

From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of  
Historiographic Turns

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IN THE FIELD OF HISTORY, we are now witnessing the untimely return of elements of the “doctrinal realism” that Hayden White identified with the legacy of Leopold von Ranke: documentary evidence, descriptive particularism, and “explanation by narration” in the service of a reconstructive history of “what actually happened.”<sup>1</sup> Most striking about this development is that a return to descriptive realism and archival objectivism has actually *followed* what were supposed to be the epistemological breaks initiated by the so-called linguistic and cultural turns in historiography. Given that academic history in the United States has always been built upon a realist foundation and that empiricism is entrenched as the disciplinary default, a professional backlash against the theoretical challenges associated with them is not surprising.<sup>2</sup> But insofar as conventional historical practices were indeed challenged by them, we might ask if there exists a connection between history’s current retrenchment and the turns themselves. Has the discourse of discrete and completed turns functioned to foreclose certain kinds of questions from being posed or debates from taking place? The real historical significance of the linguistic and cultural turns may thus lie less in specific instances of historiographic innovation to which they are supposed to refer than in their persistent and pernicious afterlives.<sup>3</sup>

In retrospect, we can see that the analytic openings that were created by the linguistic and cultural turns have been foreclosed through a process of domestication whereby new optics were transformed into routine research topics that reaffirmed traditional historiographic assumptions. Even some proponents of these turns con-

For reading earlier versions of this essay, I am grateful to Herman Bennett, John Collins, Fernando Coronil, Laurent Dubois, Durba Ghosh, Rachel Lindheim, Judith Surkis, and the graduate students in the CUNY Production of History workshop.

<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 163–190.

<sup>2</sup> Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*, rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn., 1984); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988); Donald R. Kelley, *Frontiers of History: Historical Inquiry in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 2006); Martin Bunzl, *Real History: Reflections on Historical Practice* (London, 1997). Even the new social history, of course, sought to establish objective historiography on an even firmer realist, because positivist, foundation. See François Furet, “From Narrative History to Problem-Oriented History,” in Furet, *In the Workshop of History* (Chicago, 1984), 54–67.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the story that Kristin Ross tells about how 68ers in France later disavowed, by rewriting, their past and those events. Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago, 2002).

tributed to such foreclosure effects through discourses about completed turns, a new methodological consensus, and professional reconciliation. Moreover, because the linguistic turn conflated positivist social history with structural analysis more generally, and because it tended to restrict “theory” to poststructuralism, its advocates often marginalized history informed by critical *social* theory. Against these developments, critical historians should reclaim both the linguistic turn’s demand that historians confront fundamental epistemological questions self-reflexively and Marxism’s longstanding concern with systemic, long-term, and macrosocial analysis.

This is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of the state of history today. Most of the examples are drawn from my own field of French history. The aim is not to indict individuals but to draw attention to embedded assumptions and tendencies within history as a professional space and a disciplinary formation that encourages certain habits and choices among its practitioners. The fact that counterexamples of innovative and insightful work can be invoked for any of those tendencies does not mean that such tendencies do not exist. Rather than defend or condemn a specific historiographic turn, the task is to explore the intellectual and institutional work that the idiom and narrative of “turns” often performs.

A NUMBER OF HISTORIANS WHO participated in the linguistic and cultural “turns” have written about their experiences.<sup>4</sup> From their accounts emerges a familiar narrative of the historiographic turns that begins with the development in the 1960s of the “new social history,” which challenged a traditional historiography that sanctified official sources, political elites, short-term events, and descriptive narrative. This triumphant social history was then gradually challenged by a constellation of critics associated in different ways with what became known retrospectively as the linguistic turn. By the 1980s, social history was largely displaced institutionally by various strands of work collected under the rubric of cultural history.<sup>5</sup> During this period, debates across the disciplines unfolded over fundamental epistemological questions regarding the relationship between the world we confront, the categories with which we attempt to think that world, and the worldly forces in relation to which these categories emerged. Critics in numerous fields sought to counter the limitations of realism, positivism, and functionalism. Various linguistic turns, cultural turns, and

<sup>4</sup> The original panel was “Historiographic ‘Turns’ in Critical Perspective,” American Historical Association Annual Meeting, January 2010. Recent reflections on experiences of the turns include Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999); Dominick LaCapra, “Tropisms of Intellectual History,” *Rethinking History* 8, no. 4 (2004): 499–529; Gabrielle Spiegel, “Introduction,” in Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, new ed. (New York, 2005), 1–31; Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian,” 2008 AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 114, no. 1 (February 2009): 1–15; Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2005); William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005); and Joan W. Scott, “History-Writing as Critique,” in Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow, eds., *Manifestos for History* (New York, 2007), 19–38.

<sup>5</sup> See Eley, *A Crooked Line*; Sewell, *Logics of History*, 1–80; and Furet, “From Narrative History to Problem-Oriented History.” For the sake of this argument, I often lump together the linguistic and cultural turns, fully realizing that more space would be required to do justice to their many differences.

historical turns unfolded in different ways, at different rates, and with different implications across the human sciences.<sup>6</sup>

My own graduate education in the 1990s was shaped directly by innovative research that was associated with the linguistic turn in history, the historical turn in anthropology, the cultural turn in colonial studies, and the postcolonial turn in the humanities. Nevertheless, the talk of turns then circulating in the academy was confusing. This was partly a function of the time lag that attended the cross-disciplinary borrowing that fueled many of these turns.<sup>7</sup> Precisely when many historians were turning to Clifford Geertz's symbolic anthropology in order to elucidate deep mental structures underlying supposedly coherent cultural systems, many anthropologists were developing a radical critique of their discipline's holistic concept of culture. And just as many anthropologists were discovering Marc Bloch's and Lucien Febvre's *mentalités*, Fernand Braudel's historical structures, Eric Hobsbawm's primitive rebels, and E. P. Thompson's working-class communities, many historians had already rejected structural history, reclaimed "the event," challenged the conception of agency underlying resistance theory, or criticized the voluntarism and determinism underwriting the tendency to essentialize idealized communities. Moreover, a sector of cultural anthropology embraced archival research just when many historians associated with the linguistic and cultural turns questioned the possibility and desirability of conventional historical reconstruction. If the cultural turn in history and the historical turn in anthropology roughly coincided, each implicitly raised critical questions about the other.

Such competing tendencies also existed among historians who turned away from social history. At a certain general level, those who identified with the "turns" became increasingly mindful about the non-transparent relationship between thought and being and began to reorient historical research away from facts and explanation to meaning and interpretation. But "linguistic turn" and "cultural turn" were terms of convenience that often conflated incompatible intellectual currents. Insights about the constitutive power of language or the ways that discourses mediate sub-

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago, 1967); Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore, 1970); White, *Metahistory*; Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986); Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988); Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989); Margaret R. Somers, *Does Social Theory Need History? Reflections on Epistemological Encounters in the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1989); Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1992); Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner, eds., *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton, N.J., 1994); Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York, 1996); Terrence J. McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1996); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); George Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999).

<sup>7</sup> On the "contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous," see Reinhart Koselleck, "History, Histories, and Formal Time Structures," in Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York, 2004), 93–104, here 95, 99; Koselleck, "Neuzeit: Remarks on the Semantics of Modern Concepts of Movement," *ibid.*, 222–254, here 232, 239, 246; and Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories," *ibid.*, 255–275.

jectivity and shape social life led some historians to overturn the conventional notions of individuality, intentionality, agency, and causality upon which traditional historiography depended. But they led others to reaffirm these very concepts, often through histories of marginalized actors whose subjectivity was purportedly reconstructed and experience valorized.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, “linguistic turn” and “cultural turn” are ambiguous analytic categories that have often obscured and excluded much of what they sought to clarify or embrace. But the problem goes beyond semantics or the poor referential fit between the term “turn” and what it purported to describe or understand. What the talk of turns missed or meant is less important than what it did and does. The question we need to ask is whether the discourse and logic of “turns” helps or hinders us in the crucial task of writing critical history that is at once empirically grounded and theoretically self-reflexive.<sup>9</sup>

IF THE TROPE OF “TURNS” WAS often analytically incoherent, it was nevertheless historically intelligible. The diverse currents and interests assembled under their rubric were motivated by a shared desire to rethink the methods and assumptions of social history. Yet this set of potentially radical interventions seems to have left us a legacy of historiography that now often embraces uncritical aspects of narrative event history, empiricist social history, and depoliticized cultural history. Is there a relationship between this analytic regression and the very logic of the turns?

