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Review-Interview with Roger Cooter  
The Critical Intellectual in the Age of Neoliberal Hegemony

by  
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# Review-Interview with Roger Cooter

## The Critical Intellectual in the Age of Neoliberal Hegemony

Pietro Daniel Omodeo \*

*This presentation of Roger Cooter's and Claudia Stein's recent volume (Writing History in the Age of Biomedicine, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013) is divided into two sections. The first part will offer an overview of their most challenging views. The second consists in a series of questions related to the claims of the book. Roger Cooter kindly agreed to reply to them.*



### 1. Presentation of the Volume

“There is never an escape from the historical a priori” (156). This motto well synthesizes the problematic addressed by Roger Cooter in *Writing History in the Age of Biomedicine*, a collection of essays about medical historiography and scientific culture today, many of which were written in collaboration with Claudia Stein. Cooter reflects on the state of the art in medical history, reconstructing the shifts in the approaches and in the leading theoretical questions from the 1970s up to the present. At the same time, he diagnoses the diseases affecting research, from neo-liberal complicity to fundraising strategies and, most

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worryingly, neopositivistic tendencies toward the ahistorical naturalization of scientific results.

Cooter does not address these issues in the form of a detached analysis. Rather, he is often openly polemical. I dare say that criticism is the *fil rouge* running through this work. Many essays are genuinely *satirical* in the classical sense. They are attacks against the (moral, theoretical, ideological) vices of scholarship (conformism, naivety, opportunism). Cooter urges intellectuals to abandon their ivory towers and revitalize history writing (and themselves!) in the direction of critical and political engagement. This step, he argues, has become necessary to rescue historiography from the blind alleys of self-referentiality and abstraction threatening the very meaning and existence of the discipline.

### 1.1. A Meta-Meta Perspective

The volume has a multi-layered structure. At first glance it appears to be a collection of papers: they were mostly written in the last fifteen years (apart from Chapter Two, “Anticontagionism and History’s Medical Record,” which dates back to the late 70s) and some of them are co-authored with Claudia Stein (in particular those on visual culture). However, the volume is not a mere juxtaposition. The chapters are connected by a narrative (that I shall discuss in detail), which first emerges from the first, programmatic chapter and then is continued in introductory notes, at the beginning of each section. All chapters are in fact preceded by long assessments of their biographical-historical meaning.

The complexity of Cooter’s volume is inherent to his kaleidoscopic approach. He is not focusing on history *per se* but rather on two different meta-levels. The first one concerns historiography, that is, the critical reviewing of debates on medical history and the evaluation of the implicit agendas to which the involved historians adhere. The second level is a *meta-meta*-exploration of the cultural and political drives behind conflicting historiographical approaches.

Chapter Two, for instance, illustrates this multi-dimensionality through scholarly discussion about 19<sup>th</sup>-century contagionism. The significance of the seminal article on this topic, written by Ackerknecht of the 1940s, rests with

its theoretical affirmation that medical debates are often and largely social debates (52).<sup>1</sup> The most important implication, reaching far beyond Ackerknecht's original intentions, is that ideology does not affect only *failed* science. Rather, all theorization is "socially informed". These theoretical presuppositions open up a perspective and a methodology, which cannot be dismissed on the basis of *ad hoc* empirical refutations alone. Cooter argues that recent debates on, and opposition to Ackerknecht's thesis—in spite of their historical exactitude and scrupule—are in effect forms of conservative revisionism of the historical methodology he launched.



## 1.2. Escaping the Fatal Turn

In Cooter's reconstruction, the tortuous developments of medical history in recent years have been marked by disciplinary internalization, that is, a bias toward self-referentiality losing contact with society and the attenuation of the historian's ethical and political engagement. This tendency—contrary to the Marxist 60s and 70s, Cooter argues—came with the shift from the "social" to the "cultural" register in the '90s (discussed in Chapter Three). The absorption of the former by the latter was in fact a dematerializing and "depoliticizing thrust" (85). "Where had the political bottom of history-writing disappeared?"—Cooter asks (66). According to his reconstruction, the discipline has gone through several *turns* in the last 25 years (social, cultural, somatic, spatial, visual), one following the next in rapid succession. The last metamorphosis, the neurological turn marked by the biologization of epistemology and of knowledge history (discussed in the concluding Chapter Ten) does (so far, without detection) undermine the foundations of the discipline, since neo-positivistic ideas are eroding the theoretical premises for historiography itself.

