

# H-Diplo ESSAY 337

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

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## *Learning the Scholar's Craft*

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Many of the essays in the series “Learning the Scholar’s Craft” suggest that for a number of scholars, “learning” depends as much on mentorship, intuition, and luck as it does on the research subjects one pursues. In this respect, my trajectory was no exception. When I went to college, I understood very quickly that intellectual history provided a way of combining my interests in European literature, philosophy, and politics, though I can’t say that I understood that then. I found my way to graduate school primarily because as an undergraduate I had some generous teachers, one of whom encouraged me to apply for a doctoral program in the same institution—I was one of those students to whom it would never have occurred to apply to graduate school—and I was admitted to Berkeley to pursue a Ph.D. in History. In those days, the “new” cultural history was on the horizon, providing, in part through its engagement with anthropology and French theorists like Michel Foucault, a way of understanding the cultural production of ideas, especially by less canonical thinkers who were not addressed by more contextualist versions of intellectual history.<sup>1</sup> During my first year at Berkeley, Lynn Hunt organized a conference on cultural history, and faculty members in English, French, Comparative Literature, and History had recently founded the journal *Representations*, which provided a perspective – the “new historicism” – that historicized literary texts and was critical of poststructuralism.

I was interested in how the weary experience of living on the margins, of seeing without being seen, was made legible or erased by mainstream culture. I didn’t know that then. I only knew that I was interested in ideas, modern European history, and social change. When I came across “French theory,” which provided a novel way of critiquing cultural norms beyond Marxism, I decided to explore why ideas that were capable of upending received wisdom about Marxism, social progress, and hegemony emerged in France during the interwar period.<sup>2</sup> My intent was not to write a synoptic intellectual history or a purely ideational account, and yet it was not at all clear to me how to undertake such a project otherwise. I spent nearly two years doing the research, unsure of where I was going, encouraged by my advisor Martin Jay, who was kind enough to let me make my own way while also providing support and encouragement, as did Lynn Hunt, who got me to stop researching and begin writing. The book I eventually wrote did not really fit into the framework of either cultural or intellectual history.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> “French theory” designated works by a variety of thinkers including Michel Foucault, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Jacques Derrida, many of which belonged to quite different strains of thought, but all of which challenged the concept of “man” as a rational, knowing subject.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

But in the 1990s there was a large audience for books that grappled with theory, and there were not many historians doing this kind of work. After a three-year stint at Northwestern and a post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard, I got a job posted for a French historian at Brown.

Because my book was well-received and was recognizable as intellectual history, I got tenure. I felt freer to pursue an interest in how ideas shaped patterns of cultural representation and turned to exploring how cultural anxieties and fantasies in otherwise canonical texts made social suffering legible and how. I wrote a second book that was aimed at understanding how cultural fantasies about the social body during the French interwar years figured its suffering. I ended up reading a variety of sources, not only “high” culture texts, and realized that the pervasive concern with pornography during the period represented contemporaries’ quest to find a vocabulary to address suffering rather than sexuality.<sup>4</sup> What we often refer to today as the “pornography of suffering” described at that time how the aftermath of war threatened the ideally disinterested indignation before grievous injustice that was expected of the Western, male bourgeois spectator and citizen. Figures of deviant sexuality, specters as much as real people, were threats because they encouraged unrestrained prurience or repulsion, challenging propriety and tolerance alike. Deviant sexuality came to represent deviant, undemocratic politics, and fascism in particular.

This effort to grapple with the affective dimensions of normative citizenship and their regulation of moral obligations to others – the meaning of restraint and dignity and the limits of tolerance – has defined my work since. I have explored how Western European cultures make suffering and victims legible and on what terms, inquiries not always easy to undertake using empirical methods.<sup>5</sup> I have written about a wide array of topics from the history of sexuality to the history of Holocaust memory in both monographs and essays by focusing on the symbolic dimensions and effects of social exclusion.

It is hard for historians who traverse disciplinary boundaries or engage in methodologically unfamiliar inquiry to feel entirely comfortable within the historical profession, and the increasing paucity of jobs as well as the pressure to write for a broader public will likely discourage the ecumenical attitudes that have generally prevailed. I learned from my trajectory that timing, luck, and institutional prestige are essential ingredients in securing a career, as is generous guidance -- the ongoing support of my advisors and others along the way like Volker Berghahn, Michael Roth, Dominick LaCapra, Bonnie Smith, and Joan W. Scott was always reinvigorating. Moreover, having been cast both as a bona fide historian as well as an interloper has also helped me to appreciate the historical profession’s pluralism as well as to be highly conscious of how historians enforce disciplinary boundaries. My “learning” has been forged within and outside of History departments, and was dependent on the willingness of many senior scholars to take a chance.

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<sup>4</sup> Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).