

Reason and the Mob: The Politics of Representation

Gary Peller

you might be sitting in a history class/ listening to the analysis of "what was going on" in the thirties in new york, say/ and you hear nothing of shtetls where grandma's generation came from/ and the descriptions of sweatshops sounds oddly abstract and disembodied, that is, emphatically unsweaty-scientific-full-of-clear-light—spared of the dust of ripped cloth—and quiet so you can hear yourself (someone else) think and the machines' screaming bobbing has stopped, all put in terms of an analysis of the labor structure of the immigrant population, complete with statistics/ and politics sounds like this or that labor policy adopted by this or that administration/ not at all what grandma described going to work as/ but you came to school to learn/ and it feels like an interesting addition to what you already know from family history and hot tea mornings in kitchens in brooklyn apartments/ but it still seems like the viewpoint of the other, of the officials giving the official line on what was happening—the politics at the pinocle games just can't be reduced to "labor unrest"/ but we're going too fast

then it's years later and you wonder again about the shtetls and what you might have lost in the history class/ and you focus on some imaginary moment when it happened—when the statistics and the analysis of the labor structure were no longer just interesting additions to the lived experience in new york of grandma and her friends but instead became the reality itself; and grandma's description about why her boss acted like he did was just shtetl superstition, or worst, silly. because at some point the feeling of learning new things was replaced by the idea of learning things the way they really are, free from superstition and prejudice, and stuff might be left out for the sake of time but what was there, presented as knowledge, was knowledge, in a particular form and in a particular language that you recognize as not the way you started out looking at things. but we're for education, after all

and then you start wondering, what if the language of true knowledge that you learned, the way of talking about things intelligently and dispassionately, was itself a mythology that contained prejudice and superstition; and then that it's not just new york in the thirties, it's

the way the whole picture is organized, a whole hierarchy of what counts and what doesn't that might present itself as neutral knowledge but is really just an ideology of power/ and the imaginary moment that you crystallized, the moment when the statistics and the analysis began to represent the true and the real against the superstitious, was the moment of self-denial and treachery as you implicitly agreed to a test of truth that would count out most of what you know most deeply. even if you can't prove it.

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The moment that I have tried to evoke here, the point at which we begin to believe the dominant Enlightenment teaching about the differences between truth and myth, between reason and sentiment, and simultaneously begin to suppress our particularity, our history and our place in the social world is incredibly important in the creation of social power in society. Even after the philosophers have abandoned the epistemological project, the attempt to find some firm ground to distinguish truth from myth, and even after the notion that the world can be neatly divided in the Cartesian way between the mind and the body has been rejected intellectually, these categories for perceiving and talking about the world continue to play powerful roles in our day-to-day lives, in the way that we understand ourselves and each other.

And the reason is simple. The construction of a realm of knowledge separate from superstition and the identification of a faculty of reason separate from passion was not, after all, simply some mind game played by philosophers and professional intellectuals. These categories have always served political roles in differentiating groups as worthy or unworthy and in justifying particular social hierarchies. They were not mere abstract musings about the ultimate nature of things, but rather part of the everyday texture of the way we construct our world and its possibilities. And a continuing thread of that construction of the world has been the notion that there is a radical distinction between truth, the representation of the way the world really is, and myth, an interpretation of the world that cannot be

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proven and thus is merely sentimental or poetic. It is this sense, of some grand distinction between truth and myth, that is supposed to distinguish the rational from the emotive, the legal from the political, the scientific from the aesthetic, the civilized from the primitive, the objective from the subjective, the neutral from the interested, and fact from opinion.

Which brings us to the topic of this essay: the current intellectual controversy about new critical attitudes toward interpretation. For the past decade or so in the United States, and a little longer in France, traditional interpretative assumptions have been directly and fundamentally challenged by the rise of “deconstruction” and other “post-structuralist” approaches to interpretation. Here the notion of “interpretation” is broadly conceived to include issues about the meaning of such things as literary works, newspapers, philosophical texts, and legal documents, as well as the meaning of social events such as the relations between doctors and patients, teachers and students, or workers and managers. The general idea, characterized by the term “critical theory,” is that similar issues are confronted whenever one is involved in thinking about the meaning of social products, whether those social products are the traditional “texts” of literary interpretation or, in the newer forms of critical practice, the “texts” of our social institutions and interactions.