Recollections by our senior colleagues tend to invoke “the turn” as something they took or made in a coherent and decisive gesture that distinguished between unambiguous alternatives and that demarcated a before and an after.<sup>10</sup> William Sewell, with disarming honesty, confesses that “making the cultural turn was . . . an exciting but also profoundly troubling step for an adept of the new social history . . . taking this step amounted to a sort of conversion experience—a sudden and exhilarating reshaping of one’s intellectual and moral world.”<sup>11</sup> These quasi-mythic nar-

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the debates about discourse, experience, subjectivity, and agency in LaCapra and Kaplan, *Modern European Intellectual History*; John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” *American Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (October 1987): 879–907; Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988); Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 65, no. 1 (January 1990): 59–86; Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 773–797; Laura Lee Downs, “If ‘Woman’ Is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night? Identity Politics Meets the Postmodern Subject,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 2 (April 1993): 414–437; Joan W. Scott, “The Tip of the Volcano,” *ibid.*, 438–443; the dialogue among Sonya O. Rose, Kathleen Canning, Anna Clark, Mariana Valverde, and Marcia R. Sawyer published as Rose, “Gender History/Women’s History: Is Feminist Scholarship Losing Its Critical Edge?,” *Journal of Women’s History* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 89–128, here 115–120; Kathleen Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience,” *Signs* 19, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 368–404; Geoff Eley, “Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later,” in McDonald, *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, 193–243.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this essay, I use “self-reflexive” to refer to arguments that attempt to account for their own conditions of epistemological possibility; it does not refer to writing that is autobiographical or self-referential.

<sup>10</sup> See the contribution to this forum by Judith Surkis.

<sup>11</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., “The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History; or, Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian,” in Sewell, *Logics of History*, 22–80, here 42.

ratives implicitly invoke a process of collective effervescence. For Émile Durkheim, we might recall, such heightened ritual states signal ruptures with the everyday, when profane practices turn into sacred experience and create openings for revolutionary systemic change. Conversely, in Durkheim's account, this effervescent sociality simultaneously functions to reaffirm group solidarity and demarcate boundaries—precisely by obscuring rather than illuminating the underlying social forces that constitute these heightened experiences.<sup>12</sup> We might say, then, that however contentious they might have seemed, these effervescent turns ultimately functioned to integrate diverse historians within a more coherent professional community.

Because the talk of turns objectified “social history” as a singular package, the turn away from it was often wholesale. The positions associated with one generation of historians at a particular time and place thus came to stand for social history *as such*. Critics tended to equate social history, social science, social theory, and Marxism. They often conflated positivism, social determinism, vulgar materialism, and structural explanation.<sup>13</sup> Because any of these terms were seen to imply all the others, to challenge one often meant rejecting the whole package. This led many proponents of the linguistic and cultural turns who opposed the positivism of social history to turn away from supposedly outmoded social scientific frameworks that focused on social logics, enduring forms, and deep structures. Historians who accepted the critique of foundationalist metanarratives, realist epistemology, and empiricist methodology were often also led to discount the study of long-term and large-scale historical processes. In the name of contingency, particularity, and difference, structural analysis and societal explanation were increasingly discouraged.<sup>14</sup>

An understandable fear of reductionism led many anti-positivist historians then aligned with the turns to accept a reductive understanding of Marxism as a vulgar form of economic determinism and teleological historicism.<sup>15</sup> Whether sympathetic to or critical of the turns, historians during this period often came to associate critical theory exclusively with poststructuralism.<sup>16</sup> This despite the fact that dialectical

<sup>12</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York, 1965), 236–255.

<sup>13</sup> See Patrick Joyce and Catriona Kelly, “History and Post-Modernism,” *Past and Present*, no. 133 (November 1991): 204–213; Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); and Smith, review of Sewell, *Logics of History*, *H-France Review* 7, no. 91 (August 2007): 372–374.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: History, Culture, and Text,” in Hunt, *The New Cultural History*, 1–22; and Joyce and Kelly, “History and Post-Modernism.” On the inability of cultural history to address adequately issues of material and spatial inequality, see Barbara Weinstein, “Developing Inequality,” 2007 AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 113, no. 1 (February 2008): 1–18. This difficulty is exemplified in the *AHR* Roundtable that was inspired by that essay, “Historians and the Question of ‘Modernity,’” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 631–751.

<sup>15</sup> See François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1978); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984); Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990). For examples of historical studies that engage productively with Marxism on questions of culture and consciousness, see William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980); Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1991); and Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> The reduction of “theory” to poststructuralism and the bracketing of both social theory and Marxism are exemplified by the otherwise important journal *History and Theory*. See the essays collected in Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann, eds., *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings* (Oxford, 1998).



Marxism challenged any attempt to think contingency and systematicity apart from one another; it provided a framework for analyzing historically specific structures, forms, and logics that at the same time attended to contradictions, crises, and processes of transformation. From the Marxian perspective, the dominant schema of turns seemed to offer a false choice between either doing work that was anti-positivist and self-reflexive or doing work that was concerned with the deep structures and logics that characterize distinct social formations.<sup>17</sup>

Since the late 1990s, the discourse of decisive turns has been joined by what we might call an “after-turn” discourse. Both sets of stories figure the linguistic turn as punctual, past, and complete, as if the kinds of epistemological debates about producing history that were provoked by the turns could actually be resolved.<sup>18</sup> Since theory as such was often reduced to “poststructuralist linguistic turn,” the purported end of the linguistic turn also signaled to many that the need for theoretical debates among historians was obsolete. Historians, we were told, could now return to their proper historical task of reconstructing, narrating, and interpreting the past.<sup>19</sup> They could integrate the useful or unavoidable cultural and linguistic innovations or insights into a more nuanced and technically accomplished history that would be able to represent more fully the multiple dimensions of social life and historical experience.<sup>20</sup> Especially troubling has been a tendency among some former “turners” and their sympathizers to concur in consigning these turns to the past in order to invoke a new methodological synthesis. One effect of this after-turn discourse has been to reorient debate away from epistemological disputes about the production of historical knowledge in general, and toward particular empirical disagreements about topics among specialists.<sup>21</sup>

Somewhere between the making and the ending of turns, a disciplinary consensus emerged as certain elements of recent innovations were selectively domesticated and others forgotten. It is remarkable that even as professional history has turned away from many of the insights of these turns, there are few historians who would reject

<sup>17</sup> For important non-economistic readings of Marx, see Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge, 1968); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge, 1971); David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, new and updated ed. (New York, 2007); Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism* (London, 1987); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1993); and Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (New York, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> See Surkis, this forum.

<sup>19</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> See Joyce Appleby, “The Power of History,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (February 1998): 1–14; Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, “Introduction,” in Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 1–32, here 9–10, 25; Lynn Hunt, “Where Have All the Theories Gone?,” *Perspectives on History*, March 2002, 5; Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian”; Michael Roth, “Ebb Tide,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 1 (February 2007): 66–73; Spiegel, “Introduction”; William H. Sewell, Jr., “The Concept(s) of Culture,” in Sewell, *Logics of History*, 152–174; and Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 200–201.

