

Interview

Post-Poster-the-historian and other Historical Questions

Interview with Mark Poster conducted by Tama Leaver and Kate Riley

In September 2004, Professor Mark Poster of the University of California, Irvine, visited The University of Western Australia as resident Professor-at-Large in the Institute for Advanced Studies. Professor Poster is a member of the History Department, the Film Studies Program and the Critical Theory Emphasis at Irvine and during his time in Western Australia he kindly took time to answer a broad range of questions for Limina.

[Kate Riley:] *Your academic trajectory began with European intellectual history, but has thus far traversed the history of families, poststructuralism, postmodernity, film, media, cultural studies, the Internet and digital culture. Could you tell us a little about the intellectual journeys and underlying concerns which got you where you are today?*

[Mark Poster:] I was a student of European intellectual history, yet when I read a lot of the theorists that I wrote about as an intellectual historian, I became dissatisfied with the limitations of intellectual history. A lot of them, such as Foucault and Derrida, were doing intellectual history, but in a different way. For example, Foucault questioned the idea of tracing ideas from one thinker to the next. And I was also involved with a group of other people on the campus, in what was called the Critical Theory Institute, and they were mostly doing literary studies, and they were very influential on my shift from basically a concern with European intellectual history to a concern with what we called in the United States at the time Critical Theory. It was a mix of structuralism, phenomenology, Marxism, Frankfurt School, and so forth, so it was pretty broadly concerned. So, after writing *Existential Marxism in Postwar France*¹, which was published in '75, I took basically two directions: I was interested in exploring Foucault's work in terms of its utility for writing history and a new kind of cultural and intellectual history, so that resulted in one book, *Foucault, Marxism and History*²; and the other direction was history of the family. A lot of that was due to the kinds of political developments that were happening in the early seventies, such as the women's movement, the anti-authoritarianism of the anti-war movement, counter-culture, and a whole bunch of things were going on, and I had been interested in intellectual history as utopian thought and particularly Charles Fourier [1772-1837], who had very bizarre ideas about reorganising society, basically getting completely rid of the nuclear family and monogamous relationships. So, I taught family history, I taught psychohistory, and ended up writing *Critical Theory of the Family*³ as a result of that. My interest in things like poststructuralism was going on at the same time as my interest in the family, but they were somewhat separate, as you may have noticed. I didn't really attempt to do a Foucauldian analysis of the history of the family, and I didn't make those connections until I read his book *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, but by then the book on the family was pretty much done. I've continued working on and off on families since then, but more on attempting to relate poststructuralism to historical investigation. Then, I suppose, the big change was from really being concerned with poststructuralism – I wrote *Foucault, Marxism and History* and *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism*⁴ all along those lines – but the big change was an interest in media. That change happened quite accidentally; completely separate from my intellectual interests, I was also

an audiophile. Audiophiles are deeply engaged with information machines, not only amplifiers, turntables and speakers, but also even cables, currents in the line, to make sure the current's stable, and all kinds of listening to different tables or cartridges and so forth, rather than listening to music. I really love music, but I got interested in these information machines, audio machines, and then I began to see connections between these information machines and my interest in the role of language in culture that poststructuralism reckons. So, I began to think about that relationship and began outlining the project of *The Mode of Information*⁵, which represents a shift to media studies. After audio I also got interested in video and finally into computers, so the writing follows that kind of line. Cultural studies really couldn't be avoided, just as you couldn't avoid poststructuralism, and there were some of the people who were poststructuralists, like Michel de Certeau, who were also actually very close to British cultural studies in some of their writings, especially *The Practice of Everyday Life*⁶ for him. So, that's the trajectory in outline.

