“The Tip of the Volcano”

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Laura Downs’ title—“If ‘woman’ is just an empty category, then why am I afraid to walk alone at night?”—indicates, as a good title should, what is to follow in her subsequent essay. Unfortunately in this case the title reveals right from the beginning her profound misapprehension of the texts and questions she proposes to discuss. “Either she doesn’t get it all,” an undergraduate conversant with Women’s Studies said to me when she heard the title, “or she’s deliberately misrepresenting what you’ve written.” Having read Downs’ essay and worked on this response, I can only conclude that ignorance and misrepresentation go hand in hand, whatever the author’s intent.

I am deeply troubled by the cavalier way in which Downs treats disciplines—philosophy, psychoanalysis, literary studies—not her own. Interdisciplinary borrowing has always seemed to me a difficult and risky business, requiring that we respect high standards of scholarship as we acquire new ways of analyzing and thinking. Criticism of the methods and approaches developed by other disciplines is even more challenging because it demands that we fully engage with and understand, in their terms, the ideas we want to dispute. Indeed, it seems to me that one earns the right to criticize work in another field only by the hard effort of learning that field. The glib use of technical terms, superficial familiarity with a few phrases, and schematic portrayals of main themes, do not constitute serious interdisciplinary work; rather, they represent an abdication of professional responsibility.

Downs’ piece is an example of what happens when interdisciplinarity is not pursued seriously. Since CSSH has decided to print it, and since that may be taken by readers as an endorsement of its adequacy to the problems addressed, I will proceed by commenting on her misapprehensions. As I do so, I hope it will become clear why this piece cannot be the basis for a serious discussion of the issues raised by post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories for history.

First, the title of the article suggests that there is a direct relationship between theory—the analysis of concepts like “women”—and the lived experiences of women. But there is not such a direct relationship. First, theory analyzes how knowledge is produced; theory does not produce either real life or practical politics. Second, those who interrogate the concept “women”
never argue that it has no meaning and no effects, nor do they say that there are no women in history. Rather, the point is to contest the essentialist notion underlying some identity politics that takes “women” to be all of us with female bodies all over the world and at any time in history and that assumes, therefore, that there are attitudes, feelings, and interests that we all necessarily have in common. By historicizing the category of women, in the way Denise Riley has done so effectively, that is, by asking what its historical determinations have been and how they have operated, we are able to analyze women’s situation—how it is structured and how it is experienced—with far greater precision than if we simply apply current definitions to our readings of the past. Indeed, it is only by historicizing “women” and reading its various meanings in context, that we can begin to explain why Downs imagines that she can evoke the reality of being a woman by reference to being afraid.

It is not, after all, nor has it forever been, the universal condition of women to be so afraid. The current association between being afraid and being a woman is the effect of a certain feminist discourse which makes the experience or anticipation of violence a major aspect of what it means to be a woman. This discourse reflects the pervasive ideology of violence which, in turn, has a complex relation to the violence practiced in society, both contributing to its production and naturalizing—that is, dehistoricizing—it as a social phenomenon. This discourse does not provide the kind of analysis or critique of the ideology of violence that would historicize it; instead, it reproduces its terms. By invoking this discourse in the name of the experience of women and by using it to attack theories whose very aim is the critical historicized analysis of such ideologies, Downs simply perpetuates the problem she sets out to solve.

Second, Downs confuses deconstruction with Saussurian linguistics, betraying a lack of knowledge about the history of philosophy. Saussure’s work is structuralist; its binarism leads to a systematic closure for interpretation. Derrida works with and against Saussure; it is that which makes him “post-structuralist.” The point of post-structuralism is to open up the closures of structuralism, to look for the exclusions produced by fixed binaries and re-introduce them for analysis. There is no conceivable way, then, that Saussure and Derrida can be taken to be saying the same thing.

Third, Downs misunderstands Derrida’s treatment of difference in two ways. She suggests that it has to do with intersubjective relations, when in fact it is about signification. Then she renders Derrida’s notion of difference a dialectical opposition, a “struggle to the death” (p. 435). But deconstruction

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1 Denise Riley, “Am I That Name?” Feminism and the Category of “women” in History (Minneapolis, 1988).

2 For the best discussion of this as it relates to rape, see Sharon Marcus, in Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds. Feminists Theorize the Political (Routledge, 1992), 385–403.
is precisely a critique of the reduction of difference to dialectical opposition. It is therefore simply wrong to refer, as Downs does, to Derrida’s “Manichean world view.” The work of Derrida and others has enabled us to think about difference so that it does not imply radical opposition; that is the meaning, after all, of the term “différence.”

