monetary issues, one must never tell anyone outside of one's inner circle the truth about what is really going on. One needs to act like one is just as secure as the rest of one's high-society friends. Choosing to not act in this way could result in major social repercussions.

When dealing with hidden transcripts, it should not be assumed that relationships of power are so black and white that what is said before witnesses is labeled "true" and what is said behind-the-scenes is labeled "false." It also should not be assumed that public transcripts are essential and that hidden transcripts represent liberty. It can only be assumed that hidden transcripts are made by certain people under a different degree of power than public transcripts. Only by recognizing the difference between the two can historians draw conclusions regarding the significance of supremacy in public discourse.<sup>19</sup>

Even though hidden and public transcripts are known within a group of people, they are not known beyond those borders. The hidden and public transcripts are known only to people of the same group in society and cannot be viewed in another group unless one is able to gain access to them.<sup>20</sup> Historians analyzing documents from people of status and people of the lower classes have access to the separate relationships within the two groups. They might not be able to fully understand the life of someone in either of these classifications, but they can make educated guesses, based on what is written, about the transcripts.

Whatever is written falls into one of the categories of historicity presented by Trouillot. Ideally, anyone studying history is searching for the truth. However, seeking the truth about any historical figure, document, or event is as difficult as attempting to stop waves from crashing on the shore. Because facts are not created equally, what could count as facts to some might not be considered facts by others. For example, there is an extensive debate concerning the Alamo (a

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<sup>17</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, 15.

former Catholic mission and site of the 1836 battle between Mexicans and Texans). The Inter-Tribal council of Native Americans has been pushing the significance of a cemetery that is located next to the Alamo, which holds the remains of over 1000 Native Americans who were killed in battle; they want Texas and the city of San Antonio to formally recognize the area. While their efforts have garnered some attention, they have managed to question the Daughters of the Republic of Texas' ownership of the Alamo. The ownership disagreement has been nicknamed "the second battle of the Alamo." The debate focuses on the example set by the 1836 battle. It can be interpreted as a symbol of fighting for freedom despite being outnumbered, or as an example of the harsh realities of the expansion of the United States. This debate has broken off into the streets, with demonstrations and court-order demands. Both sides are reexamining the presented "facts," which would not have been considered relevant centuries ago. The "facts," regardless of importance, are no longer accepted by both parties.<sup>21</sup> The question of facts suggests the impossibility of seeking the truth. If there are two sides of the truth, there is no longer a solid definition of "the truth." Rather than seeking the truth, the more sensible action is to seek accuracy.

#### *IV. Knowledge and Power*

Possessing knowledge and power goes hand in hand with seeking accuracy. One must be able to sort out what is accurate and what is not. French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) discusses knowledge, specifically what he calls the "insurrection of subjugated knowledge." This term refers to the knowledge that has been hidden away by people in powerful positions. This knowledge has been sewn into the fabric of the systems of everyday life. Foucault uses the example of the asylum: what led to a judgment of prisons and asylums was not the study of symbols in everyday life in the asylum or the study of criminals in society, but the appearance of historical objects, documents, and ideas. It is through this appearance that historians are able to see through the fabric and dissect the consequences that an overseeing arrangement is able to hide.<sup>22</sup> In addition to subjugated knowledge, one should be familiar with naïve knowledges, the knowledges below what it means to be mentally fully functioning or to be scientifically inclined. This type of knowledge, joined with knowledge Foucault calls "popular knowledge," is not universally known; it is known only by a certain group of people in the same location. People cannot agree on it, and it is only effective by how hard it is being enacted despite people's disagreement. This knowledge allows judgment to be the most effective.<sup>23</sup> This type of

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<sup>21</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 81-82.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 82.

knowledge deals with what Foucault calls “historical knowledge of struggles,” which sprouts a tracing of struggles and their aftereffects. This lineage could not have been possible without the removal of the brutality of international conversations, its order, and the advantages of presumed freedom.<sup>24</sup>