[Kate Riley:] *Your early work crossed disciplinary boundaries and brought theory to the study of history long before that combination was generally accepted. As a pioneer of interdisciplinarity what do you see as the key strengths and weaknesses of moving outside of recognised disciplinary bounds?*

[Mark Poster:] I actually became interested in theory by an influence outside rather than an internal development in my own thinking. The Dean of the Humanities School at the time was, in the seventies when I first came to Irvine, very interested in having each department in the School establish an introduction to theory at the graduate level and, in fact, he insisted on it. The English Department already had it, and he was from the English Department, and so I thought the idea was a great idea, and I, along with a couple of other people, developed a year-long History and Theory sequence, which because of the Dean's power we were able to institute in a generally reluctant History Department. Originally it was modelled on Barrington Moore's course in political science at Harvard that a friend of mine in the department participated in, but basically ended up being that the first quarter was on Marx and reading historians who'd worked with Marx, the second quarter was Foucault and historians who'd worked on Foucault, the third quarter was originally on Freud, but then became an optional course where students could choose between various different things each year, such as feminist theory, postcolonial theory, anthropology, various kinds of theoretical texts along with historical texts. And the aim was not so much to do pure theory, but to engage historians at the research level in their projects with theoretical questions in terms of posing their project statement. And so we've done that in the history department since the mid-seventies, for thirty years now, and other people have adopted that. So, when you think that theory is very important to say, history, you are immediately inserting something into the discipline of history that didn't develop within it, so you're already engaged in interdisciplinary work. It seems to me that the humanities were opened up to interdisciplinary work initially by the importation of continental theory – French and German theory – and the power of these ideas was one thing, but the questions they were asking about culture and the subject itself, the individual in the West, it seems to me were questions that could not be raised from within each discipline. So, I think one trajectory is when questions are being raised that don't fit easily within the discipline, it's important the discipline engage with something like interdisciplinary work. I think that has been the main advantage of interdisciplinary work: that it's able to confront and deal with and promote research in areas that don't work well in terms of the disciplines. The weaknesses of these kinds of programmes are, of course, that the disciplines are relatively well articulated and complex in the way that they pose questions and there are fairly rigorous ways of evaluating work, and there are clear models for students to follow and so forth, and that doesn't exist so much in the more fluid area of interdisciplinary work. So, it seems to me that combining traditional disciplines with interdisciplinary projects is probably the best way. The humanities have been confronted by one problem after another; if you take each discipline, philosophy was confronted by critical theory, which they had a very hard time dealing with; history was confronted by poststructuralism, initially by social history which was not something being done in the discipline of history, now by cultural history; literature has been confronted by cultural studies, looking at more popular texts than in the canon. The literature departments were able to

deal with critical theory pretty well, but they are having a much harder time in the United States, in my experience, with cultural studies, but all of them are going to have to deal with the question of the digital, and the interest of students in non-traditional areas from film studies to media studies, which are slowly beginning to develop in the United States. The way these studies relate to each discipline is itself going to be a challenge.

[Tama Leaver:] In the early state of history and theory as a conjunction at Irvine, did you have trouble with people whose projects, say doctoral projects, encompassed that shifting of the boundaries? Was their work taken as seriously in other contexts?

[Mark Poster:] There was a continuum of students, some of them were really interested in theory, some of them never heard of theory and never read these works and it was really a stretch for them to even relate to the course. What I found was that over the years, for those students that had the most difficulty with it, many of them after a year or two would come to me and say, you know I didn't get anything out of the course when I took it, but now that I've advanced in my research and writing, I'm beginning to see what value it had. So, that was one side of it, the other side was it was a risk for these students because in the seventies and even into the eighties the discipline was very hostile to theory, and students who were upfront with their interest in theory could be disadvantaged in the job market. Most of my students originally came interested in European intellectual history or in theory, but I had one student who did a very complicated dissertation on Georges Bataille in the nineties, and yet he got a job at a fairly traditional, small history department in Illinois.