Fourth, Downs misrepresents deconstruction when she charges it (invoking the now tired cliché that makes deconstruction synonymous with destruction) with “destabilizing existing categories” in a way that appears reckless, anarchic, and nihilistic. Rather, deconstruction exposes the contradictions and instabilities inherent in existing categories. These contradictions and instabilities then expose hitherto hidden operations of power. (The effect of that exposure is to destabilize those who, like Downs, believe firmly in the truth of the categories.) Deconstruction is a theory about how categories are constructed to appear closed or fixed when they are not. It therefore enables scholars to analyze contradictions and instabilities (and hence organizations of power) as they vary in context and over time. Like Marx, Derrida is interested in revealing the operations of contradiction in what appears to be a stable system. This procedure is potentially of enormous use to historians both because it attends to specific meanings and because it suggests a way of analyzing change as a process produced by and through contradiction. Whether deconstruction is adequate for explaining the kinds of change historians have made it their business to interpret is an open question, but that is not because it cannot deal with change per se.

Fifth, Downs does not understand the difference between a critique or analysis and the object of that critique or analysis. This leads her to the entirely unfounded assertion that the critique of the concept of the subject as it has developed in the West since the seventeenth century somehow destroys (“annihilates,” in her usage) that subject as an historical and political reality. It is one thing to analyze the fully present, whole self as an artifice whose realization has been pursued through the exclusion or oppression of various others and quite another to say that such analysis makes the subject disappear (would that it were that simple). If anything, theory makes the subject more visible as an historical entity, in its foundational assumptions as well as its lived effects.

Sixth, Downs conflates the terms “subject” and “subjectivity” and takes no account of the multiple and highly specific meanings these terms carry in contemporary theory. Foucault’s “subject” is not Benjamin’s, and neither of their “subjects” can be simply collapsed onto the colloquial use of the term “subjectivity.” Downs’s ignorance of these distinctions leads her to propose that Jessica Benjamin’s work “pushes beyond” that of Michel Foucault (p. 424). Actually the relation is not one of “pushing beyond” but of opposition. Foucault says “one has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account
for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework.”

Benjamin (in Downs’s account of her) does precisely the opposite, premising her notions of subjectivity on the interaction between two already existing selves with no historical specificity, the mother and child. While Foucault historicizes the very concept of the self, Benjamin universalizes this historically specific concept. It is only because she misunderstands both Foucault and Benjamin that Downs can argue that Benjamin’s theory is more useful for historians. It is only because she misunderstands both, that she fails to see that Benjamin exemplifies, rather than goes beyond, the Foucauldian critique.

Seventh, Downs does not understand the term textuality. When she says that I privilege “textual relations” over “social relations” (p. 423–4), she conflates two things of different orders. My approach to social relations attempts to textualize them, that is, to read them according to a set of theoretical insights developed most fully for written texts. Textualizing is a method of analysis, a theoretical approach; it is not the antithesis of or a substitute for social relations. It remains to be seen how well textual approaches can work for the kinds of analyses—of complex events, of lived social relationships, of the specific operations of power, and, of course, of change—that historians want to undertake. I think these are questions for serious scholarly debate. But the issues involved cannot even be discussed in the terms Downs offers.

Eighth, Downs’s argument is internally contradictory. There are several examples of this having to do with her conceptions of language. (I will leave aside such unfathomable sentences as the one which refers to the “prison-camp” [did she mean prison-house?] of the linguistically ordered nullity to which history has relegated its many others” (p. 415). She is muddled about the question of the relationships among language, thought, and the knowing subject. At one point she invokes an opposition between thought and history (p. 416). Then she rejects the idea that something (women’s situation? their oppression?—it is not clear) is “solely a question of language.” Instead, she says, the problem is “how we conceive of the historical subject as a knowing being” (p. 419). Aside from the ahistorical way this question is framed (I would say the question is, as Foucault has posed it: how, historically, has the knowing subject been conceived?), it makes no sense to talk about a knowing being without taking language (conceptualization, signification, symbolization, discourse—all historically specific, of course) into account. Moreover, to study the knowing subject historically requires exactly the kind of consideration of metaphors of power Downs rules out in favor of “a lived and labile social relation” (p. 424). How are those labile social relations lived, if not in terms of (conflicting, internally contradictory, and polysemous) metaphors? Yet another example of her confusion arises in Downs’s discussion of Benjamin’s theory. There, “suffused in golden light” we encounter the beatific

mother and child and we learn that the baby, in its “pre-lingual world” is “beginning to ponder the idea of self and other” (p. 428). How s/he can “ponder” without a signifying system—a language—is never explained.