<sup>1</sup> E. H. Ackerknecht, "Anticontagionism between 1821 and 1867," in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 22 (1948): pp. 562-593.

The dangers of the present conjuncture are pointed out in Chapter One, significantly titled “The End of History-Writing?” The focus is neurological scientism and its penetration into historiography at the expense of the discipline itself. This novel trend is mystifying insofar as it spreads the “belief that the new knowledge provides an innovative tool for digging deeper into the understanding of ourselves and our past” (8). Consequently, science is converted from the object of critical assessment into a presupposition for inquiry, in particular for philosophical and historical assessments. In this manner, the history of science becomes a harmless corollary of neuroscience (*as fundamental knowledge theory*) and does not unfold its potentiality as a critical instrument directed against epistemological naturalization, objectivation, and the fetishism of facts and of present-day explanations.

The *fatal* neuro-shift Cooter is describing especially originates from scholars’ parasitism of abundantly financed biological and neurological research, as well as from lighthearted acceptance of the hegemonic discourse behind it. It substitutes critical thought for a celebration of the *status quo* (political and cultural). According to this perspective, the alliance between cognitive neurosciences and historiography is a surrender of the latter. Satisfaction with (perhaps *resignation to?*) what is given takes the place of reflection. Thus, against *bad* interdisciplinarity—that subordinating history to neuroscience—Cooter appeals to *disciplinary* historicity. History writing as a critical practice appears to be the only way out of “The New Poverty of Theory” as the title of Chapter Ten goes (echoing Edward P. Thompson echoing Karl Marx on Proudhon). In fact, to quote the concluding words of the volume, we are in “a time when the season for turning is past” (228).

### 1.3. Criticism in History, Criticism as History

In the face of recent neo-positivistic tendencies, Cooter urges a rehabilitation of critical historiography or, better to say, the reaffirmation of history writing *as critical thought*. Cooter argues that this is not only desirable, but even necessary to the survival of the history of science. The more so, since this discipline possesses the right conceptual tools for the job of undoing ahistorical scientism. Historians of science and medicine can best serve society by putting science in

perspective and revealing its socio-cultural and political entanglements. Thus, they must denounce the specific *ideology* of our times in which science plays the role of “a source of [meta-cultural] autonomous power, without being recognized as such” (9).

According to Cooter, the reflection on epistemological *a priori* cannot and shall not be restricted to the past as the object of historical research. Rather, it primarily concerns the writer and her/his scholarly activity. From this viewpoint, Cooter’s questioning of the socio-cultural and political changes that correspond to the disciplinary *turns* of recent years, also has a self-critical import. In truth, it is not easy to unveil the epistemological frameworks according to which the discipline has been encapsulated and immunized against criticism, as inside an isolating “whale’s belly” (Chapter Eight, quoting George Orwell). The difficulty mainly rests in the fact that *ideology* is not just the *a priori* of the *others*. To unveil it, self-reflection as a form of informed criticism is required.

Chapters Seven and Eight discuss two examples of lack of criticism in historiography. The target of Chapter Seven is “retrospective diagnosis:” Could Ramses have died of “tuberculosis,” a not yet discovered disease? Could the medieval astronomer al-Kindī be the author of a “Lost Treatise on Observations of Halley’s Comet in A.D. 837” (to mention the title of a recent article)? In order to stress the paradox of retrospective diagnosis, Cooter quotes Bruno Latour observing that “transplanting into the past the hidden or potential existence of the future” is “comparable to accepting that a person two thousand years ago could have been killed by ‘a Marxist upheaval, or a machine gun, or a Wall Street crash’” (167-168). It is an illusion that the modern determination of diseases of the past can help history, since it disguises an ahistorical approach to the past whose function, in the end, is only to celebrate present knowledge. For similar reasons, Cooter criticizes (Chapter Eight) *The Cambridge World History of Medical Ethics*, for dealing with the history of bioethics not as a historically emergent discipline but rather as a meta-historical category, as if it always existed *sub specie aeternitatis*. Such neo-Platonic supra-temporal realism (so to say) consists in a hindsight projection of a subsidiary discipline of today’s medicine. This misrepresentation hinders an appropriate historical inquiry into the (socio-cultural) factors accounting for the constitution and affirmation of bioethics, and for the economical and political support it received in recent years.

