"Core Texts as Critical History: How Studying Works by Old, Dead, White Guys Can be Radical"[1]

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"I know these texts are a part of our history, but they just aren't where we are right now." This statement, or something very close to it, was made by a student in one of my courses last Fall. It reflects a sentiment that is familiar to me, falling under the "too many old, dead, white men" theme that I hear fairly often as a professor of Philosophy who focuses on historical texts in the Western Philosophical tradition. This particular comment came from a student in the Arts One program at the University of British Columbia—a first-year, team-taught, multidisciplinary course focusing on core texts in the humanities and social sciences.[2] The theme linking the texts studied in this course (which changes every two years) was "Narrative and Identity," and at the end of the Fall term we had studied works by Plato, Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Hobbes, among others.[3] The student's point was especially pertinent, then: what role do canonical, "classic" narratives such as these play in "our" current identity as participants in this course? Or, perhaps more importantly, what role *should* they play? What value is there in studying such texts when their arguments and the values that inform them have been justifiably criticized by feminists, Marxists, anti-racists, and others in the many years since?

This is not a new question, and I expect many members of the audience have quite a bit of experience with thinking about it and formulating answers. As someone who is in her first decade of teaching, I am still working on developing my own responses to students and others who are skeptical of the value of studying texts from the past when so much in the present seems to call for an approach that goes beyond past prejudices and the harms perpetuated by ideas represented in the "classics." Contrary to my student's comment, I think one thing that can be usefully said is that we may need to look at our history, precisely to better determine just "where we are right now" and to formulate effective critiques

thereof. Reading core texts by "dead, white males" *can* be an important component of education for radical social and political critique.

Interestingly, my student voiced this concern just about the time that we were discussing Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. We talked in class about how Rousseau uses history to make an argument about the present, how his narrative about the past functions to support a critique of social and political conditions in his present. This point was to come up again in our discussions of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* and Foucault's *History of Sexuality Volume I*, though that wasn't for a few months yet. These three texts, though of course very different in numerous ways, share a general framework of criticizing something that is accepted by many of their contemporaries without much question, by telling a story of its contingent genesis in the past and the problems accompanying this origin that continue into the present. I explain briefly how Rousseau does so, framing this discussion with some of Foucault's claims about the nature and value of this method of using history; and I conclude with a suggestion of how studying core texts as critical history can contribute to social critique.

In several of his works (including *The History of Sexuality*), Foucault uses historical narratives to question his own present in what he calls, after Nietzsche, a "genealogical" method that appeals to the past for critical rather than conservative purposes: "Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity . . . its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present"; its point is rather to "identify the accidents, the minute deviations . . . the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us" (Foucault 1977, 146). According to Foucault, the genealogical method involves considering particular beliefs, values, or practices that are commonly accepted in the present, and using historical narrative to show that "what is, does not have to be what it is": "the return to history makes sense in the respect that history shows that that which is not always was so," and it thereby opens room for alteration in current conditions (Foucault 1996a, 359). Foucault also argues that the genealogical use of history

can encourage reflection on and questioning of what might otherwise have appeared obviously true or right: "It is a matter of making things more fragile through this historical analysis, or rather of showing both why and how things were able to establish themselves as such . . . . [and showing that] by changing a certain number of things, . . . taking things differently, finally what appears obvious to us is not at all so obvious" (Foucault 1996b, 412). Finally, the genealogist calls for change in the present by revealing problems with the object of his/her study—e.g., the way madness or punishment is understood and treated today—thus using a historical narrative not only to show that current beliefs and practices are contingent and malleable, but also providing reasons why change is desirable. Foucault speaks of attempting to provide with his genealogical narratives a transformative experience for himself and for his readers. The point is to induce new ways of thinking, through writing and reading historical narratives:

> I aim at having an experience myself—by passing through a determinate historical content—an experience of what we are today, of what is not only our past but also our present. And I invite others to share the experience. That is, an experience of our modernity that might permit us to emerge from it transformed. (Foucault 1991, 34)

