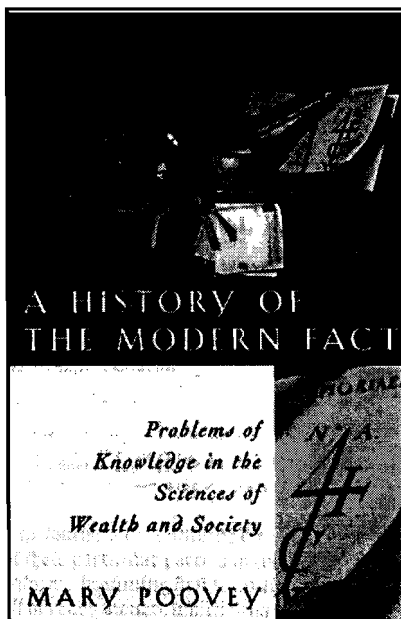


Mary Poovey. *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Pp. 419.

Although it considers questions of education only in passing, Mary Poovey's intricate *History of the Modern Fact* will provide historians of education with a good grounding in recent conceptual and methodological developments in the human sciences. The book examines an "epistemological unit": the modern fact. Her study of epistemological units is intended to reveal the foundations of knowledge production practices. Poovey locates her book in the overlapping fields of the prehistory of the social sciences, intellectual history, and historical epistemology. She wishes to avoid a linear account of the modern fact, for she claims that such accounts retrospectively recodify their objects of investigation and thereby dismiss much of the context in which developments take place.

Poovey's reading of the texts that sustain her intellectual history is guided by a double concern. First, she wishes to break with the tactics of unmasking and denunciation that characterize much would-be critical history writing. Such tactics consist in demonstrating, in the wisdom of hindsight, that past authors employed what we know to be oppressive or exploitative concepts. Poovey argues, on the contrary, that authors and texts can't be sexist or racist, for instance, before the construction of the categories of sexism and racism.

By way of taking up the implications of this stance, Poovey seeks to locate authors and texts in intellectual and cultural "configurations," where what can be thought and known, what demands enunciation and what is assumed, and what forms and styles of enunciation are available, all have characteristic limits. Configurations, or "ensembles" are fields rich in possibility. Against linear readings of intellectual history, Poovey



insists that there are always paths not taken in one ensemble that may reappear in another. Furthermore, Poovey seeks to maintain a notion of continuity that stretches across intellectual discontinuity by suggesting that subsequent readings of texts turn what were initially statements into questions. The modern fact is characterized by an internal tension: on the one hand, facts are isolated, observable particulars that are significant in their own right. On the other hand, facts are evidence. They acquire significance in relation to some overarching theoretical schema. Modernist social and political thought has been characterized by a variety of attempts to resolve this tension, either by elevating one of its dimensions over the other, or by seeking strategies of knowledge production that circumvent it. Poovey provides us with a genealogy of such attempts.

In broad outline, Poovey's narrative emphasizes England and locates the emergence of the modern fact in Baconian empiricism and in the double-entry bookkeeping of the 16th century. She traces the intellectual and political practices and devices of the 17th and 18th centuries that made it possible to bridge the gap between fact and theory without collapsing it. For instance, the authority of the absolutist state, the disinterested civility of gentlemen observers, and beliefs in divine providence and in universal human subjectivity were invoked at different moments to provide the framework of an overarching system that enabled the isolated particular to signify in its own right. Poovey then shows that the modern fact encountered its limits in Hume's scepticism, which brought the problem of induction to the fore. Having rigorously rejected *a priori* assumptions about systematic knowledge, Hume concluded that the only grounds one can have for assuming that future observations of particulars will continue to resemble past observations is some species of belief.

Belief is at the heart of systematic knowledge, and thus the internal tension that is constitutive of the modern fact was faced with implosion. Although Hume himself turned to other modes of writing, such as the essay, as a support for claims to knowledge, Poovey argues that Smith, McCulloch and Malthus adopted different tactics. Smith invented a set of conceptual abstractions, such as the "market system," to provide an orderly framework for the making of observations. In his thought, in other words, the tension between theory and observation was resolved by moving towards the theoretical pole. McCulloch (Dickens's Mr. M'Choakumchild in *Hard Times*) argued for a professional solution to the problem of induction: "statistics" would be the province of the collection of neutral facts; political economy, conducted by experts, would be the province of general significance. And, importantly for the

readers of this journal, education would operate as a sort of alchemy, training people to act in keeping with their interests as revealed by political economy, and thereby bringing statistical observation into line with the dictates of theory. In Malthus's work the use of numbers also served to widen the gap between observation and belief. First, Malthus sought to claim that because numerical regularities could be observed in practice, they were not the result of deduction. Second, because regularities were numerical, they were not the result of interest: numbers were held to be transparent.

Finally, according to Poovey, it was with William Herschel and J.S. Mill that English social thought took the problem of induction firmly on board; moved away from the ambition of a transparent replication of observable reality in thought; and sought instead to model the world hypothetically. For Mill, social science would be exact, because it would deal with large-scale tendencies (as revealed by the law of large numbers). It would deal with the problem of induction by subordinating the isolated particular to the general tendency. With this sort of resolution, Poovey suggests, we depart from the modern fact towards some variant of a postmodern fact, whose referent is not necessarily an empirical entity at all.

The development of the modern fact has been closely connected to practices of numerical representation and Poovey's book participates in the growing interest of historians in numeracy. Assigning numbers to isolated particulars has been one of the ways in which they have been inserted into more general systems of knowledge, especially in the sciences of wealth and society. Part of Poovey's project is to chart the practices whereby numerical representation came to be seen as transparent and authoritative, and there are two notable analytic thrusts of the work in this regard. First, Poovey extends the productive distinction between precision and accuracy that has been established in science and technology studies. The concepts have commonly been equated, but the distinction makes it possible to show the ways in which precision, as a characteristic of measurement practice, has encouraged the belief that some representations are accurate—that they faithfully capture reality in thought. Poovey carries her position by pointing to the "constitutive fictions," such as "goodwill," which seem to make books of account balance, but any observer of standardized educational testing will appreciate that claims about the "accuracy effect" of precision measurement are not limited to commerce. Furthermore, Poovey is concerned with styles of argumentation, especially written styles, for she claims that *how* arguments are made is constitutive of them. The authority of numbers is

closely connected to stylistic conventions that submerge the work necessary to make diverse and variable objects seem to be equivalent.

Space precludes a discussion of the many other dimensions of this work that readers are likely to find interesting. Poovey's earlier book, *Making a Social Body*, suffered from its origins as a collection of essays and *Modern Fact* shares the same difficulty, although to a lesser extent. There are a number of repetitive sections that testify to their origins as essays and the last chapter, one of the first to be written, does not satisfy as a conclusion. The most serious limitation of the work in my view, however, is methodological. Cultural ensembles or configurations of knowledge contain a variety of genres and styles, works well known and works ignored, paths followed and paths not taken. It is reasonable to argue, as Poovey does, that the ensemble as a whole is relevant. Yet it is impossible practically to reconstruct everything written and debated in philosophy and literature, and so Poovey tends to gesture towards paths not taken, towards what is "not the modern fact." Such gestures certainly defeat linearity, but Poovey does not explain the logic of their selection. I am tempted to see an irony here: the texts Poovey discusses are isolated particulars that serve as evidence, but part of the system guiding her selection of them is not enunciated.

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