Textuality, Social Science, and Society

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Abstract: The conflict that exists in our culture between the vocabularies of scientific discourse and of narrative discourse, between positivism and romanticism, objectivism and subjectivism, and between system and lifeworld can be synthesized through a poetics of truth that views social science and society as texts. The metaphor of textuality has two primary elements: semiotics of structure, referring to the syntax and grammar of knowledge and society, and hermeneutics, referring to semantics and pragmatics in the means that are conveyed through performances in specific settings. As this imagery is applied to social practices, it construes selves and societies as emerging from communicative interaction. Textual analysis of society reveals that received forms of knowledge are determined by structures like language, and that these structures are invented through acts of speech. Textuality can be seen as an adequate paradigm for civic communication, since it stresses the agency of speakers and enables us to join explanation of the regulative principles of our systems with understanding of meaning in our lifeworlds.

THERE IS A PROFOUND CHASM in our culture: the incompatibility of cognition and identity. Science guarantees that we live in a shared external world that can be known through reason. As such it permits us to create and maintain the complex social and technical systems that support our lives. But identity is achieved through narration. It is through narration that we give this world and our lives their meaning. Thus there is a contradiction: persons and peoples are constructed rhetorically through narration (Rorty, 1987; Bruner, 1987) but, as Pierre Bourdieu (1987, p. 2) argued, life or history as narration is smuggled into the kingdom of knowledge without a legitimate passport:

> To produce a life history or to consider life as a history, that
> is, a coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence
> of events, is perhaps to conform to a rhetorical illusion, to
> the common representation of existence that a whole literary
> tradition has always and continues to reinforce.

On this account, science yields truths from nature without meaning, narrative gives moral meaning to history and persons, but these are mere illusions. To this way of bifurcated thinking, narrative discourse is associated with the fictional or subjective realms, whereas social scientific discourse employs an ostensibly nonmoral, objectivist vocabulary. The conflict between these vocabularies has grown sterile mainly because we need them both — scientific discourse to understand and direct our complex systems, narrations of self and society to give moral meaning to our lifeworlds and our polity. If we are to have integrity and self-direction in our personal and civic lives, we must integrate these two ways of knowing and being. To do this we need to be able to judge the truth of narratives and to have poetic criteria for science.

One perspective that invites such a synthesizing poetics of truth is the view of science and society as texts. In this view, language is not a reflection either of the world or of the mind. Instead, it is a social historical practice. And, however polluted this communicative practice may be, it is the only river on which truth can ride. In this perspective, the meanings of words are not taken from things or intentions, but arise from socially coordinated actions (Mills, 1974, p. 677). Words help constitute and mediate social behaviors, they provide legitimating or stigmatizing vocabularies of motive, and they mask or reveal structures of domination.

To develop these contentions, in previous works I elaborated the metaphor of experience and knowledge as language (Brown, 1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1990). I argued that knowledge is itself a rhetorical enterprise, as is the social reality that it describes. And I advanced poetic criteria for assessing the adequacy of social scientific claims to truth. In developing the first part of my thesis — that knowledge is itself a rhetorical construction — I first showed that metaphors — the principal trope of language —function cognitively to provide the possibility of intelligibility and truth within discourse. Then I argued that knowledge, even putatively philosophic or scientific knowledge, takes a narrative form. I suggested, for example, that epistemological crises in philosophy, and paradigm conflicts in science, are resolved through narrative logic. Knowledge begins in metaphor and becomes a story well told. This developing perspective challenges a view held by both the positivists and the anti-positivists alike: That positive philosophy

of science provides a warrant for science as a universal, context-free, ultimately privileged way of knowing, and, conversely, that without such a global philosophical justification science has no special privileges or intellectual warrant at all. By contrast, much recent scholarship suggests that within the very practical social activity of science there emerge justifications for certain claims of science on our credence. In this perspective, science is reconstrued as a practice of narrative discourse, a practice that at once generates theories as well as their validity and significance (Brown, 1990; Rouse, 1987).

In the present essay I approach these issues from a slightly different angle. I highlight the oppositions between positivism and romanticism, objectivism and subjectivism, and system and lifeworld, and then suggest that they can be sublated within the metaphor of (social) science and society as texts. I argue that both objectivist or positivist science, and subjectivist romantic hermeneutics, though apparently opposites, are in fact dialectically interdependent views of knowledge, self, and society.

