Beyond the Cultural Turn examines the impact of the turn toward culture—variously known as the linguistic turn, culturalism, or postmodernism—on two prominent social science disciplines, history and sociology, and proposes new directions in theory and practice of historical research. The editors' introduction and ten distinguished scholars offer fresh insights into the most persistent issues created by the cultural turn and by new empirical research on social practices, the uses of culture and the body and self as critical junctures where culture and society intersect.

"Nothing has transformed history and sociology more in recent years than the rise of a new and deeper approach to the study of culture. This goes beyond study of the artifacts of culture to grappling with problems of meaning and the cultural constitution of social order in a wide variety of domains. From citizenship to colonialism to personhood, researchers have brought new understanding to the basic categories of social life. Beyond the Cultural Turn is the best introduction available to the state of the art in the intersecting domains of cultural history and historical sociology."

Craig Calhoun, Professor of Sociology and History, New York University

"Beyond the Cultural Turn offers an important assessment of some of the major trends in interdisciplinary scholarship over the past two decades and a provocative critique of the current relationship between cultural analysis and the social sciences."

Paula Findlen, Associate Professor of History, Stanford University

Victoria E. Bonnell is Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Center for Slavic and East European Studies, University of California, Berkeley, editor of The Russian Worker: Life and Labor under the Tsarist Regime (California, 1983); and author of Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin (California, 1997), among many other works.

Lynn Hunt is Eugen Weber Professor of Modern European History at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her books include The New Cultural History (edited, California, 1985) and The Family Romance of the French Revolution (California, 1992).
PART 4. RECONSTRUCTING THE CATEGORIES
OF BODY AND SELF

8. Why All the Fuss about the Body?
   A Medievalist’s Perspective
   Caroline Bynum

9. Problematising the Self
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Preface

In the early 1980s, a small but growing number of historians and historical sociologists began to turn their attention to the study of culture. The editors of this volume were among them. When the University of California Press invited us to edit a new publication series in 1984, we took the opportunity to establish Studies on the History of Society and Culture. This was to be a series with a specific mission, as described in our original announcement:

The editors hope to encourage the publication of books that combine social and cultural modes of analysis in an empirically concrete and yet theoretically informed fashion. The social dimensions of historical problems have too often been examined in isolation, and cultural aspects have either been ignored or construed as simple reflections of some other, more basic process such as industrialization and modernization. Without assuming either that social and cultural change are the by-products of economic development or that they are entirely independent, books in this series will undertake to explore the historically specific connections between social structures and social life. The concept of culture is understood here in the broadest sense, to encompass the study of mentalities, ideology, symbols and rituals, and high and popular culture. The series will thus draw from both the social sciences and humanities and encourage interdisciplinary research.

The series got under way just as new and exciting approaches were sweeping historical studies—trends we now place under the general rubric of “the linguistic turn” or “the cultural turn.” Although deeply appreciative of the remarkable progress achieved in the study of culture using models of text and language, we remained convinced that neither cultural nor social modes of analysis should be carried on in isolation from each other. The task was to find imaginative new ways of bringing them together.

In April 1994, on the tenth anniversary of the series, we organized a conference, “History and Sociology after the Linguistic Turn.”
then, twenty-three titles had appeared in our series, applying a wide range of approaches that combined social history with insights drawn from linguistics, literary criticism, and cultural anthropology. Attended by fifteen colleagues from the University of California at Berkeley and other campuses, the conference was designed to rethink the relationship between social and cultural history and review what had happened to theory and method in studies of culture undertaken by historians and sociologists.

The very stimulating discussions at the 1994 conference led us to plan a more elaborate conference two years later, “Studying Culture at the Linguistic Turn: History and Sociology.” We invited ten scholars, both historians and sociologists, to prepare papers for a two-day gathering (April 25 and 27, 1996), which also included colleagues from UC Berkeley, UC Santa Cruz, and Stanford. The intense and animated exchange of views at this conference produced the current volume, which now includes nine essays, an introduction by the editors, and an afterword by Hayden White.

More than thirty books have been published in the fourteen years since we inaugurated the series. Much has changed in historical studies, but we continue to believe that the most fruitful work emerges when cultural and social (and possibly other) modes of analysis are combined. We also remain committed to approaches that draw from more than one discipline. The series has, however, enlarged its geographical focus. Until recently, books published in our series focused entirely on European societies. Now we are including works on other parts of the world—a reflection of the dissolution of many traditional boundaries and the increasing importance of a global perspective.

This project has received support from a variety of sources. The University of California Press, and especially Sheila Levine, gave us encouragement and assistance over many years. UC Press, together with the Institute of International Studies at UC Berkeley, funded the 1994 conference. Gerald Feldman, chair of the UC Berkeley Center for German and European Studies, made the 1996 conference possible with his generous support and enthusiasm for our project. We are also indebted to the wonderful staff at the Center for German and European Studies, especially Gia White and Andrea Rapport. The Center for Slavic and East European Studies has given us indispensable assistance with many practical matters. Some additional fund-

ing came from Lynn Hunt’s Annenberg Chair at the University of Pennsylvania.

We would also like to express our appreciation to colleagues who participated in the conferences, discussed a wide range of issues with gusto, and provided many fascinating ideas and suggestions. Our introductory chapter was greatly improved by comments from Gregory Freidin, Margaret C. Jacob, William Sewell, Jr., Margaret Somers, and Ann Swidler. Finally, we are immensely grateful to Hayden White, a vital participant in the 1996 conference and author of the afterword. His impassioned engagement with the issues discussed in this volume has inspired more than one generation of scholars to make the cultural turn.

NOTES


2. Attending this conference were Susanna Barrows, Paula Findlen, John Gillis, Carla Hesse, Tom Lodge, Sheila Levine, Ewa Morawska, Peter Sahlin, Yuri Slezkine, Ann Swidler, Mark Traugott, Kim Voss, Reginald Zelnik, and the series editors.


Since World War II new intellectual fashions in the social sciences have emerged in rapid succession. For all their variations, until recently they generally fell into two broad categories: research paradigms\(^1\) that proposed to organize the study of society on the model of the natural sciences and those approaches that belonged to the interpretive and hermeneutic tradition, with its emphasis on human subjectivity and contextual meaning. Important works of scholarship appeared in both categories, but among American social scientists, the dominant trend has been to provide a better key to social explanation, and social explanation was often understood to be a version—however imperfect—of scientific explanation.