<sup>21</sup> This is evident in a recent online forum in which Laura Lee Downs, Herrick Chapman, Olivier Wieviorka, and Richard Kuisel comment on Philip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton, N.J., 2010), *H-France Forum* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2011). The participants debate how it was that the former Vichy officials could have played such an important role in the creation of the postwar welfare society, but none of them discuss in structural terms either Fordist capitalism or statist planning as transnational phenomena that cannot be grasped in terms of the political interests or ideological dispositions of French bureaucrats in the 1930s and 1940s. A framework that focuses on phases of capitalism and forms of state would immediately recognize underlying links among the statist and welfarist projects advocated by interwar social democrats, wartime proponents of the National Revolution, and postwar technocrats.

the turns outright. On the contrary, the mainstream of the discipline claims to endorse certain aspects of the linguistic and cultural turns (usually in the form of methodological techniques or research topics). A critique of historical realism has thus been recuperated for a neo-realist project of historical reconstruction that now promises to do a better job of getting things right by attending to multiple dimensions of social experience at the same time. The aim of traditional history, which Dominick LaCapra has incisively referred to as “the translation of archives into narratives,” resumes its privileged position.<sup>22</sup> Joan Scott describes how historians’ “resistance [to theory] takes the form of superficial acceptance of the vocabulary of theory in the service of its domestication.”<sup>23</sup> She recounts that “even gender” quickly became “a handy label whose application reassured rather than disturbed us, turning questions into answers before they had even been asked.”<sup>24</sup> In precisely this way, historians employed the historiographic turns to expand the types of evidence and objects that could now be collected and interpreted without feeling compelled to question their frames and forms of historical analysis.

In general, history after the turns has paid more attention to the discursive dimensions of social life and to the power relations encoded in and enabled by them. But the shibboleth of determinism, which cultural historians had previously leveled against the old social history, was then turned against the newer semiotic sensibility; this allowed historiography to drift back to its perennial interest in rational actors, individual intentions, immediate causality, short time spans, and small-scale units of analysis. A populist impulse, retained from social history, often sanctifies ordinary people and everyday experience. Referential readings of texts are again valorized, and contextualization is treated as a technical rather than an epistemological problem.<sup>25</sup>

Through a process that LaCapra has called “methodological scapegoating,” historical arguments that are not based on concretely observable evidence and that do not seek to answer questions in an empirical, reconstructive, or narrative manner are typically regarded as speculative, undisciplined, and outside the domain of recognizable and acceptable historiography.<sup>26</sup> If the assumption is that historians by definition analyze archival documents, then historians must be able to answer their questions with archival evidence. Such an equation often implies a certain understanding of actors, agency, and causality. Conversely, it means that questions that

<sup>22</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2009), 36.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, “History-Writing as Critique,” 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Barbara D. Metcalf, “Islam and Power in Colonial India: The Making and Unmaking of a Muslim Princess,” 2010 AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (February 2011): 1–30; and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “An American Album, 1857,” 2009 AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (February 2010): 1–30; as well as “AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 573–661.

<sup>26</sup> Dominick LaCapra, “Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case? Transference and the ‘Culture’ Concept,” in LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 71–94, here 73. A classic example of such scapegoating is Richard Kuisel’s AHR review of Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), which has been enormously influential for French historians concerned with the postwar period. Because Ross uses novels and film scripts as evidence for her argument, Kuisel declares that “historians can skip this book.” *American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (June 1996): 859–860.

cannot be answered archivally are not worth asking, or that historians who operate in different registers are not doing legitimate history.

Once again, “theory” is objectified and relegated to introductions and so-called “think pieces” or segregated as a specialized object of study by intellectual historians. Historians are not expected to ask questions about the conditions of possibility of the historical knowledge that they are producing—about the genealogy of their categories and their embeddedness in the social worlds they purport to explain, about their own implication in their objects of study, and the relation between those pasts and the historian’s present.<sup>27</sup> Although historians often criticize theory for being overly abstract, they tend to abstract theory from its worldly entailments, as if it stands apart from history as something that can be used or applied.<sup>28</sup> As a result, scholars are often rewarded for presenting expert performances of archival methods in the service of foregone conclusions (for example, actual historical phenomena are more complex than theoretical abstractions often make them out to be; contingent events play important roles in historical processes; historical change is the effect of many determinants and not a single cause; ideology is never wholly convincing to everybody; state power is not absolute; plans are not fully implemented; discourses and practices do not always align; actions often have unintended consequences; actors do not always know what they are doing; historical phenomena and processes are often contradictory). Descriptive empiricism thereby masquerades as theoretical insight.

Ironically, another legacy of the turns is that empiricist historians (ever ready to denounce abstraction as ahistorical) and historians influenced by poststructuralism (ever ready to denounce systemic accounts as scientific explanation) share an allergy to structural explanation.<sup>29</sup> The former invoke historical complexity, and the latter

<sup>27</sup> Recent examples of histories that seek to relate past to present in a critical manner include Harry Harootunian, *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York, 2000); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2000); Walter Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Atlantic Slavery,” in Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, Calif., 2002), 148–167; Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives*; Carolyn J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004); Herman Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham, N.C., 2004); Joan Wallach Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago, 2005); Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Boston, 2005); Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York, 2006); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, N.J., 2007); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, N.J., 2009); Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (Berkeley, Calif., 2010); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Consider the “theory for historians” genre of writing, such as Jeffrey Weeks, “Foucault for Historians,” *History Workshop Journal* 14, no. 1 (1982): 106–119; Peter Gay, *Freud for Historians* (New York, 1985); Vanessa R. Schwartz, “Walter Benjamin for Historians,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (December 2001): 1721–1743; Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Harlow, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> See the critique of explanation and defense of description in the name of anti-positivist theory in Allan Megill, “Recounting the Past: ‘Description,’ Explanation, and Narrative in Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (June 1989): 627–653. Some notable exceptions that attempt to relate history’s concern with contingent events to critical social theory’s concern with deep structures include Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992); Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago, 1997); Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt’s Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004); Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy*



respect for difference; both can ignore social theory, discount Marxism, and revert to a new nominalism that similarly emphasizes description over explanation.<sup>30</sup> However unintentionally, the after-turn discourse creates the impression, which threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, that we inhabit a post-ideological world of academic consensus.<sup>31</sup> Such an orientation promotes the idea that the analytic dilemmas, theoretical debates, and institutional conflicts associated with the turns have been resolved. Underlying such claims about synthesis is the assumption that the purpose of theory is essentially technical: a means for refining research methods in order to reconstruct the past more accurately.

In sum, antipathy to theory, an allergy to intellectual discord, and a will to professional reconciliation often reinforce one another. It is not surprising that the proliferation of historiographic “turns” has corresponded to a decline in debates within history about fundamental epistemological questions. This is partly because once optics are reduced to topics, new turns can multiply without cost or stakes. These successive turns often enact on a smaller scale the drama of opening and foreclosure that occurred with the linguistic and cultural turns more generally.

