

In my view, the *critical* in *Critical Inquiry* should not mean “judgmental” but rather “crucial” or “essential.” If the articles that appear in the journal are to be crucial to the collective understandings of the world advanced by the human sciences, they must draw up or help generate new modes of inquiry, not simply use contemporary academic (theoretical) paradigms to criticize the past or the present. While the language-based theories that have dominated the academy for the last two decades have contributed important insights into the nature of representation, I think we now need to move beyond theories of representation to considerations of social processes, including the role that particular institutions play in linking individuals to larger social and political formations. In the range of positions sketched in the call for statements, this commitment probably puts me in the consolidation and refinement camp, for I think that many of the claims academics have made about the success of various critical inquiries overstate the accomplishments of approaches like New Historicism, structuralism, deconstruction, academic feminism, and identity-based criticism. More specifically, I don’t think that New Historicism really solved the problems involved in dealing with past texts, nor do I think that New Historicists conceptualized those problems very clearly. By the same token, structuralists generally overstated the continuities between the various enterprises they examined, and deconstructive critics tended to move too easily from texts and other language-based artifacts to behaviors and events in which language is only one component. Feminists and identity theorists have also overstated the magnitude of their interventions, partly because they simplified the relationship between pedagogical comments and social effects. Practitioners of all of these critical approaches have thus made claims for their accomplishments and for the applicability of their methods that don’t seem completely warranted. When these critics (myself among them) argued that our methods constituted political interventions, we really overstated the case, for without some recognition of the relative insularity of the U.S. academy (not to mention the inaccessibility of our language and the scant readership of our journals), we were not even working with a definition of politics that obtains in the rest of contemporary society.

To move beyond the language-based theories that have dominated critical inquiry for the last few decades and to integrate theory more effectively into a methodology that collects and uses various kinds of evidence, I think we need to form alliances with practitioners in the social and natural sciences. The disciplines that come to mind include sociology, psychology (including cognitive psychology), political science, philosophy of science, and ethnography. As far as I know, practitioners of these disciplines also need to develop more sophisticated methodologies, but, whereas humanists need better tools for collecting and managing (nontextual) evidence, social and natural scientists might need more theoretically informed analytic paradigms. Theory and practice must somehow be brought together so that the construction of theoretical paradigms draws more closely upon observable evidence. At the same time, of course, we must remember that the evidence we observe is rendered evidential by the theoretical paradigms that inform observation. The recursive structure that links evidence to theory is something we have learned to acknowledge, but too few critical theorists pay more than lip service to the problems that follow from this recognition. Closer working alliances with scholars in other disciplines might help us keep these problems in view.

Let me make it clear that I am not demoting the problematic of representation, for attention to this has yielded valuable insights into the workings of textuality, various speech acts, and some kinds of social behaviors. Nor am I recommending the unreflective embrace of a simplistic version of empiricism or objectivism. What I am recommending is more work on subjects and problems that lie on the border between representation and social and psychological

processes. I am also recommending more work on methodologies that could bring humanists' insights about representation into a theoretically self-conscious relationship with sociologists' understandings of social relations and psychologists' understanding of brain function and human development. Thus, for example, I would like to see more collaborative projects that focus on social collectives and their intersections with individuals. These might include particular kinds of institutions (in specific cultural and historical settings), such as religions or government bureaucracies (to name just two). I highlight institutions because they are not only forms of representation but also mediations among representations, behaviors (both personal and social modes of subjectivity), and larger social processes. If we could study such institutions in a way that would enable us to describe the active roles they play in subject-formation, geopolitical relations, and imaginative productivity, then we might be able to begin developing new theories about abstractions like nationalism or globalization. This might enable us to understand the sense in which literature and painting can be understood as social institutions that work alongside (but sometimes counter to) other social institutions. The processes of racial, ethnic, and sexual discrimination that have so occupied critical theorists might then appear as properly *social* processes, which derive their power from their links to other social institutions as well as representations. Such inquiries would have to be as attentive to the differences among institutions as to the totality they seem to create, and they would have to be attentive to the differences that different cultural, national, and regional settings make to the way that particular institutions work. The kind of inquiry I am describing requires gathering enormous amounts of (properly theorized) evidence. It requires suspending conclusions until much evidence has been collected, organized, and sorted. Most of all, it requires allowing the evidence to influence and change the theoretical paradigms under which the evidence was collected, instead of continuing to use theory to dictate what counts as evidence and to state what that evidence really means.

Since my own commitment is to historical study, simply collaborating with scholars from the social and natural sciences is not sufficient. I believe that historical study is critical inquiry, in the sense of being essential, because knowing something about the past is essential to the sense of temporal continuity (and thus of future possibilities), whether at the level of a culture, a nation, or an individual. Yet our theoretical understanding of how to conceptualize the relation between the present and the past is still at a very rudimentary stage. This relation resembles the relation between two cultures in that it entails both similarity and difference. But the relation to the past differs from one culture's relation to another in that what remains of the past is even more inaccessible and fragmentary than are the data of another culture. Thus, what has been called the objectivity problem is compounded in the case of trying to apprehend past events, dead people, and lost commonplaces by the evaporation or effacement of evidence that would be crucial to that enterprise. Like most of the social sciences, the discipline of academic history has not been very good at addressing this problematic. I am not suggesting that scholars in the human sciences need to adopt historians' paradigms or methods, but that collaborative work needs to be undertaken to raise and help address topics that lie at the intersection of textual and historical scholarship.

At least two such topics still need theoretical and practical elaboration. The first has to do with the nature of the claim that one can make about interpretations of texts that belong to another time or culture when these interpretations are informed (as they always are) by contemporary theoretical and heuristic assumptions. Assuming that I am not claiming that my interpretation of *David Copperfield* coincides with or recovers the interpretations of the novel's first readers (much less the author), what kind of claim am I making for this interpretation? The

second topic concerns the implicit assumptions that inform historical narratives. We all know that historical narratives constitute interpretations, but too often those of us who construct these narratives ignore the role played in the presentation of evidence by the rhetorical devices and generic conventions that organize the narratives. At the same time, too much attention to the constructed nature of historical narrative can distract from attention to the evidence upon which our interpretations are based—evidence that differs in significant ways from the evidence used in interpretations of texts. Too little attention to the artifice of narrative can lead to historical accounts that feign transparency. Too much self-consciousness about the conventions that inform historical accounts can yield a history that is merely gestural, to use Lynne Hunt’s term, in being made to serve the theoretical assumptions with which the writer began.

These thoughts are not very visionary, for I haven’t said anything about new technologies or about the ability of the human sciences to intervene in emergent global alliances. Even though I do foresee changes in the modes by which we will be able to publish and read new scholarship, I don’t imagine that electronic forms of publication will dramatically alter the gulf that now separates academic analysis from popular journalism. I do not foresee an age in which public intellectuals will gain wider audiences and increased respect in venues that make our analyses readily available, for scholars (rightly) value modes of inquiry more detailed, more rigorous, and more time-consuming than are the kinds of thinking encouraged by mass media. We also write about this inquiry in language that discourages many readers, for we write largely to others who have been trained as we have. When I call for critical inquiry that is even more detailed, more rigorous, and (admittedly) more time-consuming, I do so with the belief that writing to each other (and to our students) is okay, for what we write is a crucial contribution to the collective understanding of what it means to be human—even though what we contribute can hardly be said to be the last, or the only, word.

—Mary Poovey
New York University