Though Rousseau of course lived and wrote long before Foucault, inspired by Nietzsche, came to develop his genealogical method, we can find elements of this method in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. There, Rousseau criticizes several things in his contemporary society: social, political, and economic inequalities, as well as the selfish pride and greed that drive them.[4] He traces these to various contingent sources in the past, arguing that such present ills are not inevitable results of some immutable aspects of human nature: "in order to develop they needed the fortuitous occurrence of several alien causes which might never have arisen" (Rousseau 1984, 106). Indeed, Rousseau argues in his Preface to this *Discourse* that if we look into the nature of the "human constitution," "instead of a being acting always according to definite and invariable principles" we find one that undergoes significant changes over time (67). For example, contrast to Hobbes, Rousseau argues that humans do not possess by nature the sort of self-love that drives conflict, the *amour propre* (pride) that consists in living outside oneself,

"in the opinion of others" (136): having concern for status in comparison with others and requiring recognition of this by others. *Amour propre* can develop only within groups of humans living in close proximity, and according to Rousseau, social living is a relatively recent development in human history, one that resulted from contingencies of nature leading to the need to cooperate for survival (109-115). Even if humans have lived together for so long now that such psychological characteristics appear deeply ingrained in who we are as a species, their development over time points to at least the possibility of their alteration—a possibility that is obscured or blocked entirely when they are claimed to be part of an immutable human nature.

Rousseau traces the origins of most contemporary social, economic, and political inequalities to a combination of *amour propre* and the institution of private property, which, he claims, was made possible by the accidental discovery of metallurgy and techniques of agriculture (116-118). Conjoined with *amour propre*, private property fuels "ambition, the burning passion to enlarge one's relative fortune, not so much from real need as to put oneself ahead of others, [which] inspires in all men a dark propensity to injure one another" (119). The results are competition and conflict, continual struggles for power, wars, and deceit on small and large scales—including the "social contract" that protects the rights of the rich and further degrades the poor (120-122). Rousseau concludes that his contemporary society has only "façades, deceptive and frivolous, honour without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness" (136). But he has argued through his historical narrative that none of this is inevitable; and the negative picture he has drawn of his present, contrasting with the more common depictions of the age of Enlightenment as one of progress towards freedom and equality, implies the need for radical change. Rousseau's text could be said to aim at providing a transformative experience for his contemporary readers, inspiring them to social and political action in their present.

Pointing to the critical and transformative potential of historical narratives, as evidenced in works by Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Foucault, reveals one way in which studying "canonical" works can—and indeed should—be part of educating oneself and others to promote social, political, and

economic change in the present. As paradoxical as it may seem, it can be considered a form of "consciousness-raising": it can make available for reflective scrutiny those aspects of our thinking that are so deeply embedded they appear invisible. Though studying texts from the past that ground and inform many currently-accepted beliefs, values and practices may appear to support and further entrench these rather than prompt criticism of them, this need not be the case. Clearly, works of critical history such as those by Rousseau, Nietzsche and Foucault can spark questioning of and new ways of thinking about social and political conditions in the present. But the method they employ could provide a model for considering other works from the past as well. One could teach a course or part of a course as itself a kind of critical history, by tracing one or more ideas or values that are still common today through a series of "core texts." For example, in our Arts One course this year we followed the concept of the "monstrous" through various texts on our reading list, comparing the ways in which this concept is used at different times, in different contexts, and for different purposes. Class discussions showed at least some critical reflection on the students' parts about their own approach to the category of the "monster," the "abnormal," the "foreign," the "other."[5] An important part of approaching core texts as critical history would be to note in which texts the ideas under study are contested and argued for, and in which they serve as background assumptions—this can signal the need for investigation into when and why such ideas were considered questionable, and when, why and how they came to appear less so. Such an approach, by revealing the "historicity" of the ideas being considered, can "give them back the mobility that they had and that they always should have," as Foucault puts it (1996b, 413).[6]

Teaching core texts as a means of doing critical history can reveal the contingency of ideas and values that might have otherwise remained largely as background assumptions, affecting the way we think about and act in the world without our recognizing it. The student quoted at the beginning of this presentation expressed concern that while the core texts we were studying were indeed part of our history and cultural identity, we had progressed beyond the racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, and other problematic elements that are embedded in such texts. Why continue to study works that informed who

we were, but do not inform who we are now? Because such analysis of the history of our ideas helps us even to recognize who and where we are now. Pointing to the historical development of ideas that inform our sense of identity so deeply that they fade from view can help us determine if current social and political problems may be exacerbated by ways of thinking that we don't even recognize. Have we moved beyond conceptualizing the world in ways that perpetuate oppression? How can we know unless we learn to see what seems "obvious" as "not at all so obvious"? Studying core texts as critical history can be a way to engage ourselves and our students in "an experience that changes us, that prevents us from always being the same, or from having the same kind of relationship with things and with others that we had before" (Foucault 1991, 41).