Consider the trajectories of recent turns toward new international, transnational, and imperial histories. Cold War diplomatic historians have ambitiously reconstituted their field by internationalizing their inquiries. Work that had previously focused on bilateral relations among foreign ministers began to consider a wider range of agents on a broader political terrain that included non-state actors and international organizations. But by typically explaining macrohistorical shifts through policy decisions by individuals and organizations, this new international history has retained conventional methodological assumptions about evidence, agency, and causality.<sup>32</sup> Other historians have rightly recognized the importance of producing what Christopher Bayly has called a “transnational history of ideas.”<sup>33</sup> But this urgent

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to *National Space* (Chicago, 2004); Sewell, *Logics of History*; George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, 2007); Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> For an implicit affirmation of nominalism under the rubric of historical specificity, contingency, and complexity, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005). For a theoretically rigorous history that celebrates particularity and incommensurability, see Chakrabarty's theoretically rigorous *Provincializing Europe*.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the recuperation of French radical politics discussed in Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*; as well as Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, Ill., 1960); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992); and, from a different perspective, Samir Amin, *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World*, trans. James H. Membrez (New York, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Matthew James Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford, 2002); Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2005); Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Detente* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

<sup>33</sup> “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441–1464, here 1452. For examples of transnational intellectual history, see C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, Mass., 2004); Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London, 2005); Laurent Dubois, “An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic,” *Social History* 31, no. 1 (February 2006): 1–14; Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York, 2007); Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*; Christopher L. Hill, *National History and the World of Nations: Capital, State, and the Rhetoric*

interest in reframing the networks and fields through which modern ideas have been produced, a move that could de-center Europe as the presumptive source of modern ideas, has also cleared the way for historians to reproduce, in this new transnational idiom, stories about a unidirectional flow of concepts from the West to the rest of the world.<sup>34</sup>

A new transnational sensibility has led many place-based historians to resituate traditional objects of national historiography in global political-economic or geopolitical frameworks.<sup>35</sup> By analyzing what had been national topics through transnational optics, such work reminds us that an attempt to move beyond the limitations of national history paradigms has less to do with what one studies or where than with how one frames and treats an object of study. But the call for transnational history has also led historians to study international organizations, an important area of research, to be sure, but with existing methods that effectively confirm national historical frameworks.<sup>36</sup> Or, as Durba Ghosh argues in her contribution to this forum, paradigm-shifting work in black Atlantic and British imperial history has allowed a more traditional British history to reaffirm its global importance just as it was being

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of History in Japan, France, and the United States (Durham, N.C., 2008); C. A. Bayly and Eugenio F. Biagini, eds., *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism, 1830–1920* (Oxford, 2008); Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism: Ideology, Violence, and the Sacred in Argentina and Italy, 1919–1945* (Durham, N.C., 2009); Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley, Calif., 2009).

<sup>34</sup> For example, David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008); Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*; Sven Beckert, "From Tuskegee to Togo: The Problem of Freedom in the Empire of Cotton," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 2 (September 2005): 498–526; Beckert, "Emancipation and Empire: Reconstructing the Worldwide Web of Cotton Production in the Age of the American Civil War," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 5 (December 2004): 1405–1438; Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, Conn., 2004). The *AHR* has supported this interest in transnational history by publishing and sponsoring fora such as "Transnational Sexualities," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009); "The International 1968, Part II," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 2 (April 2009); "The International 1968, Part I," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 1 (February 2009); "Entangled Empires in the Atlantic World," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (June 2007); "On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006); and "Oceans of History," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006). Writing this essay introduced me to innovative work published recently in the *AHR*, including Benjamin Lazier, "Earthrise; or, The Globalization of the World Picture," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 602–630; Cyrus Schayegh, "The Many Worlds of 'Abud Yasin; or, What Narcotics Trafficking in the Interwar Middle East Can Tell Us about Territorialization," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (April 2011): 273–306; Sarah Abrevaya Stein, "Protected Persons? The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, the British State, and the Persistence of Empire," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (February 2011): 80–108; Sunil S. Amrith, "Tamil Diasporas across the Bay of Bengal," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 547–572; Alison Frank, "The Petroleum War of 1910: Standard Oil, Austria, and the Limits of the Multinational Corporation," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 1 (February 2009): 16–41; Francine Hirsch, "The Soviets at Nuremberg: International Law, Propaganda, and the Making of the Postwar Order," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 3 (June 2008): 701–730.

<sup>36</sup> For example, the renewed interest in the League of Nations. Keith David Watenpaugh, "The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (December 2010): 1315–1339; Susan Pedersen, "Getting Out of Iraq—in 1932: The League of Nations and the Road to Normative Statehood," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 4 (October 2010): 975–1000; Pedersen, "Back to the League of Nations," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007): 1091–1117.

eclipsed by histories of colonial societies.<sup>37</sup> On another front, scholars have traced non-national networks of circulation and sociability through histories of empires, regions, or oceans. Part of their value is to challenge nationalist assumptions about the normal units through which to understand modern history.<sup>38</sup> But this critical impulse is undermined if one *a priori* form (the national state) is replaced by another (empire) as the presumptive historiographic unit.<sup>39</sup>

THE PROCESS OF DOMESTICATION and recuperation of historical turns has been especially pronounced in French history, which played such an important role in wider theoretical debates across the human sciences during the period of the turns, and particularly in French colonial history, which has enjoyed a recent surge in overdue interest. But if the imperial optic has created an opportunity to unsettle received interpretations of or approaches to French history, the turn to colonial topics, which are often treated in accordance with existing methods, frameworks, units, and periods, has also worked to reaffirm the territorial national history in relation to which these protocols were developed.<sup>40</sup>

The language of analytic synthesis and professional reconciliation was employed in a special issue of *French Historical Studies* in 2009 commemorating the twentieth

<sup>37</sup> For Atlantic and imperial histories that challenge the priority of national units and invite us to rethink "Britain" from an imperial perspective, see Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (Edinburgh, 1997); Antoinette Burton, "Who Needs the Nation? Interrogating 'British' History," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 10, no. 3 (September 1997): 227–248; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago, 2002); Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2006); Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006); Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge, 2006); Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, N.C., 2006); Antoinette Burton, "Not Even Remotely Global? Method and Scale in World History," *History Workshop Journal* 64, no. 1 (2007): 323–328; Burton, *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Durham, N.C., 2011). For work that employs empire to re-center Britain as an object and British history as a field, see Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York, 2007); Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (New York, 2006); Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750–1850* (New York, 2006); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn., 2005); Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850* (New York, 2004); David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (New York, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> For example, Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*; Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006); Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860–1920* (Berkeley, Calif., 2008).

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2010); Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> For an earlier and fuller treatment of some of these themes, see Gary Wilder, "‘Impenser’ l’histoire de France: Les études coloniales hors de la perspective de l’identité nationale," *Cahiers d’histoire: Revue d’histoire critique* 96–97 (October–December 2005): 91–119, which is an expanded translation of Wilder, "Unthinking French History: Colonial Studies beyond National Identity," in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, N.C., 2003), 125–143.

anniversary of the bicentennial of the French Revolution.<sup>41</sup> The editor's introduction affirms historiographic "eclecticism, pluralism, and . . . pragmatism" against interpretations based on "singular structural imperatives." The implication is that all structural arguments are necessarily singular and "monolithic."<sup>42</sup> This implicit criticism of the mechanical materialism that once dominated Revolutionary scholarship is made explicit by Lynn Hunt in her contribution to the issue.<sup>43</sup> Against what she calls "Marxist" and "semiotic" interpretations of the Revolution, she calls for the study of "individual experience based on perspectives derived from recent research in neuroscience."<sup>44</sup> Beyond presenting liberal commonsense (about primordial conflict existing in the absence of constitutional states) as self-evident truth, Hunt thereby seeks to reestablish history as a study of biological selves possessing an empathic human nature and to reestablish immediate individual experience as the subject of history.<sup>45</sup> Despite her celebration of microhistorical analysis, she also cites the scholarship of Laurent Dubois and invokes "new research on . . . colonies" that allows us to reexamine "the French Revolution in a global context" as a supranational event.<sup>46</sup> But it is not at all clear how she would reconcile Dubois's concerns with global history, macroanalysis, the Atlantic world, and France as empire with the traditional method and framework that she advocates.<sup>47</sup>

A piece by Dubois appears in that same special issue. With one simple opening sentence, he calls into question the assumptions, units, and frameworks upon which the whole field of French Revolutionary history depends: "The French Revolution was an Atlantic Revolution."<sup>48</sup> In his brief contribution, Dubois suggests some of the implications of this move to resituate and reconfigure the event that has served as the single most important source of collective identification and professional self-affirmation for historians of France. He argues that the "tendrils" of the revolution in Saint-Domingue "transformed life and thought, not to mention animated juridical struggles and cultural transformations" across the "circum-Caribbean," reaching from northern South America to the eastern United States.<sup>49</sup> And he writes: "the mass insurrection of the enslaved in Saint-Domingue transformed warfare, politics,

<sup>41</sup> '89 *Then and Now*, Special Issue, *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2009). Rebecca Spang observes that the very idea of an issue on an anniversary of the anniversary is an example of French history's obsessive need to commemorate and mythologize the Revolution and its ideological need to pronounce the death of Marxism again and again. Spang, "Self, Field, Myth: What We Will Have Been," *H-France Salon* 1, issue 1, no. 3 (2009): 24–32.