The metaphor of textuality has two primary elements — semiotics of structure and hermeneutics of meaning. Semiotics focuses on the syntax and grammar of knowledge and society, the governing rules and operative constraints of the communicative practices that make up science and society. Hermeneutics focuses on semantics and pragmatics, the meanings that are conveyed through performances in specific settings. As this imagery is applied to social practices, it construes selves and societies as emerging from communicative interaction. Politics, institutions, and identities are constructed, negotiated, or changed through persuasive activities that can be understood in rhetorical terms. On this account, textuality also may be shaped into an adequate paradigm for civic communication, since it stresses the agency of speakers and enables us to join explanation of the regulative principles of our systems with understanding of meaning in our life-worlds. It thereby could help us govern our polities in a rational manner to insure collective survival, even while providing us meaning and dignity in our existential experience of ourselves.

The Interdependency of Positivism and Its Critics

The Greeks of Plato's Athens, like the Puritans of colonial America, operated within a moral universe without invidious distinctions between politics and ethics. By contrast (Habermas and Rawls notwithstanding), contemporary discussions of ethics take as obvious the need to distinguish

talk of efficacy and talk of ethics. Moreover, such discussions generally assume that efficacy is the domain of reason, science, and expertise, whereas ethics is a matter of opinion or emotion. There are a number of dimensions of this bifurcation. One of them is the assumption — central to the positivist habitus — that scientific rationality is independent of its social contexts. That is, it is thought that the standards used to evaluate representations of truth (theories, facts), and our symbolic resources for constructing them (logic, language, instrumentation), are autonomous of the historically local discourses by which they are generated. Conversely, it is held that when representations rest within more local processes of social and linguistic construction, they do not warrant the status of truth.

These views often are shared by both proponents and critics of positivism alike. Take the example of Paul Feyerabend. Even this self-declared anarchist accepts the antinomies that emerge from the positivist view of reason. Feyerabend argued persuasively that science would be irrational were it in fact to follow the rules of neo-positivists and critical rationalists. Yet Feyerabend's very criticism accepts without challenge, and apparently without awareness, the same fundamental assumption of his adversaries — that to be rational is to follow some specified universal method. And by assuming that scientific method must be constrictive and absolutist, he was led to advocate an epistemological anarchy in which "What remains are aesthetic judgments, judgments of taste, metaphysical prejudices, religious desires, in short, what remains are our subjective wishes" (Feyerabend, 1978, p. 385). This does violence to formal rationality as well as to judgment of taste.

In the same spirit, much of the ethnographic sociology of science (e.g., Latour 1987; Latour and Woolgar 1979; Knorr-Cetina and Mulkay 1983) shows science to be made up through locally embedded practices. On this account, pretention to objectivity, universalism, and value freedom are debunked and science is unmasked as the social and rhetorical construction of a fragile and always partial and temporary consensus. "Actual science," argue such sociologists, does not and could not correspond to the "ideal science" imagined by positivist philosophers. Some researchers then assumed, with Pickering (1984, pp. 413-414), that because "world-views are cultural products,... there is no obligation upon anyone framing a view of the world to take account of what twentieth century science has to say."

The ironic force of such debunking statements, however, depends on the reader taking for granted an assumption which certain social constructionists share with their positivist adversaries: That science does indeed require a global philosophic justification for its veracity and, hence, that the absence

of one subverts both the validity of claims of scientific truth as well as the significance of science in the modern world (Rouse, 1988, p. 6). But there is no warrant for the view that scientific beliefs must be absolute or universal in order to be valid or useful.

The conflicts and reciprocal limitations of positivism and its opposites also can be seen by comparing the work of Carnap and Wittgenstein. These thinkers drew radically different conclusions from the failure of all attempts to justify the claim that natural science provides a uniquely world-correlative universal language. Carnap tried constructively to apply the metaphysical fiction of such a language and thus to abrogate the multiplicity of everyday languages. By contrast, Wittgenstein explored the difference between scientific and everyday language; and in this difference he discovered the functional richness of actual languages together with the multiplicity of linguistic modes that they contain and that are irreducible to any single mode of objectifying description. As Wittgenstein (1963) said,

> There are … countless … different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences'. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.

Unlike the neopositivists, Wittgenstein accepted each of the modes of human thought on its own terms and justified each by its own internal standards. Yet if we accept Wittgenstein's formulation, how could we justify any privileged status for the language game of science or social theory?