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Notes

[1] I am indebted to a lecture by Ian Johnston, published on the internet, for the way I use the notion of "critical history" in this paper, and for how I approached the study of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in the Arts One course this past year. The lecture can be accessed, as of April 2006, at the following internet address: http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/introser/rousseau2.htm.

[2] This program, in place at UBC since 1967, includes many "core texts" in literature, philosophy and history. There may also be a number of less well-known texts included in the curriculum, and we did so this year in part in order to juxtapose the "core" with the "margins" so as to encourage questioning of these categories. The texts are chosen by a team of instructors who organize them around a particular theme that, as noted above, changes every two years. There are two teams of instructors each year, with separate themes and a separate group of students. Recent themes include "Madness and Reason" and "Utopia and Dystopia." The instructors often come from departments such as English, Philosophy, Political Science, and History, though other disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences are represented over the years as well. This year, our team is made up of instructors from English, Philosophy (myself), Political Science, Music, and Asian Studies.

[3] We had also read some origin stories from Canadian First Nations, as well as a few Japanese "classics" (*Kojiki*, The *Tale of Genji* and a medieval Noh play called "Aoi no ue"). We have worked to avoid an exclusively Euro-centric or patriarchal focus in our choice of texts over the course of the year, though by the time the student made the comment noted above, we had yet to read the more "critical" works that she later found more interesting (including works by Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Foucault, de Beauvoir, Daphne Marlatt and Hiromi Goto).

[4] These contribute to the multitude of physical, mental, and emotional miseries Rousseau observes around him. Physical problems include poor health brought on by "the excess of idleness among some and the excess of toil among others, . . . the over-elaborate foods of the rich, . . . the bad food of the poor" (Rousseau 84), and the "unhealthy trades which shorten lives or ruin men's physique" (151). Rousseau also describes mental and emotional problems, "the anguish of mind which consumes us, the violent passions which exhaust and grieve us" (149), stemming in large part from the *amour propre* (pride) that consists in valuing oneself in comparison with others, needing to feel that one is better than others, and requiring that others recognize one's superior status. *Amour propre* is the source of "vanity and scorn, . . . [and] shame and envy," both of which, in combination with other developments in human qualities and activities, prove "fatal to happiness and innocence" (114). Advances in technology and cooperative social living allows for the production of new kinds of goods, which turn into new needs that lead to unhappiness if they are not fulfilled (113); and with the introduction of property are introduced not only economic inequalities but the phenomenon of greed (120).

[5] We did not undertake formally, though, the kind of process of using core texts as critical history that I am suggesting here—my argument in this essay is a result of reflection my experiences with students skeptical of studying canonical, core texts; my team in Arts One developed a different theme, with different purposes. I am of course not arguing that all courses that include core texts should be structured as narratives of critical history.

[6] There is an important question to consider here, which often comes up in the study of "genealogical" texts such as those of Rousseau, Nietzsche and Foucault: are the historical narratives they provide accurate? And if not, how does this affect the efficacy of their criticisms of the present? It seems clear that readers of such texts must take the histories as true in some sense, in order to conclude that what is under scrutiny is both problematic and subject to historical change (and thus malleable for the future). It is not difficult to find flaws in the factual claims of the texts by these authors mentioned above, and thus many readers may not respond to these texts with a change in their own thinking. Two things can be said in response. First, pointing to flaws in historical narratives themselves encourages discussion about the nature of methodology and argumentation in works of history, what sorts of evidence is used, how gaps in that evidence are filled, and what kinds of leaps are made from data to conclusions. This can, of course, inspire critical reflection on present social and political conditions insofar as those are argued for on the basis of historical narratives. This point pertains to studying any text that uses history to make its point. Second, and in regard to teaching core texts as critical history designed to question the present, the point that a history must be taken as at least largely true in order for it to have the transformative potential suggested here shows that the historical narrative told through the teaching of such texts should be as accurate as possible.