<sup>42</sup> J. B. Shank, "Is It Really Over? The French Revolution Twenty Years after the Bicentennial," *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 527–530, here 529.

<sup>43</sup> Lynn Hunt, "The Experience of Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 671–678, here 671–673.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 672.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 673.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 671–672.

<sup>47</sup> Hunt also uses Dubois's attempt to overturn conventional French historiography for her own project to re-center French history in Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2008), 160–167. See the critique of this book by Samuel Moyn, "On the Genealogy of Morals," *The Nation*, April 16, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Laurent Dubois, "An Atlantic Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 655–661, here 655. My point is not that Dubois inaugurated the field of Atlantic history, which had already been well developed by innovative historians of the early modern Anglo-American world, but that his Atlanticist approach to the French Revolution presented a profound challenge to conventional French historiography.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 658, 659.



and philosophical possibility when it led to emancipation in the colony in 1793.”<sup>50</sup> This is not simply a claim that studies of the French Revolution should also take account of events in Saint-Domingue. Nor is it even a statement about how these revolutions influenced one another. Rather, Dubois is refiguring and thus displacing the very distinction between them so that each “revolution” can be understood as a moment in a much broader, deeper, and integrated process of macrohistorical transformation. He argues that because “the Atlantic economy and the transformation of social and economic life that it propelled in some ways actually drove the Revolution,” everyday social and economic life in cities such as Orléans, Bordeaux, Nantes, and La Rochelle, as well as the intellectual history and political perspectives (thought circulating among salons, shops, and ports) of the Revolutionary period, can be adequately understood only through an Atlantic framework that attends directly to plantation slavery in the French Antilles. In short, he redefines the very meaning of “revolution,” “France,” and “Enlightenment” from the standpoints of empire, Atlantic political economy, and mass slave insurrection. He thereby identifies “an opportunity” to write a new kind of history that is “at once local and Atlantic, at once French and Caribbean.”<sup>51</sup> From this perspective, it is not possible to agree with Dubois without fundamentally reconceptualizing French Revolutionary history, or even the history of France itself; his intervention requires a wholesale revision of research methods, topics, categories, contexts, and periods. Yet his contribution was included in this special issue of *French Historical Studies* alongside a group of essays that, as Rebecca Spang incisively observes, reaffirm the mythic founding event of a hexagonal national history.<sup>52</sup>

Despite its potentially destabilizing intervention, Dubois’s work has been quickly embraced by the field of French history. We might wonder whether this is because of the analytic challenges that it poses to the national object or because it might help renew French Revolutionary studies by providing new terrain for an existing historiography. Historians can easily treat Dubois’s argument about the French Revolution as a global or Atlantic event as proof that the (continental) French Revolution did in fact inaugurate political modernity, internationalize human rights, and spread universal ideas around the world. Of course, such an interpretation misunderstands how his work demonstrates that the Revolution, politics, and ideas were not simply *French*. Or if they were, then “France” must mean something else altogether.

Consider the favorable review of Dubois’s work provided by the historian Jeremy Popkin, who clearly sympathizes with the call to reconsider the French Revolution in relation to the colonial Antilles. He does not seem to grasp Dubois’s argument that revolutionary republicanism and republican universalism must be dissociated from French metropolitan territory or ethnicity, that the former were forged on an

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 659.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 660.

<sup>52</sup> Spang, “Self, Field, Myth.” Included in this issue is Philippe R. Girard’s carefully researched essay on Napoleon’s colonial policy toward Saint-Domingue after emancipation: “Napoléon Bonaparte and the Emancipation Issue in Saint-Domingue, 1799–1803,” *French Historical Studies* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 587–618. However insightful, this “turn” to colonial history re-centers continental France as the subject of (even colonial) history and reaffirms conventional historical methodology: territorial national categories, narrative political history, methodological individualism, and archival fetishism.



imperial scale within an Atlantic system, that enslaved and colonized black actors actually elaborated their substance and significance, and that we can understand these processes only if we recognize republican France as an imperial formation rather than a national state. Instead, he mischaracterizes Dubois's central question as "did the French Revolution truly have a universalist message . . . or did the realization of freedom for those of African descent require separation from the metropole?"<sup>53</sup> Most tellingly, he writes: "One may also wonder whether the black soldiers who fought for the French in the 1790s did so out of a real sense of identification with a metropole most of them had never seen . . . one may wonder how fully committed the emancipated slaves in the Caribbean were to the notion of themselves as French citizens."<sup>54</sup> Dubois's central point, however, is not that these black revolutionaries were French-identified, but that they were real republicans enacting their rightful citizenship. When Popkin assumes that the pursuit of republican citizenship and political universalism requires an identification with metropolitan France, he reaffirms the idea that republican politics are isomorphic with French society or culture, which is the very equation that Dubois's work calls into question.

In Popkin's own illuminating study of the Haitian Revolution, a resistance to structural thinking leads him to discount an Atlantic approach to the eighteenth-century revolutions, to re-center France as their proper source, and to reaffirm narrative description based on archival evidence as the rightful task of the historian. He prefaces his book by explaining how George W. Bush's war in Iraq challenged his belief that "the great events of history were to be explained in terms of large impersonal forces . . . and that 'traditional' political history, with its emphasis on individuals, short time frames, and contingent events, was inevitably superficial." Proceeding from this belief that the existence of historical contingency is antithetical to macrostructural analysis and requires historians to focus on individual motives and immediate events, he decided to assume the role of a "pure" historian and write a "narrative political history." He thus undertook "the reconstruction of events" based on "certain assumptions about human psychology and on the dynamics of political conflict" in order to demonstrate that the abolition of slavery in 1793 was not "wholly explainable in terms of structural factors."<sup>55</sup> Once again we can see the assumption that structural analysis must imply mechanical determinism. A traditional narrative history of slave emancipation can certainly offer useful insights about contingent events, political motives, and individual psychology. But we should note here how empiricism is presented as theoretical insight: since structural factors cannot "wholly" account for abolition, we are instructed to turn away from the study of impersonal forces.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the real opening provided by an imperial optic is reduced to a conventional topic that can be treated in accordance with methods that discount the analytic framework that that optic offers.

<sup>53</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, "Revolution in the Colonies and the French Republican Tradition," *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 95–107, here 97.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>55</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge, 2010), x.

<sup>56</sup> We can also see how assumptions about politics and change in the present—if the start of a war is contingent, its real significance cannot be grasped structurally—inform assumptions about politics and change in the past, and vice versa.

Consider also the reception of Todd Shepard's *The Invention of Decolonization*, which many reviewers rightly praised as a carefully researched account of a crucial turning point in postwar French history whereby the loss of French Algeria defined the shape of the Fifth Republic.<sup>57</sup> But more fundamentally, it overturns the methodological nationalism that generally subtends French history by demonstrating how Algerian national liberation led France to "forget" and disavow its long imperial existence and reconstitute itself as a national state. This work takes as its starting point the actual existence of empire; French Algeria is treated as a juridico-politically integral part of the republic rather than as pure myth or ideology. The book thus invites us to reconsider in potentially far-reaching ways what we mean by the terms "French republic" and "republican France." It thereby challenges, however implicitly, deeply held assumptions among both liberal democrats with an enduring faith in republican universalism and anti-imperial proponents of revolutionary nationalism. It is remarkable that this study has been so broadly embraced without any corresponding debate. It certainly merits the attention of historians, but perhaps we need to wonder about the reasons for this uncritical acceptance. It seems likely that Shepard's work, which could easily be misread as using republican legality to call for a benevolent imperialism or to challenge the legitimacy of the Algerian national liberation struggle, will be as vulnerable to recuperation as Dubois's work has been.<sup>58</sup> In both cases, what should be an occasion for urgent contestation over fundamental categories has barely troubled the post-turn consensus.