Textuality: An Alternative Metaphor
for Science and Society

How can these bifurcations within our theories of knowledge and society be overcome? How might we link knowledge of structure with understanding of intention, and thereby find a public discourse adequate for both social management as well as moral identity? I believe that an approach based on the metaphor of language or text recommends itself on both logical and moral grounds. Whereas the textual metaphor can include structural, deterministic, and causal explanations, nonlinguistic metaphors of society such as the machine or the organism eschew an understanding of human will and reason. The textual approach gives central place to human

authorship, but it also invites an analysis of the scarcities and constraints that form the broader social text.

An adequate analysis is not possible, however, without modifying and sublating its positivist and romantic ingredients. First, romantic hermeneutics needs to be augmented with a critical, depth hermeneutics that stresses miscomprehensions, thwarted intentions, and false consciousness, as much as it stresses conscious intention as a focus for interpretation (Bourdieu, 1977; Gadamer, 1975; Habermas, 1968). This recommendation implies a corresponding shift in the structuralist conception of language. That is, to direct hermeneutic inquiry toward misunderstandings is implicitly to challenge the semiotic view of the text as a set of self-contained codes, the machine-like operation of which would in principle obviate the possibility of such misunderstanding. As Jonathan Culler (1977, pp. 32-54) showed, such a structuralist view reifies the conception of language and invites arbitrary attributions of signification.

One way around this difficulty would be to understand the relation of language and speech as a dialectical interaction between meaning intentions of the speaker and the meaning inherent in the object, or form. As Emilio Betti (1980, p. 55) put it, "if one considers the speech act as a mediating activity, then the totality of language appears as the living actuality of the linguistic formulation of inner experience. Language is, therefore, actualized in speech as thought and position-taking, and speech transforms language into a living presence."

The grammar of social life, as Goffman (1959, p. 2) said, requires that "others" be "forced to accept some events as conventional or natural signs of something not directly available to the senses." Hermeneutic interpretation keeps this structural grammar in the background in order to focus on the meanings that are generated within it. Semiotics keeps the intended meanings in the background in order to focus on the structures by which they are generated.

Semiotics and hermeneutics are thus dialectically interdependent within the metaphor of society as text. Semiotics does not automatically tell us what is important in a social text. It becomes most helpful after we have identified what needs explaining. It is not a tool for the interpretation of meaning or intention, but rather a method for organizing the interpretable and the results of interpretation (Culler, 1981). Semiotics is not concerned with decoding individual utterances or actions, but with the laws, conventions, and operations that allow meaningful utterances to take place and be understood. Whereas hermeneutics asks "What does it mean?" semiotics inquires "How are such meanings possible?"

The potential meanings of actions/texts are always fuller than those intended by their authors, because the future contexts and consequences of such actions are always more ample than the possible intentions of those who initially performed them. Hence, the interpretation of the social text involves not merely a hermeneutic recognition of the actor's intended meaning, but also a semiotic cognition of the unstated, often unintended, presuppositions and outcomes of conduct As Bleicher (1980, p. 44) stated:

> Sociology cannot be reduced to a *verstehen* psychology since only a limited part of human actions are consciously undertaken. It is equally impossible to rely on a naturalistic, generalizing approach since this would lead to the neglect of the historical specificity of these phenomena.

Each of these antinomies requires the other not only for its completion but also for its very essence. The hermeneutic revelation of meaning or, more recently, the poststructuralist deconstruction of meaning, all require some totalization as the background to their reductions. For example, though the very diversity of interpretations of a social text may show that all interpretations are in some sense arbitrary, it also shows the opposite: Insofar as these interpretations are understood to be interpretations of the same text (institution, society, etc.) they are presumed to be mutually intelligible within a common frame of reference and, hence, to be *nonarbitrary* (Graff, 1982). In the same sense, Deleuze's conception of the schizophrenic text or Derrida's notion that all frameworks are fictions of power both depend on some initial appearances of wholeness and continuity that already exist and which they seek to undermine or shatter.