The construction of a realm of knowledge separate from superstition and the identification of a faculty of reason separate from passion have always served political roles in differentiating groups as worthy or unworthy and in justifying particular social hierarchies.

The labels “deconstruction” and “post-structuralist” have been used fairly loosely to describe what are actually widely diverse critical practices. The new critical modes do, however, share the commitment that there is no possibility of a neutral or objective interpretative practice or of merely representing (as opposed to interpreting) the world. When we attempt simply to represent, free from bias or distortion, we must always do so through language, broadly conceived as a socially-created way to categorize perception of and communication about the world.

But language necessarily mediates perception and communication by shaping ways of thinking about the world that are themselves not necessary and natural, but social and contingent. When we try to move beyond language and rhetoric, beyond the means of representation, to what is being represented, we find only more language, more metaphor, more interpretation. According to the new critical approaches, there is no objective reference point, separate from culture and politics, available to distinguish truth from ideology, fact from opinion, or representation from interpretation. And thus philosophy, science, economics, literary criticism, and the other intellectual “disciplines” can be interpreted according to the same process that has been traditionally reserved for literature and art—they, too, can be read merely as “texts” organizing the thick texture of the world according to their own metaphors. They enjoy no privileged status vis-à-vis the “merely” aesthetic or subjective because they, too, are simply languages, simply ways of carving up what seems similar and what seems different in the world. Moreover, these approaches are “post-structuralist” precisely because they reject the notion that there is some deeper logic that governs the production of meaning, and thus they include within their critique the grand theories of Freud, Levi-Strauss, Marx, and other structuralists who purport to have found a unified, underlying scheme of social life that itself stands outside the play of rhetoric and metaphor.

This is not, of course, to say that the new critical approaches deny that we can, and do, make decisions about the world—about what is important and what is bullshit, about what makes sense to us and what doesn’t. The point is that there is no grand organizing theory or principle with which to justify our social choices as neutral and apolitical, as the products of reason and truth rather than of passion or ideology.

These new critical approaches, in short, deny the central Enlightenment notions that we have described above, that is, that there is a difference between rational, objective representation and interested, biased interpretation. This new attitude toward interpretation emerged first in literary criticism and philosophy and now has at least some practitioners in virtually all the fields of the humanities, including sociology, anthropology, history, economics, and law.

The controversy about the deconstructive stance is in many ways played out in professional journals as a typically dry, intellectual competition between philosophical positions. (My theory is bigger than yours.) But the issues that have emerged in the controversy seem to me to present important political questions about the way that power works in social life—questions that revolve around what I have described above as the struggle over truth and reality presented as one

confronts official knowledge and compares it with one's own experience of and feeling for the world.

As I see it, the deconstructive approach puts at issue what have been the traditional mainstays of our liberal and progressive commitment to Enlightenment culture. Indeed the whole way that we conceive of liberal progress (overcoming prejudice in the name of truth, seeing through the distortions of ideology to get at reality, surmounting ignorance and superstition with the acquisition of knowledge) is called into question. The new critical approaches suggest that what has been presented in our social-political and our intellectual traditions as knowledge, truth, objectivity, and reason are actually merely the effects of a particular form of social power, the victory of a particular way of representing the world that then presents itself as beyond mere interpretation, as truth itself. The deconstructive attitude is oriented toward uncovering the ways in which, say, the rational sociology of New York in the 1930s is a cultural and political construct, built on exclusion of other, "less worthy," knowledge, like my grandmother's knowledge of her social situation.

The deconstructive approach is controversial to traditionalists because it challenges what they believe their whole task is about. If what separates the rational from the irrational is the claim that the rational approach is able to purify itself of ideology and mere social conventionality, the deconstructionist wants to challenge reason on its own ground and demonstrate that what gets called reason and knowledge is simply a particular way of organizing perception and communication, a way of organizing and categorizing experience that is social and contingent but whose socially constructed nature and contingency have been suppressed. When the particular way that knowledge and legitimacy have been organized is rejected, the traditionalists see an abyss of meaning and therefore charge that the deconstructive stance is "nihilist."

On the other hand, to those who have already rejected the traditionalist vision of knowledge and truth as ideological and biased, the deconstructive approach seems abstract and apolitical, a kind of super-skeptical discourse that is of no help in getting past the ideology of official knowledge to the imbedded reality of our lives. Moreover, to many committed leftists, the deconstructive stance appears disengaged, as a kind of radical chic that stands outside the existential questions we face in social life.

