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*Thought Processes:  
How the Past Affects the Future*

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay discusses the various ontological layers that influence and challenge historians in their work to convey the past in a fashion that is both accurate and truthful. On the basis of studies by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Thomas C. Patterson, T. J. Jackson Lears, Jeremy D. Popkin, Laura Lee Downs, and John McLeod, the author explores the two sides of historicity, the creation of silences, the notion of civilization, hegemony, the paradigm shifts associated with Giambattista Vico and Leopold Ranke, as well as the more recent historical ontologies of class, gender, and race from a postcolonial perspective.*

**KEYWORDS:** *historicity; silences; civilization; hegemony; paradigm shift; Giambattista Vico; Leopold Ranke; ontology; postcolonialism*

*Introduction*

As the centuries have passed, history has been written as a means of recalling past events that cannot be experienced by the present. As a result, historians today are challenged with trying to recreate the past on the basis of modern-day ideals. Equipped with primary sources, historians are left with the task of having to re-work historical events in a way that is both accurate and truthful. Authors and historians around the world have attempted to understand ontological shifts, changes in the way ideas evolve and thoughts are perceived as time passes, that occur throughout history by means of “radical” concepts and new, popular beliefs. Assisted by Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* (1995), Thomas C. Patterson’s *Inventing Western Civilization* (1997), T. J. Jackson Lears’s “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony” (1985), Jeremy D. Popkin’s *From Herodotus to H-Net* (2016), Laura Lee Downs’s *Writing Gender History* (2010), and John McLeod’s *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2010), we are able to explore the complex ontological layers that are influencing historians and their work.<sup>1</sup> This essay explores the two sides of historicity; the creation of silences during the collection and contextualization of information in the archives; and the ontological ideas in the making of Western civilization. It also discusses the impact of the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1688-1744) and the German historian Leopold Ranke (1795-1886), as well as the changes of the 1960s, gender theory, hegemony, and postcolonialism, and how these pertain to our understanding of how and why history has been told the way it has. Thus, this essay examines the

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<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997; first published 1995); Thomas C. Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997); T. J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (June 1985): 567-593; Jeremy D. Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010); John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2nd ed. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010).

intertwining historical accounts that display what it means to have information that is consciously and unconsciously “silenced” and paradigm shifts that are the result of new ideas and new thinking.

### *I. The Two Sides of Historicity and the Creation of Silences*

Of the many difficulties that historians encounter, the two sides of historicity can lead to major historical ambiguity, or silences, when researching information on past events. The two sides of historicity can be explained as history meaning both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both “what happened” and “that which is said to have happened.”<sup>2</sup> There is a substantial difference between the two sides of historicity. One discusses that “what happened” might not ever be known by others, apart from those who experienced it directly, while the other attempts to piece together that history of “what happened.” “What is said to have happened” leaves a trail of ambiguity because there are different versions of events that are told, and this is where silences enter the historical narrative; from the rhetoric of these historians, history is riddled with contingencies because the past is never secure and can always be subject to change with new findings. That said, as ambiguous and contingent as it might be, there must be a distinct boundary between what happened and what is said to have happened.<sup>3</sup>

As historians gather and contextualize history to be put into archives, they become victims to the conscious and unconscious creation of silences that can be found all over the historical narrative. For example, anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1949-2012) discusses the irregularities in the representation of three different “Sans Souci,” two of them architectural structures and the other a Haitian Colonel; the latter, Colonel Jean-Baptiste Sans-Souci (assassinated 1803) has been left without any popularity even though he played a major role in the Haitian Revolution. Silences, like those encountered in the case of Colonel Sans Souci, are caused by differences in power.