Whether derived from classical economics, Marxism, or some version of modernization theory, most new theories and methods claimed for themselves a special purchase on understanding the mainsprings, if not the laws, of social life. The means might differ from what came before, but the ends and the presuppositions of inquiry remained much the same. Prominent among those presuppositions was the conviction that interdisciplinary work offered the best prospect for the final integration of the social sciences.

In the course of the past two decades, the confidence of the social sciences has been sorely tested. The scientific search for presumably objective or at least impartial explanations of social life has been queried on every front: the social sciences have been criticized as not scientific, not objective, and indeed not in the business of explanation. Not only is there disagreement about the paradigm to be chosen to organize social scientific research, but there is even controversy about whether such research should be organized and about whether a unifying paradigm is a good thing. The epistemological, disciplinary, political, and even moral foundations of the social sciences are very much at issue.
Many different forces have combined to alter the terrain on which social scientists go about their business. To grasp the context and significance of these developments in the 1980s and 1990s, we must remember what preceded them. While intellectual trends can seldom, if ever, be attributed to a single cause, there can be little doubt that movements advocating "civil rights, antiracism, welfare rights, and parallel movements for the rights of women and others—placed both agency and history back on the agenda." In the 1960s and 1970s, 2 in those years, social history attracted many practitioners among historians and a small but growing number of historical sociologists. By the early 1980s, however, new modes of analysis had begun to displace social history, inaugurating what came to be known as the linguistic or cultural turn. 3

It is not possible to identify a single author or text that precipitated the shift in orientation, but in 1973 two books appeared that profoundly influenced the orientation to the study of culture among American social scientists. Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* made the case that all historical texts, regardless of the type of research and methodology, are basically constructed by the author in "a poetical act." Drawing on the work of literary scholars Kenneth Burke and Northrop Frye, among others, he argued that the historian's deep structure of thinking prefigured the field of research by the selection of a linguistic mode, that is, a topological strategy. The linguistic mode, in turn, shaped other aspects of the research design, including the modes of employment and explanation. White can be considered "the patron saint" of the cultural turn that was just getting under way. 4

Clifford Geertz's phenomenally influential volume, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, also appeared in 1973. 5 This collection, containing essays originally published between 1957 and 1972, has had a singular impact on how social scientists think about culture. Geertz used his extraordinary gifts as a writer to make the case that "the culture of people is an ensemble of texts," the task in studying culture, he argued, is to use a semiotic approach "to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them." 6 Geertz's work led to a reconfiguration of theory and method in the study of culture—from explanation to interpretation and "thick description." Henceforth, symbols, rituals, events, historical artifacts, social arrangements, and belief systems were designated as "texts" to be interrogated for their semiotic structure, that is, their internal consistency as part of a system of meaning. In Geertz's well-known formulation: "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." 7

During the 1970s, when social history was still attracting many eager practitioners among historians and historical sociologists, a remarkable array of seminal books appeared that altered conceptions of the "social" and the "cultural." In addition to the 1973 works by White and Geertz, important studies by Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Marshall Sahlins, Raymond Williams, and especially Michel Foucault changed the intellectual landscape. 8 English translations of two major works by Foucault (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language*) appeared in the early 1970s, but it was the 1977 English translation of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that first brought many social scientists into contact with his work. His concept of discourse and his "radical form of cultural interpretation that combined features of both structuralism and phenomenology, the leading methodological alternatives for sociologists seeking a path away from positivism," 9 exerted particularly far-reaching influence on social scientists.

During the 1980s and 1990s, cultural theories, especially those with a postmodernist inflection, challenged the very possibility or desirability of social explanation. Following the lead of Foucault and Derrida, posstructuralists and postmodernists insisted that shared discourses (or cultures) so utterly permeate our perception of reality as to make any supposed scientific explanation of social life simply an exercise in collective fictionalization or mythmaking: we can only elaborate on our presuppositions, in this view; we cannot arrive at any objective, freestanding truth. 10 Poststructuralism and postmodernism have come under attack; but twenty-five years after Geertz and White published their highly acclaimed works, attentiveness to culture remains a distinctive feature of much of the research undertaken by historians and sociologists. The impact of the cultural turn can be gauged from a 1996 ret-
respective in Contemporary Sociology, the American Sociological Association's journal of reviews, commenting on the "ten most influential books of the past twenty-five years."10 Editor Dan Clawson explains in his introduction the decision of the editorial board to focus on social science influence, including influence on both academic disciplines and the world." Three of the ten books—Geertz's Interpretation of Cultures (1973), Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1977), and Bourdieu's Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977)—are foundational works underlying and facilitating the turn to cultural forms of analysis. The evident importance of Bourdieu for sociologists—he introduced the concepts of “habitus” and “cultural capital” into the social science lexicon and “played a major role in bringing cultural analysis back into the center of sociological analysis in general”—has no parallel among historians, perhaps because Bourdieu's research is mainly focused on contemporary topics.11

The cultural turn and a more general postmodernist critique of knowledge have contributed, perhaps decisively, to the enfeebling of paradigms for social scientific research. In the face of these intellectual trends and the collapse of communist systems in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Marxism as an interpretive and political paradigm has suffered a serious decline. The failure of Marxism has signaled a more general failure of all paradigms. Are the social sciences becoming a branch of a more general interpretive, even literary activity—just another cultural study with claims only for individual authorial virtuosity rather than for a more generally valid, shared knowledge?12

Some of the social sciences, at least in the United States, have proved very resistant to postmodernism or cultural critique. Economists and psychologists have clung stubbornly to their scientific claims, the former by emphasizing mathematical modeling and the latter by emphasizing their links to biology. Rational choice theories and formal modeling are becoming increasingly central for political scientists. Historians and sociologists, by contrast, have been much more receptive to the cultural turn without embracing, however, the most extreme relativist or anti-postivist arguments of anthropologists or literary scholars. It is this midpoint that interests us in this volume: the sometimes uncomfortable middle between disciplines regarded, or regarding themselves, as securely and immutably scientific and disciplines that see themselves as resolutely interpretive, closely tied to the creative arts, and definitely not modeled on the natural sciences.