I believe that the rise of the new interpretative approaches marks an important movement toward unmasking the politics of intellectual life, and opens up new possibilities for understanding the politics of social life more generally. Accordingly, I want to discuss de-

construction with a particular focus on the social and political issues that I believe are imbedded in the current intellectual controversy. And rather than attempt some kind of summary of the "premises" of deconstruction or post-structuralism (a slightly absurd task for an intellectual movement that poses itself against totalizing theories or methods), I will first provide an example of a deconstructive reading of a text.

I have chosen parts of an article from the *Virginia Quarterly Review* by Nathan Scott, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. Since Scott is writing about deconstruction, which he believes has engendered a "crisis in humanistic studies," his article provides a convenient starting point from which we can get an idea of what a deconstructive approach might do with a particular text and at the same time consider the political and social implications of the deconstructive stance through the issues that are raised in interpreting Scott.

Today, of course, the enterprising anti-humanism of the post-Structuralist movement is in full tide, and it presents us with the great example in contemporary intellectual life of the new *trahison des clercs*. This phrase forms the title of a once famous book by the French critic Julien Benda which was first published in 1927, and in English the phrase is best rendered as the "betrayal of the intellectuals" . . . [Benda] was moved to advance the rather extravagant charge that the typical intellectuals of the modern period, identifying themselves with class rancor and nationalist sentiment, have abdicated their true calling in the interests of political passion: instead of quelling the mob and beckoning it toward true community, they have joined the mob, concurring in its lust for quick results and adopting its devotion to the pragmatic and the expedient. . . . And it is his fiercely reproachful term that appears now to be the appropriate epithet for the intellectual insurgency that is currently sowing a profound disorder in the . . . humanities.

This paragraph is supposed to form the general context for Scott's warning about the threat of post-structuralism to modern intellectual life. As Scott sees it, the humanist approaches he defends depend for their "cultural authority . . . on what can be claimed for them as disciplines aimed at *knowledge* and *truth*." The problem with the new critical approach is that it is a form of "nihilism"—as such, it "radically impugns any truly cognitive dimension of the human endeavor. It strikes at its most vital nerve—more threateningly than anything else in our period, since it strikes from within."

Scott identifies the humanist approach with the “intellectuals” and the “post-Structuralist” approaches with the “mob.” But in order for these associations to constitute an argument against the new approaches, the reader must first understand what is bad about the mob and what is good about the intellectuals. Thus, a useful place to begin unpacking the text would be to determine what the contrast between the intellectual and the mob means and what conceptions allow us to make sense of the elevation of the intellectual over the mob.

There is no grand organizing theory or principle with which to justify our social choices as neutral and apolitical, as the products of reason and truth rather than of passion or ideology.

Scott’s rhetoric helps in this analysis because it contains a group of associations with the intellectuals and with the mob that can assist us in determining its meaning. The distinction between the mob and the intellectuals and the justification for the superiority of the intellectuals are suggested by the fact that the mob is characterized by social desire—it is associated with “class rancor,” “nationalist sentiment,” “political passion,” “lust,” “disorder,” and “insurgency.”

The intellectual, on the other hand, stands in contrast to these features: the intellectual is supposed to represent order and dispassion rather than “rancor” and “sentiment,” neutrality as opposed to politics, the “disciplined” search for “knowledge and truth” rather than the lustful satisfaction of passion and desire, the ideal and the long-term as opposed to the “pragmatic and the expedient.”

In short, Scott’s argument seems animated by a structure of meaning where reason and passion are distinguished from each other. Reason is associated with the intellect, knowledge, truth, neutrality, and objectivity; passion is associated with disorder, politics, sentiment, class rancor and unthinking nationalism. Finally, reason is elevated to a superior position vis-à-vis emotion.

Next we must consider why reason should presumptively enjoy this privileged status, what it is about the two categories that makes it seem beyond question that right-thinking and progressive minded people would “naturally” understand from the text both the contrast between the two categories and the superiority of the rational over the emotive.