These considerations return us to the problem stated at the outset: Positivist and romantic dichotomies cannot be sublated within the Cartesian thought of positivism, but they can be overcome dialectically through the medium of textual analysis. For if hermeneutic thought destroys the fiction of absolute objectivity in positivism, semiotic thought reveals the structural limits of a purely subjective interpretive social science. Such subjectivism — in the romantic rather than the positivist mode — interprets social behavior in terms of motives that are identical with the subject's own assessments of the situation. Sociological meanings thus become equivalent to linguistically articulated meanings; that is, they are assumed to be isomorphic with the verbal statements by which the actor orients himself. But even a subjectivist hermeneutic recognizes that interpretation in terms of motive is not the same as explanation in terms of cause. Motives or intentions do not cause actions; instead they provide a teleological account for them. Subjec-

tive-interpretive social science has demonstrated that intentional action is relatively autonomous of nonintentional, natural constraints, and that it must be accounted for by rules rather than by laws. Yet the question remains: Whence come these rules? And it is here that semiotic thought reveals that a purely subjectivist meaning-interpretive social science is itself a kind of myth, in that it posits a world of speech outside the rules of language.

Semiotic analysis of social texts has its beginning and end in human speech. But hermeneutic analysis of meanings that are intended in speech cannot be a merely subjective interpretation, because the linguistic context of meaning is always larger than the contexts of meanings that may have been subjectively intended by the original actors. Indeed, it is only through analysis of the rules of discourse that we can come to know what possible meanings the original actor may have intended. By setting limits on both objectivist and subjectivist ways of knowing, textual analysis gives birth to a new freedom, a freedom suggested by Dilthey and expanded by contemporary critical theorists and semioticians, a freedom that emerges dialectically in and through a field of constraint.

Textual analysis of society not only reveals that received forms of knowledge are determined by structures like language; it also shows that these structures are invented through acts of speech. Thus the textual metaphor invites us to investigate our linguistic constraints and capacities, because it sees persons as carriers of preformed linguistic structures as well as agents who perform culture and speech. By simultaneously addressing both structure and agency, such an approach not only can unmask over determined encodations; it also offers hope for developing practical definitions of morally and politically competent discourse. Thus textual analysis of society is central to what Habermas (1970) and Stanley (1978) regard as the next stage in the moral evolution of Reason: the development of a rational ethic of civic communication.

The Rhetorical Constitution of the Social and Political Text

The textualist approach also illuminates how selves and societies are constructed and deconstructed through rhetorical practices. In this view, the creation of a meaningful reality involves the intersubjective use of symbol structures through which happenings are organized into events and experience. That is, experience is expressed and achieved through persuasive communication, through rhetoric. People establish a repertoire of categories by which certain aspects of what-is-to-be-the-case are fixed, focused, or for-

bidden. These aspects are foregrounded and become articulated or conscious experience against a background of unspoken existence. The knowledge that emerges from this process takes a narrative form (Greimas, 1987, chap. 6; Brown, 1990). Reciprocally, the sequential ordering of a past, present, and future enables the structuring of perceptual experience, the organization of memory, and the constructions of the events, identities, and lives that they express (Bruner, 1987, p. 15). This rhetorically constructed narrative unity provides models of identity for people in particular symbolic settings or lifeworlds. It also guides peoples in knowing what is real and what is illusion, what is permissible and forbidden, what goes without saying and what must not be said. "The construction of a worldview is thus a rhetorical act of creative human agency; it is a practical accomplishment of a human community over time" (Brulle, 1988, p. 4).

In so constructing a world, other worlds are foreclosed. There is always a "surplus reality," since existence (potential experience) is always larger than actual lived experience. Moreover, as shown in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, there also is always a "surplus of the signified," since we experience more than we know, and we know tacitly more than we can state. Hence, the unreflected, signified world is always larger than whatever version of it becomes canonized into formal knowledge. The land is always larger than the maps, and in mapping it in one official way we narrow awareness of alternative ways of experiencing the terrain. Likewise with human conduct. What is mapped as a catatonic seizure in one culture may be seen as a divine trance in another, each equally real for those who name their world that way (Foucault, 1973).

In articulating experience through categories, discursive practices realize differences and distinctions, defining what is normal and deviant and, hence, expressing and enacting forms of domination. Thus, the processes of definition and exclusion not only are logical properties of discourse; they also are preconditions of intelligibility, sociation, social order and social control. To make reality mutually comprehensible in an intersubjective group, and to regularize symbolically guided social behavior, some (versions of) reality must be legitimized at the expense of their competitors. As Robert Brulle (1988) has discussed, such legitimation is an operation of closure. That is, it discounts the value of pursuing further implications and protects established interpretations by means of social sanctions that marginalize or silence dissident voices. Thus legitimation is a rhetorical achievement (Brulle, 1988, p. 4; Brinton, 1985, p. 281; Stanley, 1978, p. 131). In Foucault's phrase (1970, 1972), it establishes a "regime of truth," a meta-narrative by which the society lives.