Although the cultural turn has swept through the precincts of both historians and historical sociologists, practitioners of these disciplines have not always moved in the same direction; nor has the relationship between these disciplines always been comfortable. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians were encouraged to draw their theories from sociology, particularly the middle-range theories advocated by Robert Merton. Sociologists, for their part, began turning to historical research in these decades, and many were swept up by the same enthusiasm for social history that animated historians. Despite the greater engagement of historians with sociology and sociologists with history, however, the much-discussed convergence of the two disciplines remained elusive. Several fundamental disciplinary differences continued to separate historians and historical sociologists, the most important being the sociologists’ commitment to explicit testing, formulation, and application of social theory and the privileging of comparative analysis. Even more vehemently than historians, sociologists have insisted on the scientific foundations of their research, and they have been somewhat slower than historians to embrace discursive understandings of culture and to undertake research on the various forms of cultural representation.

Most of the contributors to this volume, like its two editors, were originally trained in social history and/or historical sociology. Most of them have also participated in some way in the cultural turn of the last decades. The essays and the afterword in this collection consequently demonstrate how historians and sociologists are grappling with the issues raised by cultural analysis. The authors do not offer precise prescriptions, but taken together the essays do point to current concerns and possible future directions for the study of culture.

THE CULTURAL TURN

To situate this introduction, it will be useful to focus briefly on just what constituted the cultural turn in sociological and historical analysis. There is no one answer to this question; indeed, we might have simply said, "Read the essays that follow for different
responses,” for each author has a somewhat different understanding of what is at issue. Nevertheless, some general lines of convergence can be discerned: (1) questions about the status of “the social”; (2) concerns raised by the depiction of culture as a symbolic, linguistic, and representational system; (3) seemingly inevitable methodological and epistemological dilemmas; (4) a resulting or perhaps precipitating collapse of explanatory paradigms; and (5) a consequent realignment of the disciplines (including the rise of cultural studies). As will quickly become evident, these are not easily separated one from the other, and it is their mutual interaction and reinforcement that shapes our current predicament.

The Status of the Social

Historical sociology and social history both depended on a seemingly self-evident definition of what constitutes social life. The practitioners of both subfields within their disciplines got much of their original purpose and drive from what they opposed. Historical sociologists disputed the dual hegemony within sociology of present-minded empiricism (quantitative survey studies of present social patterns) and theoretical abstraction that relied on formal conceptualization rather than historical study. They sought a more historically nuanced and comparative basis for building and testing social theory. Social historians waged their battles against the traditional disciplinary focus on political elites, political memoirs and official documents, party politics and elections. They focused on lower-class groups and on the previously neglected sources that might provide information about them.

Although their points of departure were different, historical sociologists and social historians converged on the use of social categories made salient by the work of the founders of social theory: Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. Workers and artisans, state makers and intellectuals, social deviants and society’s dispossessed—the theories and their objects differed but they all provided social categories that could focus historical and comparative analysis. Historians and sociologists alike assumed that the study of social groups, social movements, or ideologies as the expression of social interests would necessarily illuminate the workings of economic trends, political struggles, and religious transformations. While few were prepared to attribute all these to a conflictual position in the mode of production, in Marxist fashion, nevertheless it appeared only commonsensical to locate individual motivation within a social context of some sort. Thus even if factory workers, for example, did not always prove to be militants in the labor movement, as Marx predicted they would, surely some other social explanation could be found for patterns of labor activism. Because they assumed that social context and social attributes gave much of modern Western life its decipherable meaning, historical sociologists and social historians spent much more time studying the effects of social position and social interrelationships than they did querying the meaning or operation of social categories themselves.

Several factors combined to undermine this confidence in social explanation. In his essay, William Sewell, Jr., describes his own dissatisfaction with “hardheaded, utilitarian, and empiricist materialism,” his sense that “there was more to life than the relentless pursuit of wealth, status, and power.” Perhaps most important, the projects grounded in a commonsense notion of the social did not deliver on their promises. Multimillion-dollar studies of census records, huge collaborative endeavors to investigate everything from medieval religious orders to the incidence of collective violence in the nineteenth century, and thousands of individual case studies came up with contradictory rather than cumulative results. Social categories—artisans, merchants, women, Jews—turned out to vary from place to place and from epoch to epoch, sometimes from year to year. As a result, the quantitative methods that depended on social categories fell into disrepute almost as soon as they came into fairly widespread usage (and were dropped just when they became truly feasible thanks to the personal computer).

Many of the original proponents of the scientific study of the social, perhaps especially among historians, eventually turned away from their early enthusiasms. Some focused instead on singular stories and places, what the Italians call microstoria, microhistory. After completing a massive study of the peasantry of southern France in order to trace long-term economic, demographic, and social trends over two centuries or more, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie captured public attention with a lively narrative of the sexual mores and familial conflicts in a single village at a particular moment of religious crisis. Natalie Zemon Davis turned from her systematic study of the
social differences between sixteenth-century Protestants and Catholics in Lyon, France, to look at the lives of individually remarkable men and women. Even stalwart defenders of social explanation such as Charles Tilly began to write narrative histories. The same story could be—and was—repeated again and again. The social began to lose its automatic explanatory power.

CULTURE AS A SYMBOLIC, LINGUISTIC, AND REPRESENTATIONAL SYSTEM

Frustrated with the limitations of social history and historical sociology—frustrated, that is, by the constraints of a commonsensical, usually materialist notion of the social—social historians and historical sociologists began to turn in a cultural direction and to look at the cultural contexts in which people (either groups or individuals) acted. More and more often, they devised research topics that foregrounded symbols, rituals, discourse, and cultural practices rather than social structure or social class. As we have seen, they often turned to anthropologists for guidance. This linguistic turn was further fueled by the emergence first of structuralism and then of its successor, poststructuralism.

The influential French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss incorporated many of the insights of structural linguistics into his work in the 1950s and 1960s and helped spawn a “semiotic revolution,” which increasingly traced all meaning to the functioning of systems of signs or symbols (the “structures” of structuralism). In the structuralist view, culture itself could be analyzed much like a language, and all behavior got its meaning from often unconscious or implicit structural codes embedded in it. As Lévi-Strauss claimed, it was not a question “whether the different aspects of social life (including even art and religion) cannot only be studied by the methods of, and with the help of concepts similar to those employed in linguistics, but also whether they do not constitute phenomena whose innermost nature is the same as that of language.” Structuralism or semiotics, as it was often known, soon claimed fields from music to cooking, from psychoanalysis to literature, as its own.