[Kate Riley:] In your 1978 Critical Theory of the Family you conclude with the basis for a theory of 'the family' which would usually be read as a structural idea, whereas your later work finds utility in both poststructuralism and postmodernism. Given this shifting trajectory, do you approach a specific theory or body of theory as providing a framework or a set of tools divisible from an overarching theory? Moreover, what drives that decision?

[Mark Poster:] I tried very hard in the seventies to have an impact on the discipline of history alone. And I tried very hard not to bring in any ideas that would be seen as weird by historians. So I tried to use a kind of Weberian model about concepts that was relatively easy for historians to adjust to. After all, the idea of modernisation comes out of that and historians were used to that sort of thing. So I didn't really try to look at the possibilities of a poststructuralist history of the family very seriously. I was more engaged with Marx, with Freud, and with Weber at the time; thinkers had more legitimacy for historians. I don't believe in an overarching theory that would be useful for all sorts of historical writing. I believe in Foucault's notion of a polyhedron of intelligibility, that there is a heterogeneous field of phenomena, that there is a heterogeneous field of approaches to these phenomena; it's not the same as liberal pluralism, but I think that this kind of multiplicity is healthy, especially for new areas that are developed.

[Kate Riley:] In your September 2004 seminar discussion with the Beyond the Family Project at The University of Western Australia, you mentioned your interest in children's experience of media and how that affects their emerging subjectivity. Following from this, do you envisage a re-mediated family wherein the family is substantially changed by media, and if so how would you begin to account for or address these new formulations of family?

[Mark Poster:] Yes, I call this the segmented family, in terms of the fact that each member of the family, even one-year-olds now, have sources of cultural objects and inputs that are from outside the family. In the paper that I wrote, I compare that to the bourgeois family of the nineteenth century, the Freudian context, and it's amazing the extent to which parents patrolled every image that was on the walls, as well as every book that the child had available to them. If you compare that to the situation where the kid knows more about the computer than the parents do, it's a totally different situation.

[Tama Leaver:] *In your article 'History in the Digital Domain' you make the point that a transcript of an online chat session differs substantially from the experience of chat as a lived moment (with often four or more disparate conversations and so forth). I was interested, in that context, to ask, does the media-savvy historian have a responsibility to try and facilitate the archiving of interactivity as it is appearing via the internet (and disappearing just as quickly)?*

[Mark Poster:] That's a really tough problem. I think the historian or the would-be scholar has to experience it and get a sense of it, and then write about it, and there really is no way of archiving interactivity. For example, if you had a description of the American Revolution or the French Revolution of 1789 or the Russian Revolution of 1917, it wouldn't be the same as actually being there. I think historians very often have to work with, kind of making a movie in their head, in order to expand the archive in some way. I don't think it's that unusual, but you do have to experience it to get a sense of how the flow of the chat goes, and so on. You couldn't very easily get that sense of the flow very well from an archive. There are projects underway to archive the entire internet. However, games also, and anything that has that element of interactivity would be tough to archive.

[Tama Leaver:] *Pedagogically, the internet is a fantastic medium inasmuch as it makes more and more information far more accessible, including archives, but at the same time it is said by many critics to lead directly to a cut'n'paste culture which in more established terms is presented as facilitating plagiarism of previously unimagined levels. In your experience of digital media, how are these tensions played out?*

[Mark Poster:] The general way I think this is approached is the difference between a linear culture and an associative culture, or between books and hypertext. This is a real tough one for academics in their practice of teaching. I know this guy Randy Bass at Georgetown who teaches in the English Department, but who also teaches web-based stuff quite a bit, and he talks about the difficulty of grading, how you grade, if grading is geared to the linear discursive mode, how do you grade associative pages, where students pick things from different places and juxtapose and insert them. This is going to be a problem for us that's not going to go away. What's called plagiarism is based upon the notion of the original discursive author, and cut'n'paste culture is all plagiarism you could say, so this is a problem we're having to face.