Along with silences produced by power, silences can also be found in archives which house much of the information that historians use today to assemble history. Archives are used as a means of organizing facts and information that conditions the possibility of the existence of historical statements.<sup>4</sup> The issue that historians face when creating archives is the process of compiling relevant information that is useful in the collection at hand. During this process, historians can consciously and unconsciously leave out information that they deem less useful, thus causing silences that leave a trail of uncertainty that is threaded into different sources and facts. Archive creation inherently involves several selective operations which, at best, lead to a differential ranking

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

<sup>3</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 52.

and, at worst, to the exclusion of evidence and themes.<sup>5</sup> This is the second crucial moment where silence enters, and it is referred to as the moment of fact retrieval, or the making of archives. As Trouillot has stated, “the very mechanisms that make any historical recording possible also ensure that historical facts are not created equal. They reflect differential control of the means of historical production at the very first engraving that transforms an event into a fact.”<sup>6</sup> No matter how history is written, there will always be silences created by those whose archival skills require the dissection and choosing of applicable sources and facts to be placed into those archives.

## II. Civilization and Hegemony

Moving to the mainstream accounts that most people learn about, white Anglo-Saxon history can be described as a story of prosperity and bravery. The notion of Western civilization evokes the idea that there are both superior and subordinate races, a hierarchy of power that is destined and molded into the identity of Western people. The concept of civilization always brings forth a comparison: to have civilized people implies that there are uncivilized people who are inferior because of their lack of civility.<sup>7</sup> People who are deemed uncivilized have been stigmatized as “savages” who lack the discipline required to be true civilized beings. By viewing the world as stratified classes of people, the voices of the elite overpower those who are seen as uncivilized, thus creating a historical vacuum in which only the viewpoint of the powerful is seen, leaving the uncivilized in a continuous silence. According to anthropologist Thomas C. Patterson, the French philosopher August Comte (1798-1857) once opined that Western Europe’s lower classes should accept their natural inferiority and affirm the superiority of their rulers,<sup>8</sup> further confirming that social class played a vital role in the rise of Western civilization. Inequalities in the development of early civilizations, especially Western civilizations, led to early accounts of silencing of those who were not white males at a time when maleness meant dominance and whiteness meant superiority. All of these realizations created beliefs that male whiteness defined civilization around the world, even though “civility” was forced onto the “uncivilized” peoples. The sense of white superiority is even mentioned by Trouillot’s when he speaks about the acknowledgement of the Haitian Revolution by a French colonist named La Barre. La Barre came to the conclusion that when reality does not align with deeply held beliefs, people create forced versions of interpretation to obtain reality once again and to be able to repress the unthinkable back into their world of sense and comfort.<sup>9</sup> Western

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<sup>5</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Patterson, *Inventing Western Civilization*, 44, referencing August Comte.

<sup>9</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 72.

civilization heavily impacted the way history was and is being told because of the fact that white males believe they are superior and possess a higher level of intelligence than (nonwhite) people outside of the Western hemisphere.

As Trouillot and Patterson discuss in their works, silences are created by those who possess power and control; therefore, those in power dictate how history is told. This power and control, when spoken of with hegemony, can be closely compared to colonialism in many aspects. In his article, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," historian T. J. Jackson Lears explores Italian communist Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) explanation of how hegemony influences society, and how consent and force, or coercion, nearly always coexist.<sup>10</sup> Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is roughly explained as, "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, what Gramsci means by coercion is the way that strong, dominant groups are willing to forcefully impose their superiority through violence or by any means necessary to gain their position at the top. "Consent" here is understood in the sense that the so called inferior groups submit willingly to being controlled by oppressive, malicious, and exploitative forces that intend to seek benefit just for themselves.

There are many cases of consent in which inferior people succumb to superior powers. For example, Lears discusses historian Aileen Kraditor's criticism of workers who accept dehumanization in the workplace in exchange for autonomy in the private sphere.<sup>12</sup> Lears also emphasizes that subordinate groups may participate in maintaining a symbolic universe, even if it serves to legitimize their being dominated.<sup>13</sup> Basically, Lears describes that these inferior groups are very much complicit in giving up their freedom to gain other, specific freedoms or merely to assimilate. These subordinate groups are willing to cooperate with norms which are foreign to them in order to evade problems or to try to gain a higher position in society. A problem with hegemony is that it is close to colonial values, where the inferior groups are victimized and placed under the rule of the superior group until the subordinates start to believe that they themselves are the lower class. An example is the realization of class inequalities by the lower class community. Lears here explores the work of sociologist Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb which postulates that groups of people understand that there are indeed class inequalities. However, these people cannot escape the effect of dominant values: they deem their class inferiority a sign of failure, even though they have become aware that they have been constrained by class origins over

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<sup>10</sup> Lears, "Concept of Cultural Hegemony," 568.

