

New Times, New Subjects

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"What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?"

Foucault, *What is Enlightenment?*

One might think it is easy to identify "what difference today introduces with respect to yesterday", but actually it is very difficult; because so much seems to be the same. Reading several of these texts, one might conclude that nothing much has changed since WWII: lies, propaganda, and racism abound. And yet, all the texts chosen here try in some way to identify that inflection of difference that allows us to hypothesise "new times". Or, at the very least, they give us a way to critically investigate whatever newness there might be in the times we live in.

I want to focus on Stuart Hall's "The Meaning of New Times" (1988), Foucault's lecture from the *Society Must Be Defended* series (1976), and Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008/2017). Following the lead of that book title, and in happy memory of one of our earlier readings, I will also make reference to Virginia Woolf's last novel *The Years* (1937).

Stuart Hall sets up his discussion of "new times" by making the very modest claim that even if "we" cannot answer the questions about the newness of the times we live in, at least asking these questions will stimulate us ("the left") to "open a debate about how society is changing and to offer new descriptions and analyses of the social conditions it seeks to transcend and transform" (p.248).

One of the features of these social conditions that Hall identifies is the change in forms of subjectivity, identity, and identification.

Could there be new times without new subjects? Could the world be transformed while its subjects stay exactly the same? Have the forces remaking the modern world left the subjects of that process untouched? Is change possible while we remain untransformed? (p. 264)

Clearly, the answer is "No." If we are witnessing what Hall calls "the march of capital simultaneously across the globe and through the Maginot Lines of our subjectivities" (p.254), then we would have to agree with Foucault that "our general theme" should be "the manufacture of subjects rather than the genesis of the sovereign" (p.46).

Our question then becomes, how are our modes of subjectivity being transformed? This is a subset, or a modulation, of the question Foucault attributed to Kant: "what difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?"

Many of the texts in our list address aspects of this question, whether directly or tangentially. Foucault's lecture from January 21, 1976 along with Stuart Hall's article on racism from 1978, both insist that racism, for example, is not an ahistorical constant in human societies. Foucault traces the emergence of a discourse of state racism from the seventeenth century, until:

It is no longer: "We have to defend ourselves against society," but "We have to defend society against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the subrace, the counter race that we are, despite ourselves, bringing into existence"... This is the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization. This year, I would like to look a little at the history of this discourse of race struggle and war from the seventeenth century to the emergence of State racism in the early nineteenth century. (p.61-2)

While for Hall, there is a profound difference between British racism of the colonial period, and that of post-WWII Britain. By the 1970's:

It is a racism "at home," not abroad; it is the racism, not of a dominant but of a declining social formation... Racism is always historically specific in this way, whatever common features it may appear to share with other similar social phenomena. (p.146)

But this still leaves unanswered the question about changes in subjectivity. How exactly would these shifts in discourses about race correspond to, arise from, or give rise to shifts in modes of subjectivity?

Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008/2017) provides another way of asking this question. Ernaux is interested in the intersection between personal experience and History and she generates a form of memoir or autobiography that sits between these two levels: what she calls "autosociobiography:"

In a 2011 interview with *Le Monde*, Ernaux explained the category, saying that "the only writing that seemed fair to me was that which refused fiction altogether, which I later called *autosociobiographie* because I nearly always placed myself at the meeting of self and sociohistorical reality."

[Gili Ostfield, <https://www.bookforum.com/culture/-19183>]

This is effected, in *The Years*, through the rejection of the pronoun “I,” usually in favour of “we” and “she;” and also through the unsentimental focus on social and historical context over inner feeling. The context evinced is made up not only of the political events of the day, but also the things that filled those days, the consumer goods, the films and books, the after-dinner conversations, and most importantly the shifts in language that point to deeper changes in subjectivity and affect. As Edmund White points out in his review of the book:

Feelings themselves seem to go in and out of fashion. People now find the words “honor” and “patriotism” absurd. Other, newer emotions are unnameable: “There was no specific word for the feeling one had of simultaneous stagnation and mutation.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/19/books/review/the-years-annie-ernaux-autobiography.html>

When it comes to identifying shifts in subjectivity that are occurring in the present or very recent past, we run the risk of being the apocryphal frog in slowly heating water: we don't notice what's happening around us. One of the things that Ernaux's book gives us is a measure of those shifts.

In this regard, I see a strong connection with Virginia Woolf's book of the same name, *The Years* (1937). This, Woolf's last novel, follows the members of the Pargiter family over three generations from 1880 to the 1930's. In a letter to a friend, Woolf explains her intention:

What I meant I think was to give a picture of society, not private life; exhibit the effect of ceremonies; Keep one toe on the ground by means of dates, facts; envelop the whole in a changing temporal atmosphere; suggesting that there is no break, but a continuous development, possibly a recurrence of some pattern.

[cited in <https://bloom-site.com/2018/09/18/the-years-by-annie-ernaux-memoir-of-a-generation/>]

At the level of “things,” the changes are unmistakable. In one striking image, one of the characters, Martin Pargiter, is walking in London in early 1914:

Then he looked at a car. It was odd how soon one got used to cars without horses. They used to look ridiculous. (p.172)

But, below this change in the world of things, there is also for Woolf the issue of the “I”. Martin asks himself a little later in the same walk, “What would the world be, he said to himself ... without ‘I’ in it?” (p.177). And Peggy, one of the Pargiter cousins, listening to a young man talking about himself at a party, reflects: “She had heard it all before. I, I, I — he went on. It

was like a vulture's beak pecking, or a vacuum-cleaner sucking, or a telephone bell ringing. I, I, I" (p.264). Finally, the elderly Eleanor in 1932, is puzzled when people ask her about her life: "My life ... A long strip of life lay behind her... Millions of things came back to her ... But how did they compose what people called a life? ... Perhaps there's 'I' at the middle of it, she thought; a knot; a centre..." (267-8).

Ernaux's solution to this puzzle is not to write "a work of remembrance in the usual sense, aimed at putting a life into story, creating an explanation of self." Instead, "She will go within herself only to retrieve the world, the memory and imagination of its bygone days, grasp the changes in ideas, beliefs, and sensibility, the transformation of people and the subject that she has seen" (p.224).

The task of trying to grasp historical changes in sensibility, in people, and in 'the subject' is one important part of the work Hall envisages as emerging from the question of new times. It is a task that doesn't have to be left to critical theory alone, but is also taken up in works of literature.