The recent embrace of French imperial history has often been paired with a reluctance to treat empire as a category of analysis that would impel us to reconceptualize republican France in some fundamental way. Some historians who are understandably concerned that imperial history risks focusing too much on continental sources and actors have called for more local studies of colonial events and societies.<sup>59</sup> But they have often felt the need to do so by celebrating archive-based description, shying away from making bolder analytic claims, and treating France as a national state that possessed overseas colonies rather than as an integrated republican empire or imperial nation-state.<sup>60</sup> Others have undertaken ambitious studies of multiple sites across the French Empire. These have greatly increased our understanding of particular French initiatives by state and non-state actors over a

<sup>57</sup> Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006).

<sup>58</sup> One review that does grasp the implications of this work is Joshua Cole's review of Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization, French Politics, Culture, and Society* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 137–139.

<sup>59</sup> Gregory Mann, "Locating Colonial Histories: Between France and West Africa," *American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (April 2005): 409–434.

<sup>60</sup> Mann argues forcefully for colonial historians to focus on local archives and to be suspicious of empire as an analytic category; *ibid.* Yet his incisive work on colonial Africa challenges the assumptions of methodological nationalism in deep ways. Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C., 2006). Examples of insightful "local" colonial histories that, however, do not thematize their own motivating categories (e.g., violence, empire, France) include Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800–1904)* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); and Benjamin Claude Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844–1902* (New York, 2009). Detailed "local" studies that illuminate rather than elide the question of empire include Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*; Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York, 2000); Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004).

broader colonial field. But methodological nationalism—the assumption that the national state is the primary unit of historical analysis and the privileged explanatory matrix for historical phenomena—cannot be overcome through a process of addition or aggregation; starting with the empire as an analytic category is not the same as studying French national actors in the many places they happen to be.<sup>61</sup> Alternatively, detailed studies of municipal policies toward colonial immigrants often clearly demonstrate the fundamentally imperial character of the French Third Republic. But works that treat these policies within a national history paradigm tend to understand administrative diversity, the existence of multiple legal types of French nationals, and bureaucratic governance as practical violations of republican universalism (how rights and laws are applied by individual bureaucrats) rather than as structural expressions of republican racism within an imperial political formation organized around multiple administrative regimes, legal pluralism, and bureaucratic governance.<sup>62</sup>

Post-Revolutionary French history has been characterized by a contradiction between France as an actually existing imperial formation, on the one hand, and the territorial national categories that formed French self-understanding through the colonial period, on the other. Historians who continue to treat empire with those national categories risk reenacting that which requires historical explanation. Works that reconsider the category “France” from the standpoint of empire, including those by Dubois and Shepard, invite us to rethink a series of assumptions about the territorial national paradigm, such as the isomorphism among territory, people, and state; the symmetry between nationality and citizenship; the national state as a unitary juridical and administrative space; and the scale and composition of political terrains, public spheres, discursive communities, and intellectual fields.<sup>63</sup> Refiguring

<sup>61</sup> On methodological nationalism, see Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,” *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (October 2002): 301–334; and Goswami, *Producing India*. For national historical approaches to the French Empire, see Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, Calif., 1997); Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940–1944* (Stanford, Calif., 2004); J. P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880–1914* (New York, 2006); Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa* (Berkeley, Calif., 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Clifford D. Rosenberg, *Policing Paris: The Origins of Modern Immigration Control between the Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006); Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918–1940* (Stanford, Calif., 2007). For accounts of immigration that begin with race and empire, see Maxime Silverman, *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism, and Citizenship in Modern France* (London, 1992); Tyler Stovall, “The Color Line behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France during the Great War,” *American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (June 1998): 737–769; Stovall, “Love, Labor and Race: Colonial Men and White Women in France during the Great War,” in Tyler Stovall and Georges Van Den Abbeele, eds., *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race* (Lanham, Md., 2003), 297–321; Stovall, “Race and the Making of the Nation: Blacks in Modern France,” in Michael A. Gomez, ed., *Diasporic Africa: A Reader* (New York, 2006), 200–218; Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C., 2009). I have proposed a way of thinking about this problem in Gary Wilder, “Thinking through Race, Confronting Republican Racism” (paper presented at the Raging the Republic Conference, Center on Institutions and Governance, University of California, Berkeley, September 7–8, 2007).

<sup>63</sup> Examples of work that treats empire as an analytic optic and starting point rather than an empirical place or topic include Alice Bullard, *Exile to Paradise: Savagery and Civilization in Paris and the South Pacific, 1790–1900* (Stanford, Calif., 2000); Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York, 2002); Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire Back*

France as an imperial nation-state confounds conventional distinctions among national, transnational, and international phenomena.<sup>64</sup> And it overturns standard narratives about colonial vs. postcolonial periods by revealing that the challenge of cultural multiplicity for a democratic republic was an imperial problem that did not begin with decolonization and postwar immigration. The imperial republic was a cosmopolitan, if also heteronomous, space in which legal pluralism and disaggregated sovereignty were institutionalized in ways that can illuminate current debates over plural democracy in the French postcolony.<sup>65</sup>

If research on the French Empire is to constitute a significant analytic “turn,” it needs to be focused less on the familiar fact that the republican nation-state exercised autocratic rule over colonized peoples than on how imperial history transformed the republican nation into a plural polity composed of multiple cultural formations, administrative regimes, and legal systems. It follows that the crucial question is not how France behaved overseas or how its subject populations experienced colonial rule, but how the fact of empire, including ways that colonial subjects reflected upon it, invites us to rethink, or to *unthink*, France itself as well as the global imperial order within which it has been embedded.<sup>66</sup> A genuine imperial turn among historians would not simply entail research on colonial topics but would mean turning the very category “France” inside out. But because a “turn” to French colonialism is long overdue and is agreed to be self-evidently important, the fact of turning supersedes the method of proceeding, and work on colonial topics is often uncritically endorsed.

This drift in French history to use empire to re-center a threatened national

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*Home*; Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*; Dubois, *Soccer Empire*; Frederick Cooper, “States, Empires, and Political Imagination,” in Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 153–203; Cooper, “Labor, Politics, and the End of Empire in French Africa,” *ibid.*, 204–230; Emmanuelle Saada, *Les enfants de la colonie: Les métis de l'Empire français entre sujétion et citoyenneté* (Paris, 2007); Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race*; George R. Trumbull IV, *An Empire of Facts: Colonial Power, Cultural Knowledge, and Islam in Algeria, 1871–1914* (Cambridge, 2009); Spencer D. Segalla, *The Moroccan Soul: French Education, Colonial Ethnology, and Muslim Resistance, 1912–1956* (Lincoln, Neb., 2009); Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln, Neb., 2010); and Miranda Frances Spieler, *Empire and Underworld: Captivity in French Guiana* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012).

<sup>64</sup> This is something I have tried to do in my own work as well; Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, 2005).

<sup>65</sup> I am developing arguments along these lines in my current book project, preliminarily titled *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, Utopia*. See also Wilder, “Eurafrique as the Future Past of Black France: Sarkozy’s Temporal Confusion and Senghor’s Postwar Vision,” in Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Deneane Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Stovall, eds., *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham, N.C., 2012), 57–87; Wilder, “Untimely Vision: Aimé Césaire, Decolonization, Utopia,” *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 101–140; Wilder, “Response Essay,” *H-France Forum* 1, issue 3, no. 5 (Summer 2006), <http://www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol1/Wilder1%20Response.html>. Important work on contemporary France that questions the territorial national presuppositions of French studies includes Paul A. Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation* (Bloomington, Ind., 2004); Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*; Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, eds., *Postcolonial Thought in the French-Speaking World* (Liverpool, 2009); Mayanthi L. Fernando, “Reconfiguring Freedom: Muslim Piety and the Limits of Secular Law and Public Discourse in France,” *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 1 (February 2010): 19–35; and Yarimar Bonilla, “Guadeloupe Is Ours: The Prefigurative Politics of the Mass Strike in the French Antilles,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 12, no. 1 (2010): 125–137.