Poststructuralism (or postmodernism, as it came to be known) originated in a critique of structuralism, as the name suggests. It had been taking shape in France since the 1960s but became more promi-

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This emphasis on language and culture soon produced some thorny problems about knowledge more generally. If analysis of culture, as Geertz insisted, depended on the interpretation of meaning rather than a scientific discovery of social explanations, then what served as the standard for judging interpretation? If culture or language entirely permeated the expression of meaning, then how could any individual or social agency be identified? Were prisons or clinics, two of Foucault’s particular sites of analysis, produced by universally shared mind-sets rather than by concrete actions taken in the interest of certain social and political groups? Could “culture” be regarded as a causal variable and did it operate independently of other factors, including the social or institutional?

To make a long and complicated story overly schematic, the cultural turn threatened to efface all reference to social context or causes and offered no particular standard of judgment to replace the seemingly more rigorous and systematic approaches that had predominated during the 1960s and 1970s. Detached from their previ-
ous assumptions, cultural methods no longer seemed to have any foundation.27

THE COLLAPSE OF EXPLANATORY PARADIGMS

The cultural turn might be viewed as either the cause or the effect of the collapse of explanatory paradigms. Before blaming the turn toward culture for the breakdown of paradigms, however, we should remember that the cultural turn itself came out of a general dissatisfaction with the paradigms, many of them positivistic, that had presided over the establishment of the academic disciplines since the end of the nineteenth century. The founders of history and sociology as disciplines, like other social scientists, justified their endeavors by explicitly modeling their research on the natural sciences. It was perhaps inevitable that this attempt would eventually provoke discontent, whether from those who concluded that the social sciences were not scientific enough or from those who insisted that they should never have aimed to be scientific in the first place.28

The cultural turn only reinforced the sense of breakdown. To some extent research inspired by positivism and Marxism collapsed of its own weight: the more that has been learned, the more difficult it has become to integrate that knowledge into existing categories and theories. The expansion of knowledge itself has inductably fostered fragmentation rather than unity in and between the disciplines.

REALIGNMENT OF THE DISCIPLINES

The cultural turn, and the accompanying collapse of explanatory paradigms, has produced a variety of corollaries. One is the rise of "cultural studies," a term that covers a range of analytic approaches including feminist, postcolonial, gay and lesbian, multicultural, and even revived versions of materialist inquiry inspired by British Marxism.29 The most important characteristic of cultural studies is that they depend on a range of explanatory paradigms and deal fundamentally with issues of domination, that is, contestations of power. There is no queen of the cultural studies disciplines and, in fact, they have no necessary disciplinary center. Almost anything can fall under the rubric of cultural studies, since culture plays such a ubiquitous role in its conceptualization; almost everything is cultural in some way, and culture impacts on everything, so the causal arrow can point in any and all directions at once. In cultural studies, causal explanation takes a back seat, if it has a seat at all, to the demystification and deconstruction of power.

By casting doubt on the central concept of the social, the cultural turn raises many problems for historical sociology and social history, not least the question of their relationship to each other. Yet as scholars in both disciplines confront the issues raised by the breakdown of the positivist and the Marxist paradigms, they may well find common ground again in a redefinition or revitalization of the social. Although the authors in this collection have all been profoundly influenced by the cultural turn, they have refused to accept the oblitera
tion of the social that is implied by the most radical forms of culturalism or poststructuralism.30 The status or meaning of the social may be in question, affecting both social history and historical sociology, but life without it has proved impossible.

Indeed, while dissatisfaction with prevailing paradigms of social scientific explanation helped fuel the turn toward culture, disappointment with some aspects of the cultural turn has produced another shift of direction—not back toward previous understandings of the social but rather forward toward a reconceptualization of the category. One of the important conclusions of this volume is that the social as a category itself requires research: how did historians and social scientists come to give it such weight, how did past societies employ it as a category of understanding, how has the category been lived and remade through concrete activities? Surely it is no accident that much exciting work by younger scholars now focuses on material culture, one of the arenas in which culture and social life most obviously and significantly intersect, where culture takes concrete form and those concrete forms make cultural codes most explicit. Work on furniture, guns, or clothing—to name some of the most striking recent examples—draws our attention to the material ways in which culture becomes part of everyday social experience and therefore becomes susceptible to change.31

CULTURE AS CONCEPT AND PRACTICE

The most obvious question raised by the cultural turn is the definition and status of culture itself. Many critics have pointed to the
vagueness of the concept of culture, especially within cultural studies. Is it an aspect of life, like society or politics, or a way of defining a certain set of beliefs and practices, as in Balinese or middle-class culture? If it permeates every other aspect of life (the stock exchange, for example, depends on certain cultural beliefs and practices about money), then how can it be isolated for analysis in a meaningful way? And how can culture, which defines how a group represents itself, also contain the potential for conflict, struggle, and change? William Sewell, Jr. discusses anthropology’s own ambivalence about culture and reviews the many meanings of culture in anthropological, sociological, and historical writing. He argues that culture is most fruitfully conceptualized as a dialectic between system and practice. It is a system of symbols and meanings with a certain coherence and definition but also a set of practices; thus the symbols and meanings can and do change over time, often in unpredictable fashion. Rather than simply throw in his lot with those who have recently emphasized the importance of practice, Sewell insists on a necessary tension between system and practice, a tension often erased in the polemics about culture.

“Practice” can be as ambiguous conceptually as culture, of course, and like culture its function is sometimes primarily rhetorical. Scholars emphasize practice in order to oppose what they see as an overly linguistic or discursive definition of culture. But then scholars who concentrated on culture also had their rhetorical purposes: they wanted to challenge the naturalized or commonsensical reliance on materialist social explanation. As Sewell explains, the focus on practice is meant to counter a notion of culture as self-enclosed, static, completely coherent, and impervious to challenge. But he cautions against throwing out all sense of coherence in culture, arguing instead for “thin” coherence, that is, coherence viewed as contested, changing, and not very clearly delimited. The system in culture might not be all that systematic, but it still has its place in any cultural analysis.

There is no one cultural approach, and there seems to be no limit to possible proliferations or mutations. Richard Bierracki nonetheless detects a common philosophical orientation in cultural approaches. In his view, cultural investigators seek nothing less than a real and irreducible ground of the social world. They simply find it in another place than did their socially minded predecessors. Cultural analysts supplant the social and economic with the cultural and linguistic; “sign” replaces “class” as the key concept of analysis but actually serves the same function. In the process, cultural analysts maintain the belief in a grounding reality and thereby lose sight of the conventionality of their own concepts. They take these concepts, such as sign, for the ultimate constituents of reality rather than for what they are: artificial terms that serve heuristic purposes.