Orthodox political theories hold that human nature generates social order; for example, for Hobbes brutish human nature necessitated a Leviathan state. But it is much more useful to understand both state and persons as co-generated through discursive practices. Different dominant discursive practices reflect different collective habits of mind and action. In Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, p. 73) usage, the habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions that help generate and structure practices and representations. The habitus guides people's improvisations as they respond to changing situations. By helping to routinize actions and accounts, the habitus secures a common sense world endowed with objectivity based on a consensus of the meanings of practice and reality (Brulle, 1988, p. 4). These shared onto-operational assumptions make intelligibility and predictability possible, and therefore require and permit the coordination of the actions of members of a given group.

Reciprocally, from such routinized coordinated actions emerge institutions, social structures and ontological assumptions. Temporally stable patterned and coordinated actions — that is, institutions — may realize "emergent properties" in the sense that their operations cannot be fully understood in terms of the intentions of their members. Moreover, for members such institutions may become icons, human artifacts thought to have a life of their own, independent of the volition of actors within them. Yet such institutions, cognitive structures, and other collective phenomena cannot be realized except in and through the system of dispositions and discursive practices of the agents who constitute them (Bourdieu as quoted in Brubaker, 1985).

As noted, closure and legitimation also evolve the repression of alternative realities. The establishment of an orthodoxy thus creates heterodoxies —— subjugated discourses that stand outside the regime of truth. Foucault characterizes these discourses as "a whole set of knowledge that has been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated; naive knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (1980, p. 82; see Kristeva, 1973). In modern Western societies, such alternative realities are different and deviant from the dominant scientific habitus. They include dreamtime, carnal wisdom, mystic experience, feminine intuition, primitive thought, aesthetic perception, hand intelligence, street smarts, lower-class lore, folkways, dopeways, old wives' tales, grace, and other forms of knowing. These alternative realities are delegitimated by marginalizing the discursive practices through which they are constructed. Such practices become unofficial, extra-institutional, and "backstage," expressed in the "restricted" rather than the "elaborated" code (see Goffman, 1959; Bernstein, 1971; Brown, 1987, chap.

1). From the viewpoint of the dominant habitus, these discourses are linguistically deprived. Their delegitimation also delegitimates the lifeworlds of their users. The official discourse becomes the only one that provides "symbolic capital" that could be fruitfully invested in institutional relations. This limits the power and autonomy of speakers of marginalized discourses and forces them to adopt the dominant definition of reality and its regime of truth if they are to participate as full members in the collective institutional life. Indeed, compliance and full membership is expressed practically through adequate performance of the dominant speech behavior.

Thus relations of domination are produced through practice and reified for members as things given by God, Nature, Tradition, History, or Reason. This movement from creative agency to reified structure is enacted through various rhetorical strategies that conceal from social members their own rhetorical construction of social reality. Society comes to be seen as a natural fact rather than a cultural artifact. Reification thus allows relations of domination and authority to be seen as natural instead of created; it thereby facilitates conformity and continued reproduction of the social order. This ascription of naturalness inclines agents to accept the social order as it is. It becomes a "realized morality" to its members (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 163-164).

The appearance of society as a moral entity leads individuals to actions designed to maintain their self-image by avoiding shame and exclusion. Everyday interactions therefore are polite interactions, aimed at avoiding embarrassment. Should the social fabric and persons' moral esteem be temporarily torn, these are repaired with excuses and justifications (Goffman, 1959; Schudson, 1984, p. 5; Gamson, 1985, p. 5; Rawls, 1987, p. 2; Lyman and Scott, 1970). In everyday life, Goffman (1974, p. 14) tells us, we are occupied with "maintaining the definition of the situation" in order to "cope with the bizarre potentials of social life." "Definitional disruptions … would occur much more frequently were not constant precaution taken" (Goffman, 1954, p. 13). The social order, in other words, requires that "others" are "forced to accept some events as conventional or natural signs of something not directly available to the senses" (Goffman, 1974, p. 2). Thus, the realized morality of everyday interactions makes successful challenges to authority a risky, difficult, and sometimes literally unimaginable task.

