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In this captivating book, Mary Poovey, a professor of English and Director of the Institute for the History of the Production of Knowledge at New York University, retraces the history of an "epistemological unit." The epistemological unit in question here is not a clearly defined concepts, nor even a pattern of ideas, but the prism through which an entire epistemological system is reflect--in this case, the modern dichotomy between "facts" and "interpretations." What could be the history of the contestable and highly contested notion of "fact"? What are the most salient aspects of the development of a certain understanding of factual evidence as being embodied in numbers (e.g., statistics)?

These are obviously important questions that Mary Poovey's book helps to elucidate. At the same time, though, the inevitable ambiguity of the subject matter, its seemingly infinite variability, and the controversies it evokes, make it a difficult enterprise. After all, the history of the factual touches upon almost everything that is relevant to the history of philosophy and the history of the natural and social sciences. Indeed, the author touches upon an amazing range of subjects, from the history of accounting to moral philosophy and political economy, but also including literature, psychology, physics, and a few others! That she accomplishes such an intellectual feat in a convincing manner and with a prodigious display of erudition is enough to qualify this book as a major

achievement. However, the the topic is so immense that it is bound to leave many readers--including this one--occasionally wondering whether the direction in which the text invites them to go is indeed the most plausible or the most convincing. The author is the first one to admit that this is *a* history of the modern fact, not *the* history; she often takes time to explore pathways that branched off in other directions than those she identified as dominant.

Poovey's inquiry begins in the sixteenth century, in England. (Indeed the whole book is focused on events that occurred in Britain and her discussion is almost entirely limited to British writers, from Bacon to Mill.) She sees in the early development of double-entry bookkeeping the earliest example of the modern paradox according to which numbers are treated as an objective description of a reality existing independently of any pre-conceived understanding of its social meaning--a pure fact, in other words--while, at the same time, providing evidence in support of a theoretical account of the structure of that reality. In the case of double-entry bookkeeping, the credit and debit entries, because of their numerical accuracy, signify that merchants who keep such records are wise, prudent and honest subjects. This was crucial, in an aristocratic age when commerce was often treated with disdain. But the use of numbers was also an integral element of a shift from Ciceronian rhetoric to a more sober style (at that time rhetoric had not yet become synonymous with a lack of scientific rigor). This style was appropriate for the definition of new abstractions that turn out to be what the debits and credits actually measure, i.e., not pure facts, after all.

Thus there are two dimension to this thesis. Not only do apparently isolated facts find their place within a theory, but theoretical frameworks are constructed in ways that reflect normative intents; yet, especially as we move into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they are often presented as being merely logical and ex-

planatory. The author does an excellent job of bringing out that ambiguity but she does it very subtly. That is perhaps because she seeks to avoid the postmodernist trap of "unmasking" hidden agendas (p. 21). And she is all the more justified in being careful in that respect because the authors that she discusses (see below) were themselves more or less dimly aware of this ambiguity and struggled with it in their own ways. Hume, for one, posed that problem in an insightful, indeed provocative way by calling into question the validity of generalizations based on induction and by underlining the importance of beliefs in the creation of knowledge. For that reason, he occupies a central place in this book.

Having thus stated her case, Poovey then critically examines how it unfolds though an impressive array of texts that she arranges in a chronological order. These include: the writings of the advocates of mercantilism (Gerald de Malynes, Edward Misselden, Thomas Mun) who, in their opposition to the defenders of political sovereignty, first articulated the notion that the economic sphere ought to be separate from politics; the conflicting views of Hobbes and Robert Boyle on the merits of mathematical deductions and experimental methods; William Petty's "political arithmetic," a project that was ahead of its times; Hume's famous analysis of the problem of induction, i.e., the imperfect coherence and unstable relationship between empirical observations and the theoretical constructions upon which they rest; the pioneering efforts of Adam Smith, and the other contributors to what we now refer to as the Scottish Enlightenment, who articulated the central concepts and methodological principles of the new sciences of wealth and society; Malthus' role in recasting political economy as what his contemporaries came to see as "the dismal science"; J.R. McCulloch's defense of what arguably became until very recently the accepted way of dealing with the problem of induction, namely, to entrust the collection of statistical data and their interpretation to professional experts; and, finally,

J.S. Mill's reflections on the specificity of the methodological issues raised by the social sciences.

This list leaves out quite a few other writers (e.g., Daniel Defoe) on whose works Poovey comments more or less briefly. Along the way, as I mentioned already, Poovey also makes some detours. In particular, she devotes a third of a chapter to Samuel Johnson's reassessment of his universalistic convictions in his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*.

Although chronological, Poovey's exploration is somewhat circuitous. The archetypical modern fact is quantitative. This certainly is true of what early nineteenth century political economists were trying to achieve. Since then indeed, quantitative data have become even more central to the models designed by economists. But although Poovey's story begins and ends with numbers, there is a long interlude throughout most of the eighteenth century when they were almost incidental to the development of the modern fact. The Scottish philosophers were not deterred by the relative absence or inadequacy of data from their goal of following the experimental method in reformulating moral philosophy. They resorted instead to the practice of "conjectural history" (e.g., Adam Ferguson's four-stage history of the progression of the "human mind"). On second thought, however, the progression Poovey outlines is quite logical--too neat and too logical perhaps. First came numbers, then theories, and, in the early nineteenth century, the two strands came together.

In the concluding chapter, Poovey suggests that none of the solutions proposed to the problem of induction have proven to be satisfactory. Reconciling the two epistemological functions that numbers perform, as "objective" measurements and as evidence of the validity of a theory remains as difficult as ever. In a few paragraphs that stand in sharp contrast with the careful and balanced style she displayed in the rest of the book,

she implies that the time has come to put this problem behind us. Postmodern authors offer a radical solution that she seems to endorse: ignore claims supposedly based on factual evidence, and accept the view that "the systems of knowledge humans create constitute the only source of meaning" (p. 327).

This conclusion is disappointing, not because positivistic assertions about the indubitability of factual evidence could ever be rescued from the relentless critiques to which they have been subjected for most of this century, but because it is equally clear that the postmodern theories that prevail in English departments in America today do not represent the final outcome of this process. Indeed, outside of that intellectual microcosm, postmodern literary criticism has very little appeal. (This is true even of current thinking among social scientists and a growing number of philosophers in France.) Moreover, the paradox of postmodern criticism is that it derives its originality and ultimately its significance from the classically modern beliefs it seeks to undermine. If "the modern fact" was swept away once and for all by the postmodern *Zeitgeist*, postmodern criticism would become what it denounces, i.e., a hegemonic epistemology. Fortunately, this is not the case. But Mary Poovey has demonstrated in this book that postmodernist insights remain an invaluable source of pertinent questions. Except for her conclusion, her book brilliantly illustrates the heuristic value of contemporary skepticism about foundational principles and the need to attend very carefully to the epistemological differences that distinguish late modern convictions from early modern ones. But if the modern fact emerges out of this re-examination as an even more enigmatic idea, it is an enigma that continues to be as puzzling and fascinating as ever.

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