## 1.4. A Gramscian Past

Cooter depicts his own “conceptual-cum-epistemic journey” as “the *Werdgang* of a social and cultural historian of ideas in science and medicine who has moved [...] from a broadly neo-Marxian to a broadly neo-Foucauldian identity” (xii). Especially in the first chapter, he looks back to the leftist origins of the critical history of science. At those times, the “theorist of hegemony,” Antonio Gramsci shone as a “pole star” (26-27). His anti-reductionist and anti-deterministic views offered a philosophical and political underpinning for Cooter’s *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1984) (the Gramscian accent being put on the subtitle).

Although Cooter tends to present neo-Marxist concepts as outdated—lost in the turn of the 90s—Gramscian elements are still visible in his work. Among them, the most evident are the reflection on intellectual activity as intrinsically political, the refusal to subordinate culture and politics to economy and, at the same time, the attention to the mediation of socio-economical relations through theory (a contemporary instance would be neoliberal managerialism taking hold of Academia). Also the emphasis on self-awareness as reflexive clarification of ideology is reminiscent of the *earlier* Cooter, of the (broadly) neo-Marxist of the 70s and early 80s. The same applies to the following, crucial insight: “history-writing is always historiographical, not only because it is always informed by the politics and ideologies of the moment in which historians choose their topics and interpretations [...], but above all, because history-writing is always underpinned by and infused with reigning philosophical and/or metaphysical beliefs” (11). This consideration, so strongly evocative of Benedetto Croce’s idea of historiography, comes even closer to Gramsci’s political reworking of this conception according to the assumption that *the philosophy of praxis is history, past, and in fieri, thus politics*. Finally, the ethical appeal to *humanism* against forms of scientific de-centralization of humanity and abdication of responsibility for the subject manifestly descends from the same intellectual and political legacy.

Gramsci’s appeal to radical humanism, as the practical collective realization of philosophical immanentism, loomes over the theses presented in Chapter Ten. Here, Cooter castigates Latour’s material turn alongside the anti-humanistic

implications of his Actor-Network Theory. This theory, in fact, equates human agents, animals and material objects as knots of a network, resulting in a “de-centralisation of humans and their actions”. It is against such vision, portrayed as a tendency toward de-humanization and the undermining of subjective agency, that Cooter remarks: “Passivity and amorality should have no place, while self-reflexivity and political passion should have a great deal more” (210).

## 1.5. The Foucauldian Present

Whereas Marxist references are quite timid in this volume, sometimes even apologetic in their tone—according to the refrain “It felt right at the time” (41)—Foucault occupies a very prominent theoretical position. Cooter seems to regard the passage from the one horizon (historical *a priori*?) to the other as a quasi-necessity inscribed in the development of critical postures in historiography. He assigns Michel Foucault the task of freeing theory from a series of pitfalls and ambiguities of Marxism (not to mention vulgar socio-economical reductionism). As he claims, “The pre-‘postmodern’ Foucault—concerned with liberating the revolutionary process from ritualized and dogmatized Marxism—had [...] invited *consideration* whether power was ‘always in a subordinated position relative to economy’” (79). On the one hand, Marxism incurred the naturalization of society and “over-discreteness” in the distinction between culture and society. On the other, Foucauldian discourse analysis avoided these problems by assuming that “language [is not] separate[d] from a ‘real’ material world” (115). Accordingly, the *a priori* of history writing is a discursive *regime of truth* corresponding to specific power relations, continuously mediated and reconfigured. Whereas the Marxist discourse on ideology and cultural industry was primarily concerned with *politics investing the minds*, Foucault opened up a new dimension of power, namely the somatic (122). This dimension ensures his success among medical historians. Foucault’s considerations on medicalization, the concept of biopower (Chapter Nine) and the idea that the body is the center of power relations (see especially Chapter Four) are in fact *directly* relevant to their discipline.