The metaphor of society as rhetorical or textual construction has allowed us to abandon the views both of social structures as an objective entity acting on individuals, and of subjective agents inventing their worlds out of conscious intentions. Instead, both structures and consciousness are seen as practical, historic accomplishments, brought about through everyday com-

municative action, the result of rhetorical (aesthetic and political) struggles over the nature and meaning of reality.

Science, Narrative, and Civic Life

Those observations suggest that our canons for assessing the scientific truth of theories, or the moral adequacy of policies, are not transcendent but immanent in scientific, moral, and political discourses themselves. This implies that we should neither dismiss ethical language as beyond the realm of reason, nor reduce science to ideologies or interests. Positive science seeks law-like explanations in terms of notions of causes and effects, Moral discourse employs the vocabulary of purposes and ends. Like all intentional discourse and action, it is performed in the future perfect tense. That is, it is oriented towards, or at least made intelligible in terms of, some in-order-to or because-of motive (Rouse, 1987; Schutz, 1970). Indeed, the very conception of "action," as opposed to mere behavior, presupposes such a temporal structure of intentionality (Carr, 1986; Heidegger, 1962; Okrent, 1988, p. 51; Rouse, 1988). As a kind of discussion about the unfolding of intentions through action in time, moral political discourse therefore has a narrative structure.

A central problem of contemporary public life is not merely the encroachment of scientific or technical discourse into areas of properly moral and political concern. It also is a problem of the deterioration of reasoned narratives in moral discourse itself. With the capture of rationality by positive science and its technical extensions, reason and narration have been separated in civic culture. Thus, today's crisis is not merely that one collective narrative is replacing another. It is more severe: The polity in general has lost a reasoned narrative form (Lyotard, 1988). Reason in narrative discourse is being replaced in civic culture by scientific-technical calculation, on the one hand, and by irrational stories on the other. And with this we have lost much possibility for unity in our moral traditions. As public moral meanings become fragmented or fraudulent, society becomes unsusceptible to emplotment in terms of some rational political ethos.

A good example of the reduction of the democratic language of participation to the elitist language of technicism is the work of Stafford Beer (1974, pp. 41-43). Beer affirms the value of worker's participation in industrial systems even while deploying a cybernetic conception of "system" that silences people or human judgment and renders participation irrelevant.

> The work people themselves.... know what the flows are really
> like.... And if their interest can be captured in putting together
> the total model of how the firm really works, we shall have
> some genuine worker participation or replace a lot of talk about
> worker participation.... The vision I am trying to create for you
> is of an economy that works like our own bodies. There are
> nerves extending from the governmental brain throughout the
> country, accepting information continuously. So this is what is
> called a real-time control system. This is what I mean by using
> computers as variety handlers on the right side of the equation.
> They have to accept all manner of input, and attenuate its
> variety automatically. What they will pass on to the control
> room is whatever matters.

There is an animus in such writing against human natural languages,
values, memory, and literacy. Such rhetoric excludes conflicts of politics,
class, or other interests. "It shows no insight into the political nature of
'information', no respect for 'information's' ambiguities of meaning deriving
from moral paradoxes and situational diversities" (Stanley, 1978, p. 159, p.
182; for examples and discussion see Burke, 1969; Gittell, 1980; Halevy,
1955; Piven and Cloward, 1977; Thernstrom, 1969).

In such formulations, certain control replaces prudent counsel as the goal
of reason. But we still have only a vague understanding of the effects upon
human sensibilities of the reduction of symbols to their technological
content. For example, it has become a platitude of social criticism that
ubiquitous measurement results in the dehumanization of experience. But the
ways in which this dehumanization occurs have been little studied. We do
not know much, for example, about what happens to ideas like productivity,
value, decision, utility, health, costs, and benefits when we subject them to
quantification. Many humanists feel uneasy when Gallop Pollsters say that
fifteen-hundred respondents constitute a valid random sample of American
"public opinion," yet few of them have explored the underlying
mathematical and social theoretical assumptions of this claim in the light of
philosophical criteria of civitas, judgment, action, or decision.

The discourse of positive sciences, partly because it can do certain things so
well, easily expands to include more and more social life and experience. It
thereby leads us to ignore history and tradition, to turn political and moral
questions into technical or instrumental ones, and to treat every "problem" as
though it had a "solution" (Bernstein, 1971, p. 34; Delli Priscoli, 1979, p.
10; Rappoport, 1964, p. 30). In contrast to such reductivism, a technically in-

formed civic narration would help citizens to see how political issues are hidden in technical discourse and how political discourse can be informed by technical knowledge. The point therefore is not to eliminate either technical discourse or public storytelling, but to make technical talk accessible to citizens and storytelling amenable to reason. You cannot know how to eliminate acid rain, for example, unless you understand that "sulphur" is a cause of it. Nor can you know why we should eliminate acid rain unless you have a conception of the character and value of human life. A technically informed, civic narrative discourse would fuse the "how" and the "why." Thus, it would help humanize technicians and, much more importantly, it would enlighten and empower citizens.