Bieracki concentrates on the practical consequences of this cultural “realism,” that is, the belief that culture is an ultimate constituent of social reality. He maintains that it actually blocks the study of cultural differences by assuming culture’s organizing power rather than inspiring research to verify that power. It also tends to rely on the unexamined metaphor of “reading a text” to explain the deciphering of signs in a culture. Bieracki advocates a cultural approach that is less intellectualist and materialist and more corporeal (a theme taken up in more than one essay here). But more important, he shifts attention to comparative analysis designed to test the power of culture against other possible explanations. He wants to examine how cultural investigation can explain differences in historical outcomes more effectively than other kinds of analysis. In short, by developing a cultural historical sociology he harnesses a focus on cultural differences to the search for causal explanation. Rather than arguing that the conventionality (the “nominalism”) of analytical terms makes all analysis equally fictional, in the manner of postmodernists, Bieracki maintains that a recognition of culture as a “nominal tool” of analysis will liberate it to do the work of social explanation.

Although Bieracki’s essay is bound to provoke controversy, it shows that epistemological and even ontological issues are invariably raised by the cultural turn. He himself argues for a nonrealist or nominalist understanding of culture, one which proclaims that there is no ultimate foundation for history or the social sciences (though he does not fully resolve the question of how any method, such as a comparative one, could then be legitimized). Historians and sociologists can no longer retreat to a kind of philosophical know-nothingism; any method, even an emphasis on comparison or nonintellectual practice, inevitably poses fundamental philosophical
problems. It is one of the virtues of the cultural turn to have pushed these issues front and center, and the essays in this volume show that they cannot be easily dismissed.

KNOWLEDGE IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Dialogue among the disciplines depends in part on a strong sense of their differences from each other: exchange is not needed if everything is the same; interdisciplinarity can only work if there are in fact disciplinary differences. Thus a renewed emphasis on disciplinary difference, or "redisciplinarization," seems to be in order. At the same time, historians and sociologists have learned to appreciate the historicity not only of their disciplines but also of their procedures, without thereby giving up on the possibility of objective—that is, verifiable—comparable results. This historicization has opened the way to experimentation with both the objects and the means of study: investigation of micro versus macro levels of analysis, as well as reconfigurations of quantitative methods to study the formation of social categories rather than assuming their defined and fixed existence ahead of time. In sum, interest has been renewed in the social, but now as an object of study rather than as an already-defined presupposition.

Weaving in and out of the debates about culture and the future of the social sciences is science itself. At the same time that some have claimed that the social sciences cannot hope to be scientific, others have argued that even science is not as scientific as it has been cracked up to be. The social history and social studies of science (sometimes known as "science studies") are among the most controversial areas of the social sciences today. This is not surprising, as science has provided the standard of truth in Western culture for several centuries. When science is questioned, truth as a value is put into doubt. If science reflects the play of ideological and subjective interests, then what grounds our notions of objectivity and scientific knowledge?

In other words, science can now be viewed as part of culture, not above it. Margaret Jacob looks at the influence of "social constructionism" in the study of science. She shows how short the step was from the social and linguistic contextualization of science to philosophical relativism: if the work of scientists reflected the social and cultural prejudices of their settings, then scientific truth did not transcend the social or cultural milieu of its practitioners. In this way, social and historical studies of science prefigured the more general epistemological crisis of recent years, as even science could not provide an infallible paradigm of explanation. Indeed, it was an influential study of the process of scientific change, Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that first gave currency to the concept of "paradigm" and raised troubling questions about the truth status of the natural sciences.23

Yet while social and historical studies of science have shown the situatedness of scientific activity, they have not been able to explain the most important feature of science: it is not bound to the contexts in which it first took shape. Newton's science, for example, may reflect his religious, political, and cultural views, but the law of gravity works outside the time and space of seventeenth-century England. What makes this generalization possible? Like Biernacki but for a different set of problems, Jacob argues for more comparative study of the workings of science. By examining science comparatively and in a global context, investigators can determine the sources of both the generalizability of science and its salient differences across time and place. This kind of study promises to break down the isolation of the natural sciences from the social sciences, gives more complexity to the definition of science, and thereby makes possible a more telling conversation about truth and objectivity. The fundamental philosophical issues cannot be addressed without giving attention to the cultural and social meaning of science, but such studies need not lead inevitably to "science bashing." Instead, they can provide a model for analyzing how knowledge can be configured by a particular cultural setting and still work in other ones. The goal is not to deny the social construction of science but rather to understand both the limits on that construction and the sometimes surprisingly global spread of scientific knowledge.

One important way that knowledge works is through narrative power—establishing authority by means of a story. Scientists derived their authority, after all, not just from their experimental and theoretical successes, which were still in doubt in the early seventeenth century, but also from their ability to persuade rulers and literate elites with their arguments. Those arguments rested on narratives about the presumed conflict between science and tradition and
about the superiority of scientific method in unraveling the mysteries of life and death, including even the story of creation. If science prevailed, the story went, then darkness, ignorance, and superstition could be vanquished and progress achieved. Science did not become the standard of truth in the West without a struggle, and that struggle was in large measure one over narrative—over the best account of the age of the earth, for example, with all that such conflicts entailed in terms of cultural authority.

Narrative power looms large in the essay by Margaret Somers, which lays out a research method for undertaking a historical sociology of the formation of key concepts. Using the case of Anglo-American citizenship theory, Somers explores the workings of what she calls a "knowledge culture." Rather than offer an intellectual history of the concepts of citizenship that traces their intellectual lineage or a sociology of knowledge that tracks down the social interests that they express, she insists that knowledge is simultaneously culturally embedded—mediated, for example, through stories and symbolic systems—and analytically autonomous, with its own histories and logics. She is particularly interested in the narrative forms that serve to legitimize citizenship theories by embedding them in a knowledge culture; thus the metanarrative of Anglo-American citizenship makes the market seem natural and inescapable while it depicts the state as arbitrary and merely contingent.