To understand the way that Scott succeeds in commu-

nicating, to uncover the manner in which his language resonates with what a reader might already understand about the world, we might at this point imagine the contrast between the rationality of the intellectuals and the passion of the mob in terms of individual, rather than social, issues. Here we recognize the relationship between the mob and the intellectual in the relationship between reason and desire, the mind and the body. Just as the text associates being civilized at the social level with subordinating the mob—social desire—to the intellectual, so we have reference to a cultural language in which being civilized and mature as an individual means subordinating the passions to reason, making the mind the ruler of the body rather than the other way around. In addition, the sense of the temporal relation between the short-sightedness of the mob and the long-view of the intellectuals is repeated in the notion that the mind must delay the satisfaction of desire in the civilized individual—the regulative function of reason is temporal, to keep emotion and desire in their proper places at their proper times, to resist the animal urge for immediate satisfaction.

And at this level of the individual, the full force of the superiority of the intellectual and the mob is exposed, for the body represents our natural, animal side, and the mind our human side. Just as the intellectual must “quell” the mob’s passion and lust in order for the humanist position to survive, so the mind must quell the urges of the body if we are to be civilized and escape our animal selves. Our animal passions represent the continuing hold of nature over us, just as the possibility of mob action represents the need for the continuing vigilance of the intellectual, lest social life degenerate to an animal state. To transfer the issues back to the social level, then, Scott’s appeal is to a general language of social progress and development—the intellectual is favored over the mob because the mob is, in a sense, less human, closer to nature, primitive.

We have in our cultural knowledge concrete historical images that support the reasonableness of the hierarchy of reason over passion. Probably the most powerful single image in the American experience is the image of the Southern lynch mob—there, in the common understanding, the mob, ruled by irrational racism against Blacks, bypassed the orderly, rational, and judicial means of dispensing justice in favor of the “pragmatic and the expedient,” simply acting on the basis of their passionate emotions. In this image, reason can play a heroic role and justify its privileged status vis-à-vis passion, by standing against the forces of the mob and speaking from principles, objectivity, and dispassion.

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REASON AND THE MOB

At this point, it seems that we have a good hold on the meaning of the text. We are asked to reject the mob in favor of the intellect just as we must reject our passions in favor of our reason. In either sphere, the failure to regulate the emotional with the rational would in a sense be giving in to our animal urges, opening up the possibility of regression and the end of civilization.

But just as soon as we begin to feel that we have gotten a hold on this determinate meaning of Scott's argument, we also feel it begin to slip away. If the "reason" for subordinating the mob to the intellectuals is the threat of the mob to coerce with its passion, then it strikes us as initially dissonant that the intellectuals are asked to "quell" the mob. The very ability of the intellect to "quell" suggests that in some way the intellectuals are like the mob, possessing coercive power. Yet it was the potential for the mob to coerce that justified its regulation by the intellectuals.

This power of the intellect to "quell" introduces the possibility that reason is actually a means of discipline, a coercive technology for the social regulation of passion and emotion. At both the individual and the social levels, reason plays the role of standing in the place of desire and deferring it to another time or place. Accordingly, we imagine reason at the individual level deferring desire until the "right" place, e. g., in our social mores, reason defers passion to the privacy of the home, or perhaps to the marital relation. At the social level, the intellectuals defer the passion of the mob into the courtroom or other "appropriate" places.

But once we see reason as the regulator of passion, as a technology, we also realize that reason is constructed out of social power. The notion of reason regulating desire to “appropriate” times and places exposes the ways that reason embodies social choices about what is appropriate or inappropriate. With respect to sexuality, for example, regulation might occur according to the Victorian notions of propriety or according to “our” modern permissiveness. Reason itself yields no determinate basis that would allow us to choose between the alternatives. Reason does not tell us whether to prefer the nuclear family over the alternatives, nor whether the present segregation of reason and desire according to public or private realms is reasonable. Any choice of this or that mode of regulation seems to reflect merely a preference, a desire. Short of some “natural” embodiment of the relationship between reason and desire, any choice looks political, willed, a reflection of desire itself.