<sup>11</sup> Lears, "Concept of Cultural Hegemony," 568, referencing Antonio Gramsci.

<sup>12</sup> Lears, "Concept of Cultural Hegemony," 581.

<sup>13</sup> Lears, "Concept of Cultural Hegemony," 573.

which they have no control.<sup>14</sup> According to Lears, what Sennett and Cobb are explaining is that these people realize that they are disadvantaged, but they comply with their class origins even though they have had no say about them.

### *III. Paradigm Shifts: Giambattista Vico and Leopold Ranke*

From the understanding of why history has been written the way it has, we move to the application of new ideas. During the eighteenth century, Europe underwent a huge ontological and intellectual shift from relying on the authority of the Bible to a more secular approach to rational thinking. This development is known as the Enlightenment. When this shift occurred, Enlightenment thinkers began to conceptualize the human experience as a story of progress, pointing toward a better future.<sup>15</sup> However, the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico challenged the teachings of rationalist philosophers, such as those of the early modern French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650), and their ideals pertaining to the scientific study of the natural world. Instead of believing that scientific study was the best approach to understanding the natural world, Vico argued that, since men make history, they can know it from the inside in a way that they can never know facts about nature.<sup>16</sup> By arguing that men make history, he was implying that Descartes's emphasis on scientific study to understand the natural world was flawed. Descartes's emphasis was flawed in the sense that the use of a mathematical or geometrical system narrowed the understanding of the outside world because those systems were man-made.

As he disagreed with the aspects of man-made understandings of the world, Vico also disagreed with most Enlightenment thinkers in that he did not believe that humanity as a whole was progressing over time. Giambattista very much supported a cyclical theory of history, where all societies progress through three stages: an age of gods, an age of heroes, and an age of men and "human government." By the time they reach the last stage, nations decline and new nations take their place and begin a new cycle.<sup>17</sup> Because Vico did not believe that humanity was progressing over time, he decided to focus on cultures, customs, beliefs, and languages as important for history, rather than the various forms of government. Vico argued that history should be structured around the evolution of society and the interaction between the people of the time. Vico's approach is significant because his ontology emerged at a time when the Enlightenment's ideologies were held as true by many philosophers and historians. Vico's take on history itself was a paradigm shift that occurred at a time when new, radical ideas were in circulation.

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<sup>14</sup> Lears, "Concept of Cultural Hegemony," 578, referencing Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb.

<sup>15</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 60, referencing Giambattista Vico.

<sup>17</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 60-61, referencing Giambattista Vico.

In the nineteenth century, a German historian by the name Leopold Ranke had an immense impact on the study and professionalization of history. According to historian Jeremy D. Popkin, Ranke had described the task of the historian as “to show what actually happened.”<sup>18</sup> What Ranke meant by this was that the historian should not judge the past according to ideals that could only be experienced by the present. Ranke emphasized that each age had its own set of values, and that no one of them could claim superiority to all others.<sup>19</sup> The ontology addressed by Ranke directly correlates to the ideas of Trouillot and Patterson in that historians writing in the present can never understand the mindset of historians writing in the past because of the different frameworks used by their different times. For Ranke, since historians could not understand the framework of the past, the way to achieve an essential understanding of the past was to reconstruct history on the basis of historical documents.<sup>20</sup> This hailed the birth of the concept of primary sources, and because of this history needed to be re-wired and rewritten to attain an essential understanding of the past. Ranke also created the research seminar, leading to the professionalization of history. As history had traditionally been taught in lectures, Ranke aimed to fully immerse and engage his students in the process of source interpretation by having them examine primary documents and present their conclusions to other scholars.<sup>21</sup> Ranke’s final contribution to the development of modern history derives from his insistence on the autonomy of history as an academic discipline and the necessity of its professionalization.<sup>22</sup> Ranke believed that it was imperative that history be its own profession away from philosophy and literature, that it needed its own methodology, and that it needed to be judged only by its own rules as taught and learned by professional historians. Ranke was a true visionary in that he took a step away from how history had been in the past and paved the way for how history would be regarded in the future.