Ultimately Somers wants to explain why the concepts of civil society, political culture, and public sphere have all failed, that is, why it has been so difficult to establish a third arena or space between the state and the market. She traces the difficulty to the success of the Anglo-American metanarrative in closing off any such conceptual space; the history told allows only the inevitable dichotomy between public and private, between nonnatural and natural, between the contingent and the perennial. The consequence for us is that citizenship has been privatized and the public sphere demonized. Thus Somers emphasizes the role of narration and naturalizing strategies in the workings of a knowledge culture. By emphasizing the logic of narratives, Somers aims to get beyond the dilemma posed by what the historians and sociologists of science called internalist and externalist accounts; she wants to show how narratives make social categories seem natural, how narratives shaped by outside forces develop their own internal logic and autonomy. Although this account may not in itself answer all the possible questions—if, for example, cultural objects can never be empirically autonomous, as Somers claims, then how is it that we can establish their analytically autonomy nonetheless?—it does set up productive new grounds for the interchange between a history and sociology of knowledge.

NARRATIVE, DISCOURSE, AND PROBLEMS OF REPRESENTATION

Narrative figures prominently in many of the essays in this volume because narrative provides a link between culture as system and culture as practice. If culture is more than a predetermined representation of a prior social reality, then it must depend on a continuing process of deconstruction and reconstruction of public and private narratives. Narrative is an arena in which meaning takes form, in which individuals connect to the public and social world, and in which change therefore becomes possible. But just what is narrative? Is it an essential form of knowledge? Is it universal to all peoples? Narrative has come under fire in some postmodern theories for being inherently deforming and propagandistic, even imperialistic. Postmodern time is imagined as something other than historical time. According to Elizabeth Ernarth, "The founding agreements that we take for granted in modern historical narratives do not form in postmodern time, just as the common medium of events that we call history simply does not exist in postmodern narratives." Yet postmodern attention to narrative has also sparked great interest in it. Suddenly, like Monsieur Jourdain who discovered that he was speaking prose, historians and historical sociologists have learned that they were making important choices of rhetorical and representational form without knowing it.

Historians have had a long and increasingly vexed relationship to narrative. Before the twentieth century, written histories almost always appeared in narrative form (in some way recapitulating their origins in oral culture). But in the twentieth century the connection between history and narrative has been broken. The proponents of scientific history insisted that it could only be analytical and not narrative in form; it must present evidence in the manner of a scientific
paper, following scientific procedures. Narrative made history too much like literature and not enough like science. In recent years, as Karen Halverson explains, historians have taken different tasks in attempting to resolve these tensions: a few have pursued the philosophical issues raised by narrative, some have tried out new narrative forms in their own writing, and others—like herself—have examined the modes of storytelling within the cultures they study. Whatever historians may think of the role of narrative within their own current disciplinary practice, it is hard to deny that storytelling in one form or another permeates past cultures.37

As a general observation, this attention to narrativity is probably uncontroversial. But Halverson wants to go much further and consider the actual narrative forms, their development over time, and their eventual impact on historical practice as well. She focuses on one of the most popular narrative print forms, the American murder narrative, from the execution sermon of the late seventeenth century to the murder-trial transcript of the late nineteenth century. Her aim is to show how narratives get their power from being woven into daily life—that is, by molding and expressing popular opinion of how individual motivation and action work. Murder mysteries, by her account, offered a secular understanding of human evil, one that restored moral certainty in a world filled with uncertainty and incomprehensibility. Thus narrative may be a fundamental property of human consciousness, but it takes very different shapes in different times and places. Her analysis helps explain the emergence of the murder mystery as a literary genre and suggests, in addition, why historical discourse in the nineteenth century came to be modeled on legal narrative. History as a discipline is shown to participate in general cultural practices, but these can only be understood through a fine-grained analysis of their actual workings.

Like postmodernists and in some cases following their lead, theorists of the postcolonial condition have raised questions about the role of narrative.38 Is historical narrative as we know it a peculiarly Western or Eurocentric form of knowledge? Can non-Western societies be understood using the same categories? Can subordinate or subaltern voices ever be truly heard by those accustomed to other ways of speaking and depicting? In his essay Steven Feierman confronts these questions by analyzing a case drawn from Africa:

public healing on the northern Rwanda frontier. He comes up with some surprising answers that show the brittleness of the customary dichotomies—European/African, colonizer/colonized, foreign/authentic, world/local. Public healing proved so strange to European observers that it seemed to defy the usual categories of representation and analysis. Healing mediums did not fit into Western narrative conventions; a medium did not have a single place of birth, flexible dates of birth and death, or even a single body. Consequently, they became invisible.

While joining with others who have pointed to the inevitable hybridity of most cultural forms, Feierman never denies the effects of colonization: some colonizers tried to destroy African practices, and most often they aimed their fire at customs and activities they viewed as inherently irrational. Public healing is a particularly telling example not only because it seemed irrational to the colonizers but also because it still proves resistant to the conventional terms of historical or ethnographic analysis. Public healing had no obvious antecedents and left no visible legacy; it occupied a kind of cultural and analytical blind spot. Healing mediums led resistance to the Europeans, but they also competed with local Rwandan leaders, whose stable, linear accounts of masculine authority were more easily apprehended by Western historians and ethnographers.

To get beyond the blind spot into which public healing has disappeared, Feierman focuses on the role of kinesthetic, as opposed to purely discursive, practice. In the healing rituals, participants combined music and dance in a performance that was characterized above all by movement. Recapturing African "voices," therefore, depends on something nonverbal—a rhythmic performance. Meaning cannot be found in a fixed set of social references—the same characters often appeared in different social guises in the oral narratives—but has to be sought instead in the performative specifics of a very unfamiliar cultural practice. Study of non-Western cultures provides more than just another perspective: it can challenge the most basic assumptions of both our theoretical and empirical approaches.

With his emphasis on the tension between micro- and macrohistorical accounts, Feierman addresses one of the most vexing issues facing social scientists. Historians and sociologists are now experimenting with different units of analysis, no longer assuming that
there is a clear national or regional scale that must be used in every study. Yet Fei-Fei also cautions us against an easy assumption that microhistorical accounts will help us avoid all the problematic features of large-scale intercultural analysis. Focusing exclusively on the micro level may just leave untouched all the usual macro accounts of the sweeping success of colonial conquest and capitalist expansion.