The central sections of the volume are largely informed by Foucauldian motives. Chapter Four specifically addresses the body-turn as a move from the previous essentialism of sociology to the Foucauldian discursive problematization of the body “as a form of knowledge continually being invested and re-invested in power relations” (99). Chapters Five and Six deal with health posters from the 90s (with scholarly work on them as well as exhibits). Against naive understandings of visual culture as something merely auxiliary to science (as a form of top-down dissemination and education), Cooter and Stein argue that images shall be treated as moments of a “discursive regime, not of universal truth” (137). To be sure, these remarks can be applied to the use of documents and the appeal to facts in general. For instance, in Chapter Six Cooter and Stein consider a museum exhibit of AIDS posters<sup>1</sup> that programmatically illustrated their global dimension but, as a result, isolated them from their socio-cultural, discursive environment. Instead, posters were reinserted in the new narrative of globalization, which is itself highly ideological as a projection of the notion of a “spatially transcendent capitalism—an economic system supposedly unfettered by place or national boundary” (152). Images, as the authors remind us, emerge from political, intellectual, and emotional struggles for meaning (147), in which the local and not the global is the decisive aspect.



Cooter favors a historical and political reading of Foucault. Therefore, although he appreciates novel attempts directed toward a theoretical appropriation and continuation of Foucault’s work, he strongly criticizes (in Chapter Nine) conservative neo-liberal distortions marked by the intention of an apolitical usage of his theories, as well as by abstract philosophical theorizations employing his categories.

<sup>1</sup> *Against AIDS: Posters from Around the World*, held at the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (February-April 2006).

## 1.6. Epistemology and Society

To sum up, two crucial issues emerge from *Writing History in the Age of Biomedicine*. The first one concerns epistemology. Cooter points out a mostly unperceived neo-positivistic trend affecting the theory of knowledge. It consists in the substitution of historical epistemology—a perspective inseparably connecting historical investigation and theoretical reflection on the object as well as on the subject of historiography—for biological reductionism. A general tendency to root epistemology in the brain is not innocent, as it disguises an underlying conservative project. Neuro-reductionism, in fact, erodes historical consciousness as well as the critical thought that is indissolubly linked to it.

A second major point concerns the disappearance of society and politics from the history of science and medicine. While this development signals a conservative turn in the discipline, the social framework that led to this outcome remains unclear. The passage from the collective Marxist intellectual of the Seventies, who saw himself or herself as part of a vast political and cultural movement, to the Foucauldian indignant but impotent academic ‘telling the truth’ against the mainstream is a shift whose origin and meaning remain obscure if it is framed only in moral terms. The internal dynamics of an academic discipline should not only be related to scholars’ intentions or lack of criticism. Rather, it should be understood as part of major socio-economical and political changes, namely market-oriented societal restructuring in the post Cold War era and the revival of liberal theories.



The vastness of the subject taken on in *Writing History in the Age of Biomedicine* transcends specialized shortsightedness. It raises the question of the transformations of intellectual work and historiography in the present, while asking whether and how the impetuous affirmation of biomedicine affects our historical awareness. Many of the questions addressed are too fundamental to be answered by one author in one book. They require broad cultural debates.

## 2. Questions and Answers

**1** DEAR Roger, I would like to begin our conversation with your—actually, not only your—Foucauldian conversion. Although Foucault’s treatment and criticism of power clearly has a political dimension, I tend to perceive the passage from the neo-Marxism of the 70s to the Foucauldian trend of the present as a loss of collective capacity to look forward and shape our common future. It seems that increasing emphasis on ethics and a generic sense of revolt replaced earlier forms of political engagement. Do you not think that the disaggregation of the collective dimension of intellectual engagement and the preeminence of individualistic criticism mirrors the neo-liberal developments of the last decades (and possibly the social-democratization of the left)?

The loss of a *collectivist politics* of the kind last seen in the 1970s is indeed a feature of neoliberal culture. However, I am not sure that is the same thing as the *loss of a collective dimension to intellectual life*. There was certainly a collective intellectual buzz to the postmodern literary turn in the 1980s among feminist, gays, and other self-discovered subalterns. You could say that the political collective got broken down and distributed into many cells – all of them very lively and collective in spirit as they challenged the new enemies of intellectual progress (i.e., those who opposed poststructuralism). But what would be more accurate to say is that the new topics for intellectual discussion in the 1980s and 90s sundered the old rationalizations for, and legitimacy of, collective intellectual endeavour. The death of ‘the social,’ the rise of the Self and identity politics, and other poststructuralist preoccupations mediated, or at least sat comfortably with the ‘selfish gene’ individualist ideology of neoliberalism<sup>1</sup>.