#### *IV. Historical Ontologies of Class, Gender, and Race*

As the shift from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century occurred, historians saw relatively few significant developments in the field of historical representation. That is, until the paradigm shift of the 1960s started to gain momentum, creating an interest in minorities and those who had been silenced in the past. Tensions grew in the 1960s as wars were going on and the call for equality arose, leading to an interest in a new, radical form of history that

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<sup>18</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 76, referencing Leopold Ranke. “Actually” is, however, a mistranslation of the German term “eigentlich” which, in this context, should be translated as “essentially.” See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28.

<sup>19</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 77-78, referencing Leopold Ranke.

<sup>22</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 78.

focused on minorities and the oppressed. Some members of the historical profession were ready to show that the discipline could reshape itself to meet the demands for a new understanding of the past,<sup>23</sup> but these historians also knew that the challenges presented to them required not just a new perspective on history, but new methods as well.

Much of the drive for change in the 1960s came from students who demanded courses which taught them about their lives and the problems that directly concerned them. The demand for understanding the past in terms of the oppressed is explained by radical historians such as Jesse Leimisch (1936-2018) who called for a history “from the bottom up” that would concentrate on “the powerless, the inarticulate, the poor,”<sup>24</sup> which is connected to Trouillot in that there are people and events that have been silenced, and that people seek answers for the silencing and truthful historical evidence. The demand for change also came from women during what is known as “second wave” feminism, where women wanted to be able to have their stories integrated into the historical narrative, which had been written and dominated by men because of the patriarchal system that had been in place since the earliest civilizations. According to Gerda Lerner, “Women’s history asks for a paradigm shift,”<sup>25</sup> which is true in every sense: to write women’s history is to allow a new ontology to thrive because history written by men has minimal inclusion of women, and many male historians of the past have overlooked accounts from women. Thus, the 1960s saw paradigm shifts aimed at minorities and those who had been silenced in the historical narrative to now enter the mainstream of history.

Feminist ideals and gender roles can be seen in almost every corner of the past, even when patriarchy and the oppression of women were among the central social ideals shared by many people. As there was a rise in an interest of the history of women, contemporary historians once again faced the challenge of trying to understand the past while being objective to the matter at hand. For example, historian Laura Lee Downs discusses a 1987 monograph by Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, in which Bynum tries to explain the reasons for women fasting in Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Down suggests that Bynum, in her effort to explain medieval women fasting, fell victim to using current ideologies to explain past ontologies. Bynum used her understanding of anorexia today to understand women who were starving themselves in the past, but only believed that the women’s mutilation was a result of today’s emotional disorder, when in reality women in medieval times used this starvation to create an imitation of

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<sup>23</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 128.

<sup>24</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 130, referencing Jesse Leimisch.

<sup>25</sup> Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, 143, 163 note 12, citing Gerda Lerner, “The Challenge of Women’s History,” in Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Women in History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005; first published 1979), 142.

perfection in this world, namely of Christ suffering on the cross.<sup>26</sup> These women purposely starved themselves for religious purposes to be able to connect further with Jesus: as Jesus had suffered, so did these women. According to Downs, Bynum explained that the holy fasting of late medieval women enabled these women to construct for themselves complex, spiritually effective, and distinctive roles within the medieval church.<sup>27</sup> It was clear that the women did not suffer from the emotional disorder, anorexia. Having objective ideals when referring to historical documents is one of the challenges that historians have to deal with.