Commentators on the postcolonial condition usually emphasize the distortion introduced by Western perspectives and practices, but these distortions often apply to the Western past as well. Modern categories of religion and rationality, for example, may prove just as problematic in analyzing witchcraft in sixteenth-century Europe as they do when applied to healing mediums in twentieth-century Africa. An understanding of the meaning of categories seems to depend on a very localized analysis; and yet, as Sonya Rose demonstrates, categories also have a life beyond single moments. She reviews the theoretical literature on recurring incidents of “moral panic,” in particular those distinct moments in which long-standing themes of the disorderliness of women are recirculated. Such bursts of commentary about sexuality are episodic, she maintains, not discrete events with no connection to each other. How can connections between them be established?

Rose’s essay goes to the heart of the question of culture’s definition and the problem of change or variation. Is women’s “disorderly” sexuality recurrently linked to moral decay and social breakdown because it is a deep structure that functions to regulate cultural and sexual boundaries? If so, why does it reappear only at certain times and not always? Rose raises this issue in order to contest the view that culture can be theorized as fully autonomous (because it is structurally organized). She argues that cultural practices are always interwoven with social ones; moral discourse, for example, becomes more highly charged in times of war, political unrest, or rapid social change. Sexuality can be deployed in different circumstances to reinforce group or national identity, but its deployment is historically specific and therefore always susceptible to change. Rose thus echoes themes sounded earlier by Sewell and Halpin; in the unending spiral between continuity and transformation, each retelling of a story offers the possibility of change, and each story once told gives weight to a set of imagined truths about the social world.

RECONSTRUCTING
THE CATEGORIES OF BODY AND SELF

While social and political action depends on narrative, it also depends on many presuppositions about the individual who acts. Both the body and the self have been at the center of poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques of Western knowledge, but only the body has loomed large in recent historical and sociological research. The focus on the body reflected in part the impact of feminism, which emphasized the differences of gender and the location of those differences in bodies. It also followed from the influence of Foucault, whose studies of prisons, clinics, and the history of sexuality all drew attention to how discourses worked through bodily techniques. A new concept and practice of individualism was produced, for example, by classifying, counting, and disciplining bodies.

Yet the rediscovery of the body in much recent work has had the paradoxical effect of reducing it to the status of just another discourse. Caroline Bynum introduces her essay by identifying the many different disciplinary emphases and approaches to the study of the body, which make the discussion of the body “almost incomprehensible—often mutually incomprehensible—across the disciplines.” Here we see an illustration of the growing trend toward fragmentation rather than unity in and between the disciplines.

Notwithstanding a robust growth industry in studies of the body, Bynum draws attention to what has been overlooked by this literature, which focuses heavily on sex and gender and preserves a traditional Western dualist perspective (i.e., the identification of the body with nature and the female). Her essay shifts our focus to “the body that dies.” Moving between the contemporary and the medieval world, she explores the implications of the death of the body for identity, matter, and desire.

Bynum finds that medieval theologians and philosophers did not present their ideas in terms of a Cartesian mind/body duality. They thought of the person as both soul and body, they worried about the meaning of identity and its relationship to material continuity, and they often wrote of body and desire as interconnected. Compared to the hundreds of years of controversy in which personal identity was seen as unitary, particular, and infused with desire, mind/body du-
alism “is a small blip on the long curve of history.” One implication of her essay is that scholars ought to be suspicious of overly teleological views of the past; we should investigate the past not to prove our superiority but to regain humility.

The essay concludes with reflections on a question that is central to historical studies: how can we understand people remote from ourselves in time and place? She warns against essentialism and against succumbing to new approaches that have produced among historians “despair or solipsism.” Instead, she proposes that we study the context, vocabulary, and circumstances of people who lived in the past, while at the same time recognizing that the way we think about the past is shaped by many earlier discourses. Like others in this volume, Bynum does not want to retreat from the advances made by the cultural turn but urges, instead, that we focus on the ways our predecessors tried to resolve “a perduing issue.” In accordance with this approach, historical studies would investigate how people in the past asked questions relating to issues such as group affiliation, that is, how they formulated problems and answers within their own historical setting. Bynum proposes a comparative strategy, constructed around specific formulations of issues and contexts for responding, for example, how a third-century theologian and a late-twentieth-century feminist problematized and resolved identity issues given the categories and context available to them. She reminds us that “we must never forget to watch ourselves knowing the otherness of the past, but this is not the same as merely watching ourselves.”

Whereas the body has drawn a great deal of attention, the cultural turn has produced relatively little investigation of the self. This may seem surprising, as the self preoccupied the theoretical giants of sociology such as Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons and provided a prime focus of research for Lucien Febvre, one of the founders of the Annales school of historians. But in the work of structuralists and especially poststructuralists, the self as a meaningful conceptual category has largely been effaced; the self has been reduced to an entirely constructed, and therefore empty and wholly plastic, nodal point in a discursive or cultural system. Since poststructuralists and postmodernists have celebrated “the death of the subject,” they have left little in the self to resist social or cultural determinations. Thus, though poststructuralists have drawn attention to the self as a contestable category, they have done little to encourage research on it.

Jerrold Seigel examines the critiques of the Western self offered by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida, the most important proponents of postmodernism. He discerns three distinct dimensions in thinking about the self: the material, the relational, and the reflexive or self-positing. A material analysis emphasizes the biology of individual existence; this approach appears in Nietzsche’s argument that the self is nothing other than the bodily expression of the will to power. In the relational perspective, most congenial to sociologists and social historians but also present in Foucault and Derrida, the cultural, social, and discursive relations that constitute selfhood are emphasized. In the reflexive or self-positing perspective, derived from Kant and Fichte and given more recent expression by Heidegger, the capacities that transcend given contexts or settings take pride of place.

Seigel maintains that postmodernists such as Foucault and Derrida do not so much escape from the Western tradition of thinking about the self as they replicate and even exaggerate certain strands within it. Talk of the death of the subject or the end of man ends up actually exalting a utopian notion of selfhood as absolutely unconstrained. Postmodernists remain trapped in now classic dualisms between the relational and reflexive perspectives, seeking like Nietzsche to flee from them by turning on occasion to an apocalyptic material perspective. In other words, they posit a self that is simultaneously purely relational—constructed by discourse as the sediment of all social and cultural relations—and purely reflexive, that is, absolutely unbounded.