But it would be historically short-sighted to lay the blame for this on post-structuralism and postmodernism. The origins of the death of “collective-intellectual-activity-as-collective-politics” go back as least as far as the invasion of Hungary in 1956. Disillusionment then with the supposed *real* politics of Soviet socialism combined with ever-stronger faith in West in the belief (propaganda)

<sup>1</sup> See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

that individuals could change the world in a free society, found its way into a variety of intellectual discourses. In history-writing its most famous expression was in E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), a work that proclaimed the novel idea that 'The working class made itself as much as it was made.' Ever after, the history of peoples was seen as being about more than merely modes of production and structures, as in the old economic marxism. Working people were no longer simply raw human material and blank minds to be imposed upon; they were (or had the potential to become) the masters of *their own* destiny. Thus here, ironically even within this most inspiring example of social(ist) history writing, one can detect the roots of the self-centred individualism of 1980s. A final twist in this dialectical understanding of fundamental change is that it was Foucault's understanding of knowledge/power that did most to enable us to see it. By calling into question social historians' understanding of power as based upon the liberal-Marxist trinity of exploitation, domination and oppression—those blocks to understanding 'true reality' and liberation—Foucault helped us see that we are not only objects of disciplines but also self-scrutinizing and self-forming subjects of our own knowledge<sup>1</sup>.

**2** USING a theatrical metaphor, one can say that various characters come on the stage of your book, and play different roles, often opposing one another. Marx enters it as the sadly missed ancestor, whereas Foucault acts the part of the anti-dogmatic exponent of a new generation of anti-dogmatic thinkers. Similar to medieval Allegories, Vices and Virtues, appear in the drama as positive or negative figures: Naturalization and Essentialism versus Discursiveness, Scientism versus Historicity, and so on and so forth. Enlightenment, with her maids Reason and Universalism, move on the scene as fraudulent illusionists, in spite of their historical significance as reference points for modern criticism. Some of the figures look even more ambiguous. This is certainly the case with Ideology, which is passé in spite of her efforts to hide her popular origins (through a process of de-vulgarization). Humanism stands out as the positive antagonist of Reductionism, and Reification as the defender of human freedom of decision and action. However,

<sup>1</sup> For elaboration see Roger Cooter and Claudia Stein, 'Introduction: The Vicissitudes of Fundamental Change' in Cooter and Stein, *The History of Medicine: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies* (London/N.Y: Routledge, 2016).

*the question arises whether Humanism, as a category, can still play a role within an anti-essentialist historicist perspective. How shall the calls for humanizing responsibility be reformulated from your anti-essentialist viewpoint? How shall we deal with the inner ambivalence of categories such as reason and ideology?*

There are a lot of characters here; too many to account for individually. Perhaps ‘dancers’ would be better, all performing in a ballet that might be entitled the transformation of the reign of ideology to that of discourse. Inasmuch as they refer to humanism and its fit to an anti-essentialist historicist perspective, let me concentrate on that. First of all, ‘fit’ is not the right word; it over-determines the answer or prefigures it. I don’t see humanism—or ‘being human’—as *only* an essentialist category, like ‘the body’, ‘society’, or ‘history’; I also regard it as an article of Enlightenment faith deserving our utmost nurture. Sure, it was made up as a *category* during the Renaissance, and the study of that is no less interesting than the making up of the current negatively-orientated post-humanism. But we lose more than we gain by treating it intellectually *only* as a historical construct; in fact, we lose ourselves, or rather, our faith in ourselves as humans. Without that we are wholly vulnerable to those who, dancing to neoliberal tunes, proclaim that we are no different from non-humans (bacteria, tables, bombs) and can therefore dispense with the Enlightenment privileging of human agency. Posthumanists’ think that is entirely possible that one day we will have robotic selves. But in this they forget that the very idea of a stable (essentialist) ‘self’ reproducible for all time is a product of a particular culture and not something that is universal.