Alongside knowledge, power is the second part of the pair. Power takes its form through operation; it cannot be given or taken. Above all, power prevents things from surfacing.<sup>25</sup> Sociologist Stuart Hall states that power is present in all levels of life and does not stem from one person or location; power is also efficient.<sup>26</sup> One could argue that power could not gain the handle it has on people and institutions if it were not efficient. It would be easily spotted and recognized and broken down or changed. The case of Martin Luther is a strong example of one going against power. At that time, going against the Catholic Church was viewed as the start of a revolution.<sup>27</sup> Luther was brave enough to speak up and expose the Church’s shortcomings. It can be argued that power is only effective as long as it stands. Luther broke down the Church’s power, and both people and historiography became divided. It could also be argued that, in order to keep the natural order of things, there needs to be some degree of power. Power hides; it does not bring issues or voices to light. Suppose, in certain situations, this could be a positive. It is against the law to steal and loot, but if the power over the public regarding criminal acts were relaxed, some people might deem it acceptable to defy public property or take whatever they please from any store of their choosing. The fact that this situation has not happened in society shows how strong power is. Society condemns stealing and vandalism and has severe repercussions for those who break the law. Decent citizens follow the law. This willingness of citizens to follow the law is what power encourages: acceptance and complacency.

#### *V. Race, Gender, and Class on the Ontological Ladder*

The concepts discussed above require an understanding of ontology. The eighteenth century marks the period in which ontology gained popularity. Trouillot references historian Michael Adas when talking about Western civilization and the idea of man. “Man” refers to coming from European lineage and being biologically male.<sup>28</sup> Women sat below men on the societal ladder; European women occupied the second highest position. Further down the ladder were the Chinese, Persians, and Egyptians. These groups not only came from

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<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 89-90.

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, in association with Open University, 1997), 13-74, here 50.

<sup>27</sup> Roy Pascal, “Martin Luther and his Times,” *Science & Society* 2, no. 3 (1938): 332-347, here 332.

<sup>28</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 76.

civilizations believed to be more advanced but were thought to be a bigger threat to Western civilization. Occupying the lowest position on the ladder were Africans and other Americans. It was believed that these people could blend in with the West. Around this time, negative association with skin color began to take form, and “black” held the worst association. This association, in addition to the concept of inferiority, was used as a justifiable reason to enslave blacks.<sup>29</sup>

The ontological ladder elevated men above women. Eventually, women fought to include their views of history. The inclusion of women and gender in history books created different theories on perspective. The catalyst of feminism’s second wave regarding women’s history after 1968 was politics.<sup>30</sup> Historian Laura Lee Downs references historian Natalie Zemon Davis when talking about the goal of politics in women’s history. The hope of politics in women’s history was that it would modify the standards by which history would be written.<sup>31</sup> 1960s and 1970s women’s historians would spur conversations with male-centered historians about rewriting history based on the experiences and perspectives of women.<sup>32</sup>

A womanly identity, which was newly-discovered from the work of awareness groups, significantly acted in developing a form of feminist politics centering on the “we are one, we are woman” statement from activist and scholar Ann Snitow. This led to complications with regard to women in poverty and non-white women; they thought they had more in common with their male relatives, husbands, and brothers than with their wealthy white counterparts who led the organization.<sup>33</sup> However, some feminists did not approve of this slogan. Only when feminists understand and integrate the varying experiences of women could true bonding exist.<sup>34</sup> This is important because it is relevant to other aspects of life. It is not beneficial to group people based on one factor and then assume they all share the same experiences and points of view. People are individuals and experience circumstances and events in different ways.

From the political influence on women’s history came two theories about the analysis of gender and women in history; both theories were discussed in the 1970s. The first was a socialist-feminist theory, which focused on the importance of distinguishing between gender and class and male authority versus capitalist ways of control. The second was the presumption that the “culture” of women came from the thought that, in some way, people instinctively separate areas of

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<sup>29</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 76-77.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 21.

<sup>31</sup> Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 24.



socialization into privately and publicly gendered categories.<sup>35</sup> Public, in this case, could be referring to the workplace and everyday life, whereas private could be referring to the household, family, and relationships.

### *Conclusion*

The factors of history discussed above, such as power and knowledge, hidden and public transcripts, structure and agency, and gender, add new perspectives to the interpretation of history. Pondering the definition of facts and sources, how they were made, and the circumstances under which they were made, will make one rethink everything one has ever known about history. No longer can one look at a document or narrative and accept it for what it is: one has to think about any possible motives authors may have had and what they may or may not have left out, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The theories presented here have contributed to a more educated and formulated definition of history. They can act as the scaffolding for our understanding of history; their ideas can set the foundation to comprehend and create one's own examples to understand their points. I look at history now as an iceberg: it may look simple and relatively unintimidating, but there is much more below the surface than meets the eye.

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<sup>35</sup> Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 24.