By constituting an official discourse of meaning and legitimacy, scientized politics imposes a preemptive, cognitive closure on the present even as it suppresses the lived experience of societal members. Applied science thus is a discourse of power for experts, and of alienation for citizens. It construes the actions that it recommends as neither whimsical nor arbitrary, but as legitimate because they are the product of rational, objective deduction.

By contrast, Vico ([1744] 1972) viewed truth and experience as enacted through language that is available to all adult members of the community. Thus, he opposed philosophies that construed the knower as a passive spectator and the world as an object independent of our rhetorical construction of it. Vico specifically challenged Descartes's view that the truth of ideas is to be judged by their clarity and distinctness. For Descartes, mathematics was the exemplar of such truth. Vico rejected these criteria and argues that we know the truth of things because we have made them. Thus, mathematics seems fully true, but this is because it is a system of signification that has been fully made by man. For Vico, doing and knowing, or the constructed and the true, are both rhetorical enactments, and each is "convertible" into the other — *verum et factum convertuntur*.

Extending Vico's thought in the direction of Foucault's, we would include relations of power and domination in our understanding of the "doing" or "making" of knowledge. From this viewpoint, the *what* of any practical-cognitive system is convertible into the *how* of its writing, imagery, or speaking. Knowledge and power are built into our representational practices. Their convertibility becomes available to us through rhetorical self-consciousness. Such self-consciousness allows us to see how the ideological scripting of our messages masks exclusions, silences, and control and, thus, how knowledge and power, or knowing and doing, are ways of enscribing the social text.

Such a linguistically self-reflective posture is largely absent from social science and civic practice today. And, indeed, it is explicitly eschewed by the dominant positivist epistemology. To that extent, even though it avoids explicit value commitments, modern social science reproduces existing discursive practices, and thereby helps affirm existing categories and relations of persons, things, and classes (Shapiro, 1988, pp. 5-9). By contrast, a textualist understanding of social science and society stresses the constitutive rather than the causal or even the communicative dimensions of social practice. It thereby alerts us to the processes by which discourse becomes reified as a mirror of the very things, categories, and relations that it creates.

Yet today any reasoned public narration must be characterized by an awareness of its own impossibility. There is no telos outside of experience around which human conduct in general might be organized in narrative form. But perhaps we may say that the *quest* for such a telos *is* the moral telos of contemporary humanity (Frentz, 1985). This quest for a moral telos as itself a telos, is properly ironic, since it recognizes the dialetical nature of the human condition — that our self-determination presupposes us to be determined beings. Leon Trotsky said that the purpose of socialism was not to make men and women happy, but to elevate the grotesque melodrama of human existence to the level of tragedy. To be a morally enlightened being is to accept this tragedy as part of the quest for what can never be fully realized — an emancipated moral political community. Narrative truth today evokes the tragedy of our efforts at self-transcendence. But this tragedy, to be truthful to the contradictory conditions of modern life, must be cast in the ironic mode. That is as close as we modern persons can come to a happy ending.

Note: Several paragraphs of this essay are adapted from my previous work (1987, pp. 137-140; 1989b, pp. 40-41). One section here, on The Rhetorical Constitution of the Social and Political Text, is coauthored with Robert Brulle, drawing from his 1988 unpublished essay.

Biographical Note: Richard Harvey Brown was the keynote speaker at the 1988 annual meeting of the AIS in Arlington, Texas and the subject of a "Conversation with the Author" regarding his book *Society as Text*. Brown is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, where he recently hosted two international symposia on "The Rhetoric of the Social Sciences" and "Writing the Social Text." He is also the author of several books related to the topic of bridging the humanities and social sciences which he addressed at the 1988 meeting: *Society as Text: Essays on Rhetoric, Reason, and Reality* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), *A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Human Sciences*

(University of Chicago Press, 1989), *Social Science as Civic Discourse: Essays on the Invention, Legitimation, and Uses of Social Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), and *Discourse and Dominion* (forthcoming).

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