[Tama Leaver:] *One of the responses to plagiarism in the face of online resources is to turn to massive archives of student essays such as TurnItIn.Com, against which new work is compared and plagiarism detected. Do you respond favourably to that framework? (The reason I ask is that these systems seem to be addressing the symptom, while the problem is students not having a strong ethical or political understanding of why plagiarism is a bad thing.)*

[Mark Poster:] I agree with you. I don't think it's useful. What you have to impress upon a student is that the education is theirs, not the teacher's, and if they want to cheat, they're the only ones losing by it. It doesn't cost me anything to write an A instead of a C, but I would have students do projects on the web and they have to confront the issue not so much of information overload but the problem of a non-linear library, whereas you can go to a library and go through in a linear hierarchical way to find your area of interest, but when you're on the web doing searches, it's very different from that. And then pulling pieces together out of that is very different: there are problems of evaluation, but that's nothing compared to the problem of what to put where and how to make the linkages in your own web-based text. I think that the whole idea of trying to counter the new resources of plagiarism with yet another computer program that's bigger and better is futile, completely futile, just as trying to censor a certain webpage in the context of the decentralised 'net is futile, because of mirrors and so on. It's also completely to be expected that the first gestures will be repeating things out of an earlier context that don't really take into account the full dimensions of what we're dealing with.

[Tama Leaver:] *While 'new media' seems to be the umbrella term for most forms of digital media and material accessed via the Internet, do you think that these media are so different as to justify being labelled 'new' or*

does the conjunction 'new media' speak of a distinct lack of historical perspective in 'new media' writing and related criticism?

[Mark Poster:] I think that 'new' is justified, just as television was new in the 1950s, and film was new in the 1920s, or radio, or whatever, but it's much more than that. The problem is deciding what is new, the temporally new; the iPod is two years old, so that's new in a temporal sense, but what's different about the iPod from broadcast radio or CB radio or something like that? So media specificity is very important and comparison of media is very important. Finding surprising connections between different media is also part of the problem of the historical perspective. There are lots of things to be wary of, and one of them is to introduce a historical perspective that simply attacks the problem at a certain level where everything appears to be the same. The other end is I think less of a problem, where everything seems so fine-grained as to be completely different. So there are often, for example, just reading Lessig, who talks about the relationship between copyright and property, between airplanes and file-sharing. In his book *Free Culture*⁷ he talks about the fact that there used to be a law that you owned everything on your land, all the way up through the sky, and the issue came up because when a plane flew over a farm, chickens would go nuts, and would kill themselves, they were so frightened, so the farmer sued the airline, and the law told him that he owned the land and the air, all the way up there (of course here [in Australia] the Queen owns everything, but we will forget about that one). So the idea was that property laws were obviously ridiculous in the context of the innovation of domestic air flight. So, similarly, the current copyright laws are ridiculous in view of internet transmissions such as file-copying.

[Tama Leaver:] I noticed on one of your syllabi that you use Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media*⁸ which a number of people find problematic because it seems to translate new media backward primarily into film, and I was wondering how you felt about that?

[Mark Poster:] I think he's very ambivalent in that book about new media being really new, or new media really playing out certain technical aspects of film; that's one thing. I think that people need to explore connections between things like film and new media, television and new media, print and new media. I think it's worth doing those kinds of projects, to see how they're alike, but one also has to do the opposite to see how they're different. It's funny that I think the overall thrust of the book is to define the difference, but through his own training in visual studies and his own experience with film, he fell into the trap of trying to explain all of new media in the context of film in parts of the book. And sometimes errors are very instructive. Especially in graduate work, it's good to read stuff that has a problem in it and see that even scholars who are published have problems.

[Kate Riley:] As a historian who has moved beyond history's recognised disciplinary boundaries, where do you firstly think history as a discipline is heading in the next decade and secondly how would you like to see it change and continue?