<sup>66</sup> See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms* (Cambridge, 1991).



object is occurring at a moment of professional uncertainty and anxiety. The geographer David Harvey has identified a tendency under capitalism to neutralize crises of overproduction through a short-term “spatial fix.” Rather than such crises’ being resolved by restructuring production, old methods of production are simply extended over a wider geographic area. But spatial fixes cannot overcome internal contradictions because they do not transform the system that produced them; they merely defer necessary restructuring and reproduce the same contradictions on a larger geographical scale.<sup>67</sup> We might wonder whether the turn to colonial topics by French historians operates like a spatial fix for the discipline.

There has been much concern in recent years about a crisis in French history (and literature) departments as they face declining enrollments, diminishing enthusiasm, and administrative hostility. This decline is variously attributed to globalization, to students’ interest in transnational topics and their suspicions of Eurocentrism, to France’s own declining world status and significance, or to the fact that the locus of political dynamism and cultural creativity in the French-speaking world has shifted either to immigrant communities within continental France or to francophone communities outside of France.<sup>68</sup> Among some historians, this shift has generated anxiety, resentment, and nostalgia for a time when French history occupied a more prominent position in the academy.<sup>69</sup> Others have responded by turning directly to France’s overseas colonies as a topic of study. This superficial “turn” thus often functions to forestall a feared crisis in French history. We know that after the 1873 economic depression and following each of the two world wars, the prospect of national decline led policymakers in France to turn to its overseas colonies. Do scholars today risk making the same kind of gesture—scrambling for colonies to save the nation in the face of the declining fortunes of European history?

These examples are presented not to argue that more historians should turn to imperial or post-national history, but to illustrate the more general tendency among historians to foreclose analytic openings through a domesticating embrace that preserves traditional history.<sup>70</sup> The point is neither to exhort historians to be theorists or Marxists nor to suggest that there is no value in descriptive, narrative, or national

<sup>67</sup> David Harvey, “The Spatial Fix: Hegel, Von Thünen, and Marx,” in Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York, 2001), 284–311; and Harvey, “The Geopolitics of Capitalism,” *ibid.*, 312–344.

<sup>68</sup> For a diagnosis of this situation, see Tyler Stovall and Georges Van Den Abbeele, “Introduction,” in Stovall and Van Den Abbeele, eds., *French Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1–16. For a symptom of it, see Jan Goldstein, “The Future of French History in the United States: Unapocalyptic Thoughts for the New Millennium,” *French Historical Studies* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 1–10.

<sup>69</sup> On the rise of colonial nostalgia in France today, see Achille Mbembe, “Provincializing France?,” *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (2011): 85–119; Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l’Afrique décolonisée* (Paris, 2010); Mbembe, “L’Afrique de Nicolas Sarkozy,” *Le Messenger*, August 1, 2007; Mbembe, “France-Afrique: Ces sottises qui divisent,” *Le Messenger*, August 10, 2007. On American historians’ affective attachment to France as an object of study, see Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson, eds., *Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2009). On “historical transference,” whereby historians reproduce, or act out, in their work the tendencies about which they are writing, see LaCapra, “Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case?,” 72–73.

<sup>70</sup> It is also important to note the analytic strengths of different subfields in which such general criticism does not apply. For example, Latin American history still frequently foregrounds political economy, Atlantic history typically focuses on regional scales and transnational formations, South Asian history often attends to the colonial genealogies of analytic categories and feminist history to processes of subject formation, etc.



history, but rather to challenge the common assumption that historians operating in different registers are not doing proper history.

WE MIGHT ALSO ASK WHETHER this conservative shift is related to professional anxiety about an academic crisis. The precarious state of national history cannot be separated from the precarious history of national states. One does not need to be a professional historian to recognize that we are living through a historical epoch marked by a convergence of large-scale structural transformations. These include the collapse of the Fordist compromise in the West, state socialism in Eastern Europe, and the Bandung development project in the South. This process of global capitalist restructuring and the consolidation of a neoliberal consensus has also corresponded to new imperialisms, resurgent religiosity, looming environmental catastrophe, and emergent forms of political identification, association, and governance on a planetary scale. This current round of globalization has revealed that the territorial national state flourished under particular historical conditions that are undergoing a decisive shift. It has also reminded us that the discipline of history, whose genesis was bound up with that national object, developed under those same conditions.

These momentous developments create enormous challenges and opportunities for thinkers who want to grasp an emergent future that is already now but, as Ernst Bloch would have said, is “not yet conscious.”<sup>71</sup> This therefore should be a moment of great ferment for historians, supposed experts in epochal transitions who are especially well prepared to bring historical insight to bear on contemporary developments even as we can now rethink conventional historical narratives and conceptions of time in light of these profound changes. Within the discipline, the burgeoning interest in imperial, transnational, comparative, and global history is surely linked to these epochal developments. Yet our field has not been seized by the spirit of innovation, experimentation, and debate that such extraordinary times seem to invite and require. On the contrary, this appears to be a period of disciplinary retrenchment.<sup>72</sup>

Joan Scott has diagnosed this troubling trend as an anti-theoretical “yearning for security and stability” among historians whose focus has turned back to “the objective empirical.”<sup>73</sup> She explains this recent “return to traditional disciplinarity” as a reaction to the radical challenge that poststructuralist theory posed to the very foundation of conventional historical scholarship.<sup>74</sup> While this certainly seems to be the case, we may also relate this conservative turn to our current upheaval. Instead of regarding these times as an opportunity for historiographic renewal, many in the field have responded defensively to the prospect of a general crisis within and beyond the academy that may threaten not only their paradigms and worldviews but their profession and positions.<sup>75</sup> As scholars who often study collective responses to rupture and upheaval, we historians should recognize this corporate retreat into a guild

<sup>71</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 1: 114–178.

<sup>72</sup> On “archival fetishism,” see LaCapra, *History and Criticism*, 92.

<sup>73</sup> Scott, “History-Writing as Critique.”

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Gordon Wood, “In Defense of Academic History Writing,” *Perspectives on His-*

mentality as a common response by social actors to an unstable present and an uncertain future. But we are not used to thinking reflexively about the historical developments that condition our own historiographic practices.

As the gap between experience and expectation widens, to use Reinhart Koselleck's formulation, it becomes at once imperative and difficult to grasp present shifts historically.<sup>76</sup> Doing so requires us to write histories of the present that attempt to understand these transformations genealogically, in relation to long-term historical processes of which they are a part, and proleptically, as if we were analyzing past history from a future standpoint.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, current transformations are not simply occurring *in* time, as if it were a neutral medium within which history unfolds; they are operating *on* time itself. An adequate history of the present must therefore also attend to the historicity of historical temporality—not just to change over time, but to changes in the sociohistorical constitution of time itself. This means that histories for and of our times cannot simply explain or interpret the past or the present; they must also directly examine the historically specific and dynamic relationship between past and present.