Ninth, if Downs has a theoretical alternative to the notion that thought requires language, she never offers it for our consideration. Instead she structures her argument in terms of oppositions between language and experience, ideas and reality, texts and contexts, the textual and the social. She treats these oppositions as self-evident facts that need no justification. As a result she never addresses some difficult problems, which she must if she wants to have a coherent and persuasive argument with post-structuralists. Among these are the problem that “the social” itself is a conception, the meaning of which has had a specific and changing history; and the problem that the context for any text consists of a selection of those events or phenomena that are considered to matter or not for understanding the text. (Downs suggests, for example, that I should have used Leroy Beaulieu rather than Jules Simon because the former was more widely read [p. 422]. Why does she assume that hers is an unproblematic principle of selection?) The delimitation of context (as Derrida has pointed out) is both exclusionary and productive and so constitutes a textual moment. What happens then to the opposition between text and context? Historians may want to argue about what this means for their work, as well they should, but first they have to achieve a better level of understanding than Downs demonstrates, one that is far less casual in its consideration of these complex questions.

Tenth, if CSSH readers are not familiar with the work of Benjamin and Carolyn Steedman, they will be misled by Downs’s treatment. The books are radically at odds in substance and method. While Benjamin undertakes a rewriting of the oedipal myth to emphasize the harmonious aspects of the mother-child dyad, Steedman focuses on the failure of the reproduction of mothering in the specific context of Britain in the 1950s. Using Freudian theories of desire, Steedman shows that psychic dynamics are historically produced. She does not rescue an “authentic” or “genuine” subject from its theoretical misrepresentation. Nor does she “look squarely at what is out there to be seen” (p. 432). Rather she reads the family stories and memories of her childhood through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, offering an alternative to certain Marxist interpretations of the political conservatism of workers.

Downs reads Benjamin as a method of social reform that will cure the oppression of women by restoring to them the “genuine subjectivity” that deconstruction supposedly has destroyed. In fact, Benjamin is offering a counter-myth to the oedipal one that is as radically unverifiable as the the-

oretical fiction of parricide. Hers is a *theory* of intersubjective relations, not a way of establishing specific subjectivities. Downs's conflation of theory, description, and prescription leads her to present Benjamin's theories as if they were political programs.

Eleventh, Downs misrepresents my book. It is influenced as much, if not more, by Foucault as by Derrida. It deals directly with the uses of psychoanalytic theory in the chapter, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." Chapter 6, "L'Ouvrière, Mot Impie, Sordide," is full of references to the historical circumstances that influenced the writings of Simon and Daubié: the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty, industrial and urban development, the rise of political economy, and so forth. Chapter 9, "American Women Historians," deals with change. In that chapter, as well as chapter 5, "Work Identities for Men and Women," women are depicted as speaking/acting subjects. There are surely grounds on which my book's arguments can be criticized, but such criticism should be made not by distortion and misrepresentation, but by engaging the arguments themselves.

Twelfth, and finally, Downs misrepresents the feminism in whose name she writes. In her first paragraph she presents me as someone who attacks "all previous feminist scholarship" and the "decades of scholarship and struggle" on which it is based. She writes as if feminism were a unified movement and as if I were the only dissenting voice. Yet, as any serious historian of feminism can attest, feminism is and has always been a contested field in which no single theory or political practice has prevailed. I find it odd that such a closed and singular portrait of feminist scholarship can come from someone who posits the possibility of relations of difference that are neither antagonistic nor hierarchical and who looks for ways to think about "noncoercive bases for community." A unified concept of feminism is inherently coercive; my ideal for community is one in which difference and conflict are taken to be the very basis for meaningful exchange.

For me writing this response has been an exercise in frustration, not a meaningful exchange. There are many confusions of Downs's that I have had to let stand. I have only dealt with the "tip of the volcano," to use Downs's phrase. As a result, I have not been able to deal with questions my book does raise (questions about how post-structuralism can study change, about the limits of textualizing for historians, about the uses of Freud and Lacan for thinking about subjectivity historically). I would like to discuss and debate those questions because they are crucial for the kind of history I think I want to write. Alas, those discussions will have to take place elsewhere.