Humanism has of course many stripes, but what they all have in common, writes Kenan Malik (in the one of best book ever written on the subject, *Man, Beast and Zombie: What Science Can and Cannot Tell Us About Human Nature*<sup>1</sup>), “is a desire to place human beings at the centre of philosophical debate, to glorify human abilities, and to view human reason as a tool through which to understand nature”. Ever since the Holocaust this has been thrown into doubt, the faith in humans devalued, the idea of their infinite possibility compromised. The fabric of humanity has been corroded as a result. But why should we continue to lash ourselves as a consequence of what was, after all, a historically aberrant totalitarian ideology mired with would-be scientific racism? Unless,

<sup>1</sup> London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2000.

of course, it is in someone's or something's interest that we should; that we should be turned in this way from subjects to objects. And of course it *is* in someone's interest: a neoliberal capitalist political order that doesn't want people to act like Enlightenment humans, wondering, questioning and criticizing, but rather, wants them to submit to what is, which is made to seem the *only* option, and a lovely one at that.



**3** In your writings, Postmodernism has a markedly negative connotation. Along with Fredric Jameson, you regard it as the ideology and the “Cultural Logic” of contemporary capitalism. Since you deem biological neo-positivism to be its expression, as well, how do you judge the relationship between these two cultural tendencies? Postmodernism seems to run in the opposite direction from the neurological reductionism that is occluding history writing. In fact, it has the appearance of a sort of hyper-historicity; it is a dematerialized and depoliticized proliferation of narratives. However, both strands—postmodernism and neo-positivism—have common roots in the neo-liberal terrain and adhere to the “ideology of the end of ideology”. Hence, the two extremes of heedless subjective relativism and neurological objective positivism converge as they claim to be located beyond ethics and politics.

*Are they not two “mystified mediations” of the same reigning global capitalism? Are they perhaps two successive stages of one process, in which neo-scientism supplants postmodernism as official ideology?*

As a neo-Marxist I couldn't help adopt a rather negative attitude (a la Jameson and Eagleton) to postmodernism. That is fully apparent in the middle chapters of my book. But as the introductions to those chapters and the later essays make explicit, I was also undergoing a change of view. With Claudia Stein, I began historically to reinterpret postmodernism. It was not as *apolitical* as its exponents and critics maintained; in fact, it was quite as political as Marxism,

it was merely a different politics serving different cultural times. I became interested in understanding the construction of the self within that culture and developing a critique of that understanding. The logic or the forms of thinking in postmodernism were different than anything that had existed in the past, but it was pointless not to engage with it simply because it wasn't Marxist. Indeed, once one realized that its language was *the same* as that of contemporary biology (manifestly so with regard to 'reading the book of life' in both DNA laboratories of those of linguists) there was all the more reason to explore it as a historian of contemporary biomedicine.

Today, 'neo-scientism' (although that is hardly the best word to characterize what's shaping what) has only the appearance of supplanting postmodernism (but not, I think, installing itself as 'official ideology', which remains neoliberalism). One must understand that science, too, in the 1980s went through the linguistic turn; science never operates independent from the wider culture (which is precisely the message that was hard won by historians and sociologists of science from the 1970s and which was furthered through postmodernism, but which is now forgotten). Today, neuroscience and evolutionary biology only *appear* as having supplanted postmodernism (in truth, poststructural thinking); in fact, the current science is deeply postmodern in conceiving of people as not in control of their will, and so on.

Of course biology remains basically big money; it's not done for free, and big bucks are to be made from it inside and outside the pharma industry. Which is to say that the relationship between contemporary science and contemporary capitalism remains straightforwardly that of making money. There remains little of the anxiety over this that there was in the 1960 and 70s when it dawned on scholars (and much of the public) that scientists were not the disinterested lot they purported to be. But the neo-Marxian conclusion of the 1970s is no longer so interesting—that science is the social relations of capitalist culture, or that under capitalism scientific knowledge is constitutive of the hierarchical and unequal power relations embedded in the dichotomous positivist structuring (metaphysics) of science/society, fact/value, nature/nurture and Truth/ideology. Far more intriguing today (to my mind at least) is the way in which 'life' is being reduced to biology, and mind to brain. Biology is now taken as *the* way to understand the self (and hence there is no call for something as obscure as history as a means to this end; it can be relegated to a profit-

making entertainment industry). It is not capitalism and its power relations that demand scrutiny here, but rather, the specific posthuman ‘neurocultural futures’ in which it operates. Beckoned is a study of the nature of power unconstrained by (but not indifferent to) a Marxian script. That was the point of *Writing History in the Age of Biomedicine*.