Historians today are able to observe the need for all women to recognize feminist ideals in order for real change to occur, to be inclusive of all rather than committing to the exclusiveness and ignorance that had once been displayed by many white middle-class women. It was clear that there was indeed an ontological shift in the 1960s and 1970s, as feminist ideals emerged to challenge the patriarchal society that had dominated and thrived since civilization's inception. Contemporary women had had enough of being submissive to the men who had controlled every aspect of their lives, so many rose up together to challenge the system that had been in place by coming together in unity and declaring things such as, "we are one, we are woman." Unfortunately, this movement at first only affected the lives of white, middle-class women, leaving women of color to have to defend themselves as this movement moved forward. The push for women's rights and equality initially almost completely left out black women because white women were mostly preoccupied with the idea of "freeing" women in general, more so than combatting other issues that women of color faced, such as racism and discrimination. As Downs explains, the problem for black women during this time was that they felt more aligned with their brothers, sons, husbands, and fathers, than their white middle-class "sisters."<sup>28</sup> Because of the exclusiveness of the "we are one, we are woman" movement, many women of color were marginalized even further, even though this feminist movement was intended to be inclusive of all women, marginalized, and silenced peoples.

On the topic of marginalized people, we need to backtrack to the realities of the colonizers and the colonized, the influence and power that controlled indigenous people, and how these relate to modern issues pertaining to minorities. The effects of colonialism on the colonies and their peoples are so devastating since, after years of colonial rule, indigenous people lose their sense of individualism and seemingly become dependent on the rules and norms set by their colonizers. In *Beginning Postcolonialism*, English scholar John McLeod references a statement by sociologist Stuart Hall (1932-2014) that life after independence in many ways still follows the effects of colonialism: the values

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<sup>26</sup> Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 48-49.

<sup>27</sup> Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> Downs, *Writing Gender History*, 23.

and attitudes created by colonialism are not so easily forgotten by the colonized people.<sup>29</sup> Keeping colonial values is thus normalized to indigenous people because colonial values have been embedded in colonized lands for so long that any sense of the past traditions has been wiped away by the imposed (colonial) cultural values. McLeod emphasizes the need for a change of mind or “decolonizing” of the mind to break away from the dominant ways of thinking.<sup>30</sup> According to McLeod, colonialism establishes a certain way of thinking. This explains why so many people who were forcibly colonized believe they are inferior, namely because they have been taught by the colonizers that they are less civilized. The reason postcolonialism so heavily impacts the way history is written is because of the way power and nationalism are entwined in the way history is told. McLeod expands on how there are many different versions of history, but due to each country’s nationalism only one particular version of the past is told because it is the only one that matters in the national narrative of said country. McLeod’s analysis of nationalism affecting the way history is told can be tied back to Trouillot and Patterson, as power determines who gets to write history, thus creating the silences of marginalized people.

### *Conclusion*

The record of history is saturated with ambiguity. This ambiguity is a result of a vacuum in history that absorbs the details of the past not fit to move with the big picture of history, the sifting of the important and not so important information known as silencing. From Trouillot’s book, *Silencing the Past*, we are able to make the connection between the two sides of historicity, as well as the collection and contextualization of archives in the sense that both are susceptible to conscious and unconscious silencing by historians. In Patterson’s study, *Inventing Western Civilization*, we see how the creation of Western civilization shaped how history has been written. Lears’s article, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony,” discusses the real intentions of hegemony and how it has played a vital role in how history has been written and which ontological frameworks have been used to describe the past. Popkin’s work, *From Herodotus to H-Net*, allows us to understand the paradigm shifts throughout the centuries and how ontologies have changed for the betterment of writing and analyzing history. Downs’s monograph, *Writing Gender History*, provides a better understanding of gender theory and how, over time, writing that discusses women and gender has shifted. Lastly, in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod explains the impact that colonialism has had on indigenous people, how postcolonialism plays a major part in why subordinate groups are silenced, and why we see colonial values in use today, even though colonized lands have gained independence. As historians are constantly tasked with discovering new documentation and piecing it together to refine the

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<sup>29</sup> McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 38, referencing Stuart Hall.

<sup>30</sup> McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 25.

existing historical narrative, their efforts are quite substantial. It is their hard work and the decisions that need to be made while carrying out research that makes the profession of history so enticing and so exciting.

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