By this strange twist, reason can only “quell” desire on an individual level by the means of desire itself, by becoming the desire to defer desire, and reason can only control desire on a social scale by becoming social desire—the mob. Thus reason is only desire that has become institutionalized as good sense, that has achieved social conventionality, that is no longer recognizable as a mob because it no longer bears the signs of its emotion, the rage that marked the historic efforts to repress the passion of the other, the infidel and the heretic. Reason appears as desire that has been frozen in its “appropriate” place, and, having achieved its goal, reason can appear free of the violence that is its history. Like the mob, reason promises a coerced social order based on a particular social desire. In contrast to the sharp, qualitative distinction we began with, here reason and passion appear simply as different points on a spectrum; neither concept refers to anything positive and substantial. Reason appears as a social choice about how to regulate passion, but as such it only has meaning as the flip side of passion, as a deferment of passion that is ruled by passion itself. Reason is simply what is not passion, but only social choices tell us in any particular instance which is which.

Moreover, this indeterminacy with respect to the relation between reason and passion, the intellectuals and the mob, extends to what we think of as the “mob.” Our earlier model of the irrational, threatening mob was a lynch mob. But when we look again at the ways that social history has been constructed, we find a multitude of contexts where there was an attempt to identify a lustful, emotional mob unworthy of power and in need of discipline. The mob of immigrants through Ellis Island, the mob at the Bastille, the mob at wildcat factory strikes, the mob at the sweatshop sewing machines, the mob in the housing projects and

the Polish ghettos, the mob in the March on Washington.

What seems to connect the meanings of “the mob” in these contexts is a consistent pattern of dominant groups justifying their privileged status by associating the “other” with base, animal urges—a pattern extending from Nazi caricatures of Jews, to white racist caricatures of Blacks, to the middle-class vision of the poor, to male visions of femininity, to factory owners’ visions of workers, to skyscraper office images of the people on subways. In each class relation, the dominant group projects the other as emotional and primitive, ruled by irrational passion. In this interpretation, the language of the distinction between reason and passion seems to be simply the language by which the powerful and dominant justify their own power on the basis that they are more civilized and human—and as such, the very categories of reason and passion, far from giving us a vantage point from which to distinguish politics from truth, seem to be merely one form of the rhetoric of social power. The text’s reference to the “mob” is indeterminate. The choice between which group to call “the mob” is a political choice, one which “reason” can’t decide.

Moreover, this indeterminacy about the text’s meaning is not even limited by what we earlier assumed was the paradigm of bad group action, the lynch mob. We initially understood the text by identifying the lynch mob with the coercive threat of civilization disintegrating to an animal state. The lynch mob acts irrationally, in a prejudiced fashion against the Black person being lynched, out of passion rather than reason.

But when we look inside the language of the lynch mob itself, we find the same terms used to justify the lynching. What made Blacks threatening and “other,” in need of the discipline of the lynch mob, was, from the lynch mob’s point of view, the passionate, lustful, sexual nature of Blacks. It was precisely the white group’s view of black lust that made Blacks represent for the lynch mob the threat of the insurgency of a primitive, animalistic nature that threatened the civilized social order.

Here the interpretation seems to be at a crossroads with no sure way to determine how we are to understand Scott’s argument. If it is lust and passion, the animal side, that must be regulated and quelled, then the lynch mob’s self understanding of what it was doing is consistent with Scott’s claims. Surely Scott doesn’t mean that—that’s not the point here. Rather, what is called into question is the notion that something called “reason” can neutrally and dispassionately dictate how we are to distinguish the bad mobs from the good. What started out as the paradigm of the mob threat to overcome reason with emotion can, from a different point in

history and a different place in social life, become the identification of the mob with reason.

Reason and passion can both be associated with the mob; the association of passion with particular groups, and the association of reason with other groups, is a political act that can’t be determined by reason itself. In this interpretation, reason can’t be the *source* of the intellectual’s legitimacy in Scott’s text since the content of reason is simply an *effect* of a particular group being in power and therefore able to categorize others as irrational. Accordingly, in Scott’s own terms, reason is actually nothing more than some mob having the social power to define its coercive force as what is necessary to quell the passion of the other.

At this point, Scott’s text seems to be at war with itself. Scott seems to suggest that the intellectual is to be favored over the mob because the intellectual would be rational, objective, and neutral, while the mob is passionate, biased, and coercive. But the language of the distinction between reason and passion is indeterminate. Nothing in the concepts or the words determines what is being referred to; determinacy is achieved through a contingent social choice, that is, through politics. Rather than point away from politics and toward reason, the text simply advocates a particular politics, a particular disciplinary discourse of social order; the text’s invocation of a place outside of politics and passion, a social space outside the mob, seems to be simply one form that the social struggle between groups takes.