In his book *Conscripts of Modernity*, the anthropologist David Scott suggests that “morally and politically what ought to be at stake in historical inquiry is a critical appraisal of the present itself, not the mere reconstruction of the past.”<sup>78</sup> Speaking about the unexamined persistence of certain anticolonial research questions that were formulated by C. L. R. James in a previous era for a future that is no longer available today, Scott offers what we might read as a general warning for all historians: “the task before us is not one of merely finding better answers . . . to existing questions—as though [they] were timeless ones” but of reflecting on “whether the questions we have been asking the past to answer continue to be questions worth having answers to.”<sup>79</sup> He thus raises precisely the kinds of self-reflexive questions about writing history (today) that have been foreclosed by the post-turn consensus. If historical scholarship is to have any currency, he suggests, it must reflect critically on the aims of history, on the implication and investment of historians in objects of study, and on the complex, and ever-changing, relation between past and present.<sup>80</sup>

While Scott presents a persuasive argument for rethinking historiographic practices in relation to the demands of our present, he does not say much about what a history for our actual present might in fact demand. In *Logics of History*, William Sewall relates recent trends in history-writing directly to contemporary social transformations. This is an exemplary work of self-reflexive and transdisciplinary history

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tory, April 2010. Wood calls on academic historians to shift from analytic to narrative history addressed to a popular audience.

<sup>76</sup> Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation.’”

<sup>77</sup> Fernand Braudel writes: “what would the explorer of the present-day not give to have this perspective (or this sort of ability to go forward in time), making it possible to unmask and simplify our present life, in all its confusion—hardly comprehensible now because so overburdened with trivial acts and portents?” Braudel, *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago, 1980), 36.

<sup>78</sup> David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, N.C., 2004), 41.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 56, 209.

<sup>80</sup> Dominick LaCapra also calls for a “dialogic history” that explicitly addresses the relations between past and present as well as scholar and object of study. LaCapra, “History, Language, and Reading: Waiting for Crillon,” *American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (June 1995): 799–828.

that uses Marxist social theory to link history's insights about events, meaning, and narrative to social science's insights about deeper structures and longer-term processes. Sewell tries to understand the rapid shift from social history to cultural history in the 1980s in relation to two deeper contradictions *within* social history. First, many social historians in the 1960s were oriented toward anti-establishment politics yet pursued populist histories of ordinary people with positivist methodologies borrowed from big science, which was itself implicated in the establishment order that these histories sought to contest. Second, politically committed social historians' interest in ordinary people's everyday experience used quantitative methods and structural frameworks that often ignored or erased the individuality, subjectivity, consciousness, and history-shaping agency that their work sought to reveal. At a certain point, Sewell explains, many of these historians attempted to overcome these contradictions by turning to a cultural history that substituted meanings, mentalities, and interpretations for facts, structures, and explanations.<sup>81</sup>

Sewell also asks how a hegemonic social history could crumble so quickly after the advent of cultural history with only minimal debate and resistance. He turns to political economy to explain why historians were so willing to abandon the methodological innovations and analytic insights associated with the study of society, social relations, and social structures. He writes: "the cultural turn was also fueled . . . by a secret affinity with an emergent logic of capitalist development" and notes that "the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation lies behind the great wave of academic cultural turns in the 1980s and 1990s."<sup>82</sup> For Sewell, the "potential complexities between contemporary forms of capitalism and a purely cultural history" are revealed by the fact that both have been equally invested in ignoring the role of structural determination in social life.<sup>83</sup> It follows for Sewell that "existing cultural or linguistic models have so far proved inadequate to the intellectual challenges posed by worldwide capitalist structural transformation."<sup>84</sup> He observes that "at the very time when particularly powerful changes in social and economic structures are manifested ever more insistently in our daily lives, we cultural historians have ceased not only to grapple with such structures but even to admit their ontological reality."<sup>85</sup> He warns that if historians hope to participate in "attempting to reclaim effective political and social agency from the juggernaut of world capitalism . . . I think we need to understand our own epistemological and political entanglements in world capitalism's recent social history."<sup>86</sup>

We do not have to accept the particulars of Sewell's account to appreciate his ambitious attempt to demonstrate what a self-reflexive history might look like—one

<sup>81</sup> Sewell, *Logics of History*, 1–80. Sewell observes that historians were turning against Fordism precisely when that order was already unraveling.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 59.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 53. In an incisive commentary on Geoff Eley's *A Crooked Line*, Manu Goswami argues persuasively that "cultural history cannot account for the conditions of its own global emergence and resonance without recourse to the forms of historical totalization that it rejected in the reaction formation against social history." Goswami, "Remembering the Future," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 417–424, here 422.

that historicizes historiographic practices in relation to our historical present.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, we may emulate his deep commitment to transdisciplinary inquiry that is at once historical, social scientific, and theoretical.<sup>88</sup> Nor can we afford to ignore his insistence that we address the analytic and political costs of a wholesale turn away from structural analysis, societal explanation, long-term processes and large-scale transformations, theoretical inquiry, dialogue with the social sciences, and engagement with Marxian social theory.<sup>89</sup>

Crafting a history for and of our times will require us to move beyond the insidious logic of turns in order to reclaim the analytic space where history, social science, and critical theory once converged around large and pressing sociohistorical questions. That convergence often occurred through specific circles of intellectuals who inhabited what the historian Lucien Febvre called “that unexplored no-man’s land where the historian feels that he has no business, while the philosopher or sociologist thinks that it is up to the historian to venture there alone.”<sup>90</sup>

The *Annales* project provides one important precedent. The work of Febvre, Marc Bloch, and Fernand Braudel has been associated with both the social history that was turned against and the cultural history that was turned to. These thinkers recognized that because society was an integrated totality, history would have to overcome arbitrary and obstructive divisions within and across disciplines. They insisted on a self-reflexive and anti-positivist problem-oriented history that refused to fetishize facts, appearances, and description. They directed historians’ attention to the production of space and posed fundamental historiographic questions about geographic scale. They also attended to both the temporal complexity of history and the historical production of time. Recognizing the interpenetration of past and present, they argued that present concerns had to inform historical inquiry at the same time that historical knowledge should engage present debates. Above all, they raised critical questions that resonated productively across the human sciences and that spoke to their conjuncture.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, disciplinary history today is distinguished by a

<sup>87</sup> For non-Marxian approaches to historical self-reflexivity, see Koselleck, *Futures Past*; Dominick LaCapra, “History, Reading, and Critical Theory,” in LaCapra, *History and Reading: Tocqueville, Foucault, French Studies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000), 21–72, here 64–72; Gabrielle Spiegel, “Revising the Past/Revisiting the Present: How Change Happens in Historiography,” *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 46, no. 4 (December 2007): 1–19.

<sup>88</sup> This work thus calls to mind Immanuel Wallerstein’s program for historical social science. Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, N.C., 2004), 1–22.

<sup>89</sup> See also the related call for a reconstituted “history of society” in Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 187–202; as well as Eric J. Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society,” *Daedalus* 100, no. 1 (Winter 1971): 20–45; and Goswami, “Remembering the Future.” Note that the critique of the linguistic and cultural turns from the standpoint of “society” developed by Sewell, Eley, and Goswami differs fundamentally from the call by Bonnell and Hunt for a renewed social history and historical sociology “beyond the cultural turn” that challenges the straw man of “reducing everything to its social determinants” and advocates “re-disciplinizing” the human sciences, which could return to their real task of producing “objective—that is, verifiable—comparable results.” Bonnell and Hunt, “Introduction,” 11, 26, 14.

<sup>90</sup> Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke, trans. K. Folca (New York, 1973), 39.

<sup>91</sup> See Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York, 1953); Febvre, *A New Kind of History*; Braudel, *On History*; as well as Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*, 43–79; Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–89* (Stanford, Calif., 1990); François Dosse, *New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales* (Urbana, Ill., 1994); André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca, N.Y., 2009).

proliferation of topical turns and a poverty of timely questions. Rather than celebrate methodological consensus, we need to seek an analytic synthesis that relates the epistemological challenge of the linguistic turn to the social structural concerns of the Marxian tradition. In this way, historians might produce work that is at once self-reflexive critical history and historically situated critical theory. Such commitments cannot be relegated to the past as discrete and completed events. They were not lessons to be learned but promises to be pursued through an ongoing process in which we question our questions, debate the stakes, and reflect upon the conditions of possibility of what we can know and why it might be worth knowing at this particular historical conjuncture as we craft histories of the present for the future that is already at hand as well as the one that we might want to create.

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