**4** THE problem of positivism raises the question about the function of the meta-discourse on science, whether philosophical or historical. Is the function of HPS just celebration? The exaltation of science is the most marked cultural and philosophical trait of positivism. It takes the results of the present-day for granted, bases the theory of knowledge on its results and produces theoretical as well as cultural (political etc.) justifications for it. Indeed, parasitism can be very remunerative, since a subordinate role with respect to sciences garnering wide social recognition makes fundraising easier also for ancillary disciplines.

What about historiography? While you convincingly stress the critical potential of the history of science and medicine, it is also patent that such critical use is not very likely to meet with general approbation, nor to easily obtain financial support in a neo-liberal context where intellectuals are not expected to make problems. Paradoxically, your appeal to historicity and critical thought as the salvation of the discipline might not be heard because your ‘vision’ cannot compete with a historiography that is uncritical and celebratory of the status quo. Indeed, the position you stand for is out of the running. To be sure, mindless historical practice would drown together with the society it mirrors. But can we really bet on such eschatology? Or, rather, is it not the special task of the critical intellectual to contribute to political change—this being precisely what makes his/her engagement significant, independent of concerns about the rescue of disciplines?



It is true that the critical position I stand for—an Enlightenment tradition—is out of the running in the neoliberal marketplace wedded to reductive neuroscience. I am, as it were, in the position of an anti-phrenologist in the mid-1830s

when phrenology was at its cultural height. Critique has ‘run out of steam’, Bruno Latour assures us, while his ‘sociology of associations’ (Actor Network Theory) and things like nonrepresentations and affect theory serve effectively to intellectually mediate neoliberal economics. Poststructural/postmodern critique is usurped and bent (largely unwittingly) into rationales for the economic order which undermine critique itself. But there is still political hope in the academy. The weight of critical assessment of the neoliberal mess in the humanities and the privatization of universities is mounting (e.g. Marina Warner’s recent piece in the *London Review of Books*, or Willem Halffman and Hans Radder’s “The Academic Manifesto: From an Occupied to a Public University” in *Minerva* [2015]). The veil is being lifted and political action called for – now even among some of one’s colleagues who have hitherto preferred to bury their head in the sand. I’m hopeful, even though as yet (to anticipate your next question), the profound association between neuro-culture and neoliberalism remains largely mystified, and the hip thing in historiography is towards biology, positivistically and ahistorically embraced as a source of autonomous (culture-free) knowledge.

**5** THE *problem of the cultural meaning of research-funding policies and strategies is one of the most important issues you tackle. As you point out, the crisis of the engaged intellectual is closely connected with the managerialization of academies and research institutions. Market-driven historiography, and the competition between historiography and other disciplines shapes our thinking and writing. It can be said that funding constraints are at the same time material and intellectual limitations.*

*Is it not time for a public j'accuse denouncing the mechanisms of exploitation and the power relations affecting intellectual activity? This should be an inquiry into the neo-liberal cultural regime, perhaps an analysis à la Boltanski on how the novel spirit of capitalism is realized through the socio-cultural and economical mechanisms of the present organization of culture.*

*As I see it, such a study should cover at least the following aspects: working conditions (precarization of the research, short-term employment, contractual forms), career mechanisms (research evaluation and the criterion of “productivity,” the quantification of the requirements for recruitment, survival and advance in the*

*Academia), education politics (school and university reforms, the reshaping of the curricula, the skills-oriented model of teaching, the figure of the student-customer), editorial politics (marketing-oriented publishing, copyright, imposition of formal criteria by publishing companies, blind refereeing), the formalization of the spaces for debate (conference arenas, admission criteria to meetings, participation fees, and mediatization), and, on the top of it, funding policies (the privatization of teaching and research, the system of fellowships, the role of foundations). The aim of such analysis would be a reflection on the nouvel esprit scientifique based on an understanding of the correspondence between a neo-capitalist restructuring of education/research/humanities and neo-liberal values informing scientific practices.*

*One can ask further: What is the role of the intellectual in a context in which all that is individual and results from competition is praised (e.g., individual publications counting more than co-authored ones) and in which all that is engaged (politics and civil commitment) is downplayed to hobby status (or a private creed) that can be harmful for one's career (directly, because it retards scientific "productivity," or indirectly, for ideological reasons)?*