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This interpretation of Scott’s text is an example of one of the many ways that a deconstructive reading might proceed. At the risk of reductionism, we can at this point articulate some aspects of the approach to Scott’s argument that are often present in deconstructive readings. First, we were able to show that Scott’s text yielded no stable, authoritative meaning; to the contrary, Scott’s argument could be read in one way as advocating the elevation of reason over passion; yet, we were also able to use the text’s own terms of analysis to reverse this meaning, to find that there is no qualitative distinction between reason and passion and that reason is simply a particular form of passion. Second, the reading also demonstrated the active participation of the interpreter in constructing meaning; the interpretation was not neutral and passive, but rather depended on the sense that the reader brought to the text, on the conceptual language that the reader already possessed. Finally, we identified a critical opposition in the text, the contrast between the intellectual and the

mob, and showed how the text itself could be read to subvert the good sense of the contrast upon which the argument is built. By reversing the relationship between reason and passion, and thereby showing how reason might be seen as simply the effect of passion rather than its regulator, this critical interpretation showed how the rational, determinate sense of the argument actually depended on an initial, arational association between reason and particular cultural and political visions of social life.

The point of this kind of reading is not that Scott was somehow insufficiently rigorous in constructing his argument, that, had he been more careful, he could have articulated his position in a way that would have made it immune to the kind of interpretation I have pursued. Any text can be read in this manner. Meaning does not somehow reside in a text, to be discovered by an innocent, unbiased reader; and language is not a self-executing, static reference to objects in the world. Meaning is always constructed, and always subject to being constructed differently. The attribution of meaning to texts and events is a political process that cannot be determined by the authority of reason. So it is not that something is bad about Scott's argument because it can be shown to depend on a particular ideology, on a particular language for attributing likeness and difference in the world. The point, rather, is that there is no way to flee from the politics of interpretation to the purity of reason.

I believe that Scott has correctly identified the political nature of the challenge that deconstruction represents to the traditions and institutions he defends. Deconstruction, in Scott's view, poses the threat of the mob coming to power, because deconstruction subverts the legitimacy of the discourse with which authority commonly justifies social hierarchies such as the superiority of the "intellectuals" over the "mob." The position and prestige of the intellectual depends, in Scott's view, on laying claim to being rational and apolitical. Reason is not itself supposed to be power, but the way that power is tamed to ensure that it is legitimate and appropriate. But if the category of reason is itself a social construct, and if the mantle of social legitimacy depends on being called reason, then the question of what to call reason is a political question about a contingent exercise of the social power of marginalization and exclusion.

The deconstructive approach works to politicize the boundaries between knowledge and superstition, truth and myth, reason and passion, fact and opinion. In doing so, it helps to expose the ways that these distinctions are not simply natural and necessary ways to divide up the world, but rather form the language for a particular discourse of authority and power. As such,

the point of demonstrating that, say, Scott's commitment to reason against the mob actually rests on a particular ideology about the world is not to fault his analysis for being partial or political. The goal is not simply to reverse the hierarchies and thus to favor passion over reason, the mob over the intellectuals, superstition over knowledge, but to see that these very ways of thinking and talking about social life already embody a particular discourse of power that seeks to legitimize social hierarchy by claiming to have escaped politics, superstition, and the mere conventionality of language.

And that is why, I think, so much controversy has arisen over the deconstructive project. By exposing the dependence of supposedly rational or scientific interpretations of the world on language and textuality, on the contingent ways that the thick texture of the world might be carved up, the deconstructive practice subverts the claim of the Enlightenment tradition to have transcended time and space, to have found through reason or science a place outside of historical struggle and beyond the partiality of a particular place in the terrain of social geography. Thus, we can recognize in Scott's argument about reason a particular language for interpreting the world—a language within which it seems natural rather than controversial to divide up the world according to the categories of reason and desire, the elite intellectual and the popular mob, knowledge and superstition, principles, and politics. But these categories are not, in fact, natural or necessary. They are, rather, social constructions that can be deconstructed to reveal their history, to reveal the excluded voices that have been diminished as "primitive" or "passionate" or "emotional" in the march of "enlightenment" and "progress." And this language can be deconstructed to reveal its place in the current social geography—in the claims of the powerful that their power is justified by their superior reason or education, or by their civilized nature in sublimating their passion and desire according to middle-class notions of propriety. Or in the more general cultural tradition marked by fear of passion and sexuality, fear of emotion, keeping proper public appearances.