[Mark Poster:] Where it's heading I think is pretty clear; it was defined in the nineties – I could be wrong, I haven't read massively the *American Historical Review* or such journals recently – but it seems that there are two directions that it's going in now over the past decade, and historians don't change all that rapidly: one direction is toward world history, or what I would call global history; and the other is toward cultural history. And, I think they're screwing up both of them, for different reasons in different ways. In *Cultural History and Postmodernity*⁹ I tried to define how they were screwing up cultural history; again, it makes sense that these were basically social historians trying to do something called cultural history. Historians are good at picking up new terms, historians use Foucault's term 'discourse' quite a bit without any sense of it, and very inappropriately very often. I think they use 'culture' in ways that doesn't really grapple with the issues that are specific to cultural as opposed to social history, for example, not that they're completely unrelated. The other phenomenon that I'm interested in is that I hope historians will start to take seriously media and address issues of media history and in general I would say, I hope that historians begin to confront the issue that the discipline is organised by the time-place fields and that's becoming increasingly

inappropriate given the globalisation that's taking place. It's bad enough before 1950, say, but now it's becoming very unproductive to organise things by nation-states, when nation-states are clearly at risk and need to be looked at from a perspective that enables you to get at them, rather than be within them completely. So, I hope that there's a more problem-oriented approach in history rather than this time-place stuff.

[Tama Leaver:] *Most of your work is centred around an idea of the subject, and that seems to be your underlying concern in whichever context. However, in your new work, in the way you talk about information machines, it seems quite possible to read a certain sense of agency into them, and I am wondering how you dealt with that tension?*

[Mark Poster:] One of the problems in dealing with media is the problem that [Marshall] McLuhan faced right away, and that's the problem of being accused of technological determinism. I think that the whole issue of technological determinism emerges out of the cultural value of, and figure of, the agent. The way the agent is configured is in terms of the subject/object dichotomy, and there is a clear difference between a subject and an object, and machines are clearly objects. So any kind of agency that is projected into machines is clearly violating the freedom of the subject. I think that the whole issue of agency has to be re-thought, and that's one of the things that I'm interested in by looking at agency in games and agency in other aspects, to see the relationship, the coupling of humans and machines, rather than to see it as an opposition, as a binary of humans and machines, as many of the films, such as *Terminator3: Rise of the Machines*¹⁰, have been portraying them as a threat. There's a real anxiety in the culture which is based on the subject/object opposition, to grapple with the assemblages of humans and machines, where something like agency does exist within machines. So, I think redefining agency outside of the Cartesian subject, the modernist subject, is an important intellectual problem.

[Tama Leaver:] *In Cultural History and Postmodernity you end your introduction with a subsection entitled 'The Aim of the Book, or How I would like to be Read'. Following that theme, for future historians of all disciplinary origins, how would you like 'Mark Poster' to be read?*

[Mark Poster:] I'll give you an example, an incident: there was a woman from Curtin [University] who attended one of the lectures [given in Perth], and she told me she had emailed me months ago and I had generously sent her a recent chapter based on what she said she was interested in, and that she included a very harsh criticism of this chapter in her dissertation, and she wanted to let me know that. I think that I would like to be read without piety – Foucault also talked about that – just used as a tool, bits and parts in different ways that are useful to people. That's how I'd like to be read.

Notes

¹*Existential Marxism in Postwar France*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975.

²Foucault, *Marxism and History: mode of production versus mode of information*, Basil Blackwell, New York, 1984.

³*Critical Theory of the Family*, Pluto Press, London, 1978.

⁴*Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: in search of a context*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1989.

⁵*The Mode of Information: poststructuralism and social context*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.

⁶Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984.

⁷Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: how big media uses technology and the law to lock down culture and control creativity*, Penguin Press, New York, 2004.

⁸Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press, London & Cambridge, Mass., 2001.

⁹*Cultural History and Postmodernity: disciplinary readings and challenges*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997.

¹⁰*Terminator3: Rise of the Machines*, (dir. J. Mostow, prod. M. Borman et al.), USA, 2003.