I couldn't agree more with your assessment and your practical hints, not least with respect to funding and the need for intellectuals to regain control over it. Universities have become simply sites for money making. Many intellectuals wring their hands over this, as if it were merely a problem 'over there', and not one that links intimately and pervasively to themselves by transforming the nature of their thought in ways conducive to neoliberalism. The job of the intellectual must be to unpick and describe the present in which we live, but always with a view to its critique, as a means to its improvement. At the very least, their role should be to provoke and/or inspire, like good art. But increasingly intellectuals (especially in the social sciences) forsake critique and provide mere apology for what is. That is their would-be utility in a utilitarian-made (neoliberal) world. Others seem to be unwittingly bent on a return to something like Scholasticism with its provision of endless exegesis in the stead of critique. They fail to see that they are politically determined actors. Under conditions of posthumanism they happily forget that it is only man who makes up ideas about his condition and then rationalizes them. Restoring the Enlightenment idea that the proper study of mankind is man is a means to healthy critique, not a throwback.

# IRICURI

But the age of the intellectual is probably past, especially the European intellectual once feared by constituted authority. It might be possible to reconstitute it but not on university sites as they presently stand. So long as schools of business studies run the show and determine the virtue of its ‘calculations’ there is no hope.

**6** IN a recent publication<sup>1</sup>, you revisit the issue of neurological reductionism in the context of a “(broadly postmodern) culture and (broadly neoliberal) socioeconomic order”. In the same essay, you offer a synthesis of the theoretical-historical problem of the neuro-turn: “It delegitimizes critique itself, at least as we have known it since Marx” (145). Thus, the name of the Ancestor comes prominently back to the fore, as the teacher of critical thought and historicism or, better, of the reciprocal reinforcement of the two. You underscore “the insistence of the young Marx that nothing is ever outside history, including our most abstract conceptions of ourselves and our most abstract categories” (153). This was the rationale informing the ‘New Historicism’ of the 1980s and even of the 1990s. “This insight—as you write—should only make us more attentive to the complicity of ‘theory’ in the politics of intellectual production that is, to the fact that ‘theory’ is always a priori inside reigning epistemologies and visible and invisible normativities. Just as important, it should alert us to the seductive role of language in the political negation of older forms of thinking—precisely, to wit, the kind of critical thinking stemming from the early writings of Marx” (149-150).

Is this an appeal to rediscover the Marxist roots of criticism? Is this a call for the revitalization of our political origins? Is this the conclusion we shall draw from your reflection on the parabola of the history of science and medicine in the last three decades or so? You seem to suggest that it is time not only to reflect on our post-modern cultural environment, but also to assess the gains and the losses in the

<sup>1</sup> “Neural Veils and the Will to Historical Critique. Why Historians of Science Need to Take the Neuro-Turn Seriously”, *Isis* 105 (2014): 145-154.

*development of critical thought itself—that is, to evaluate the path from Marx to Foucault through Gramsci. What comes next? Is it not one of most urgent imperatives to create new bonds of solidarity and a new community in order to overcome the impotence of individualized criticism limited to indignation?*

*A new collective project going beyond criticism seems to depend on the capacity to bring together fragmented opposition to the present hegemonic discourse. In this respect, how do you judge the role of intellectuals between subjective responsibility and collective action?*

It is not the historian's job to guess the future, and every historian who has tried has invariably ended up with egg on his face. In the article you refer to I was seeking first and foremost to lift the veil on the fashionable turn among historians to 'the neuro', to expose the way it undermines critical thinking. This was not an appeal to rediscover the Marxist roots of criticism. Far from it; following Joan W. Scott, my thinking was to align the young Marx and neo-Marxism and Gramscianism of the 1960s and 70s with the critical thinking of the 'literary turn' of the 1980s, in order that we might erase the supposed dichotomy between Marx and Foucault and reinstate critique itself as the common subject in need of defense. In quoting Marx on 'nothing outside of history' etc. I sought only to underscore past intellectual unity of purpose—a unity worth clarifying in order to reclaim the fight for critique in an increasingly Scholastics-tending world of intellectual bullshit.



*Leonetto Cappiello, Advertisement to Uricure pills, around 1910  
(Wellcome Library, London,  
<http://catalogue.wellcomelibrary.org/record=b1160143-S8>).*