We can also see in the analysis of Scott's text a particular way that such a language or ideology works to, in a sense, cover its tracks, to suppress the constructed nature of its categories. For the coherence of Scott's approach depends on believing not only that his categories for interpreting the social world are natural and necessary, but also that they can be applied apolitically because they are not merely words or ideas but refer to something real in the world, something out there somewhere prior to the mere convention of lan-

guage which the distinction between reason and desire reflects. The point of showing that reason is simply what is not desire and vice versa is to demonstrate that there is no escape from the contingencies of language. There is nothing in the words or concepts of “reason” and “desire” that dictates that they be associated with particular experiences; the two concepts exist only as they are socially constructed and contrasted within language.

The notion that there is no escape from language and politics, no way to represent the social world free of ideology, is not meant simply to correct some intellectual mistake that academics have made in the process of interpreting the world. Rather, it is to oppose the authority of official knowledge on its own terms, to demonstrate that if the justification for certain people being marginalized and excluded from social power is that they view the world through the lenses of myth and superstition, so, too, do the so-called rational and civilized. The significance of the deconstructive practice is not simply to reveal the constructed nature of what gets taken as fact, knowledge and truth as opposed to opinion, superstition and myth. It is an important practice because, in our social world, these claims to truth have played powerful political roles in the construction of our social relations—in the ways that those in power have justified their power and those out of power have been made to feel that their powerlessness is their own fault and inadequacy.

Moreover, the deconstructive practice is significant to the extent that it works to demystify the ideology of necessity and naturalness not only in intellectual life, but also in social experience. The notion that we are always perceiving and communicating about the world through language, through socially created and contingent ways of articulating the social space, is relevant not only to “texts” in the sense of written documents, but also to the “text” of our social relations themselves. One aspect of the textuality of experience is reflected in the language of social roles. We approach each other in large part through a social matrix for distributing meaning that influences how the other will be perceived and how we perceive ourselves. Accordingly, social power, represented in the language of social roles, influences every social relation. For example, the relations between men and women proceed largely on the basis of what it means to be a man or a woman within the particular language of social roles. As recent feminist work has powerfully articulated, there is no basis outside social power for the way that these roles have been constructed. The language of gender roles does not reflect some objective, natural reality. It is a construct with a particular history and place in the social field.

But so long as this language of social roles is taken to reflect something positive and substantial, something that pre-exists language and is merely reflected by language, so long as it appears that gender relations are conducted in a certain way because that’s the way men and women “are,” the social construction of gender rules is suppressed and gender rules assume a place outside of politics, outside of history, and beyond the possibilities of social change.

The Enlightenment tradition of opposing knowledge to ignorance, truth to mythology, and reason to passion beckoned us toward a place of universality where we would meet outside the play of politics and passion, free from the hold of mythology and the particularities of our history. But the most successful form of social power is one that presents itself not as power, but as reason, truth and objectivity. Rather than continue the quest to find a place that is outside politics and independent of social struggle, it is time to look at all the ways that social power is at stake across the social space, in what gets called “politics” as well as what gets called “reason,” in what gets called “private” choice as well as what is recognized as public power. Rather than compulsively search for a vantage point of neutrality, we should recognize as acts of political power the exclusions of those who are marginalized as merely ideological or superstitious in the Enlightenment mythology of truth.

The deconstruction of the dominant forms of knowledge is only the first step of a committed critical practice. We then are faced with the task of taking a stand, or asserting what the world means, of constructing new meanings and new understandings of what is happening in our social lives. Having debunked the dominant form of knowledge because it suppresses its socially created character, we are thrown into the task of creating meaning socially, the task of politics itself.

To some, like Scott, the assertion that there is no neutral, authoritative, and apolitical interpretation of social life available sounds like a message of hopelessness and nihilism. I think this reaction is rooted in a conviction that the only kind of knowledge worth having is a kind of knowledge that can be elevated above social life and social history, that can be immunized from bias or change. For me, the message of social construction and social contingency is one of hope. It is hopeful because it also suggests that there is no objective necessity or rational principle to justify the way things are, to legitimate the hierarchies and status quo distribution of wealth, power, prestige, and freedom. Because our social relations are social products, there is no “reason” why they cannot be remade by us, working and struggling and dreaming together. □