Seigel does not conclude that we must jettison the three dimensions of thinking about selfhood. Rather he insists that we must look for new ways of reconciling them, paying attention to the material constitution of bodies, to the processes by which material selves become subjects who can be both relational (social) and reflexive (individual) in a bounded but not fixed fashion. Selves can be materially embodied and still provide the subjectivity needed to experience the objective materiality of the world. Seigel cites recent work that uses the term “narrative self,” with narratives providing the link between culture and mind, between social relations and reflexive qualities. The “concrete self” developed through narratives still necessarily
faces the tension between freedom (the reflexive) and constraint (the relational); that tension is crucial to reconsiderations of both the individual and the social as categories.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In his afterword, Hayden White provides an overview of the cultural turn and its implications for the future of the social sciences. For him, the significance of the cultural turn is its "deconstructive" aspect—its contribution in making us recognize that the social reality of any given society is merely one possibility among others. All social science disciplines and approaches are "contaminated with ideological preconceptions," according to White, and for this reason one should be clear about the ideology inherent within a given methodology, be it positivism, Marxism, or postmodernism. Here White is unequivocal: "any science of society should be launched in the service of some conception of social justice, equity, freedom, and progress—that is to say, some idea of what a good society might be."

While declaring his preference for a Marxian analytical model, White also notes that in the Western tradition, both Marxist and "bourgeois" social science have taken a very dim view of the major intellectual movements accompanying the cultural turn. Postmodernism and "culturalism," whatever their failings, remain for White major advances over previous approaches because they challenge prevailing orthodoxies about the scientific and objective nature of social scientific inquiry. It is now the task of the social sciences—both Marxist and non-Marxist—to meet the challenges posed by these approaches. White's position on these matters is likely to be controversial for many historians and sociologists, and in many ways it goes against the grain of the essays in this volume. But most historians and historical sociologists will agree with his contention that the cultural turn has indeed prompted a major reconsideration of basic epistemological and methodological issues. His reassessment of the virtues of "culturalism" reminds readers that debate on these matters is far from finished.

Notwithstanding the many differences among them, the authors of the nine essays share a certain common stance toward the dilemmas raised by the cultural turn. All of them emphasize empiri-
ment has revived one of the great dreams of nineteenth-century positivism: a grounds for making different branches of knowledge mutually intelligible, if not mutually transparent.

The essays in this volume propose new directions even while they incorporate many of the insights gained from the cultural turn. Rather than jettisoning the social as a category that has outlived its usefulness, the authors argue for its reexamination and reconfiguration through new empirical approaches. These range from rejuvenation of the comparative method of analysis to exploration of microhistorical episodes in a wide variety of settings. Many of the authors emphasize that social identity cannot be approached in the old categorical fashion, as if identifying a social position would tell the researcher everything that he or she needed to know. Though no longer viewing culture as a completely autonomous factor, scholars must take it into account as having its own logic that shapes both the object and the subject of study.

The cultural approach has been most successful in overturning the tried-and-true materialist metaphors about base and superstructure (in classical Marxism) or first-economic, second-social, and third-political and cultural levels (in the French Annales school of history). Historians and sociologists no longer assume (not that everyone always did!) that causal explanation automatically traces everything cultural or mental back or down to its more fundamental components in the material world of economics and social relations. At the same time, it is clear that many are just as unhappy with a definition of culture as entirely systemic, symbolic, or linguistic. The focus on practice, narrative, and embodiment—whether of whole cultures, social groups, or individual selves—is meant to bypass that dilemma and restore a sense of social embeddedness without reducing everything to its social determinants. The authors in this volume consistently emphasize the relational process of identity formation, the conflict between competing narratives, the inherent tension between culture viewed as a system and culture viewed as practice, and the inevitable strain between continuity and transformation.

The jury is still out on the future of the social science disciplines. They came into being at a distinct moment at the end of the nineteenth century, and there is nothing to guarantee their eternal existence in just the same shape. Here again it might be salutary to remember some necessary tensions: knowledge grows by specialization and fragmentation, but understanding what that knowledge means probably requires some reintegration. There is something to be gained both from disciplinary separation and from interdisciplinarity. For now the disciplines remain pretty much in their old places, but scholars within them are always seeking new ways of making connections between them. And change, when it comes, will no doubt follow from something other than theoretical prescription. It will come out of new practices embedded in the social world in ways that we cannot yet see.

NOTES

1. The concept of "paradigm" was given great currency by Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1962 [1st ed. 1970]). In defining paradigms, Kuhn argues, "I mean to suggest that some accepted examples of actual scientific practice—examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together—provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research [Ptolemaic astronomy, Newtonian dynamics, etc.]."

2. Terrence J. McDonald, introduction to McDonald, ed., The Historic Turn, p. 5.

3. We do not mean to suggest that historians and sociologists were oblivious to the study of culture prior to the developments summarized as the cultural or linguistic turn. On the contrary, some sociologists—influenced by Weber, Durkheim, and then Parsons—did take culture very seriously. The Parsonsian approach to culture, with its focus on internalized values and norms, had a significant following but was largely displaced by the shift we are calling the cultural turn.


7. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 5. Geertz’s position was further elaborated in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983). See James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986), for evidence that anthropologists, even those going in more or less the same direction, did not universally agree with Geertz.


9. Jonathan Simon, “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Middle-Range Research Strategy,” *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 3 (1996): 318. Simon continues: “the story that Discipline and Punish told reversed the assumptions of the interpretive critique of positivist sciences… After Discipline and Punish, the question of whether a true social science was possible had to be recognized as a fundamentally political question.”


11. Craig Calhoun, “A Different Poststructuralism,” *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no. 3 (1996): 304–5. One indicator of the historians’ lack of attention to Bourdieu can be found in the 1996 volume edited by Terrence J. McDonald, *The Historic Turn in Social Sciences*. Of the eleven contributors to the volume, including many historians, only three include a reference to Bourdieu in the bibliography to their chapter. Steven Mullaney, a specialist on English literature; Sherry Ortner, an anthropologist; and Craig Calhoun, a sociologist.


Bonnell, "Uses of Theory," Goldthorpe's argument cannot be sustained, for some historical sociologists now conduct primary research in ways that are indistinguishable from their colleagues in a history department.


18. Donald R. Kelley rightly points out that there is a long lineage to cultural history as a field; see "The Old Cultural History," History of the Human Sciences 9, no. 3 (1996): 101–26. But those first drawn to social history and historical sociology followed a different trajectory.

19. As noted earlier, we use "cultural turn" here to signal a broad shift that has been labeled in many different ways. Some of this discourse derives from Lynn Hunt, ed., The New Cultural History (Berkeley, 1989). See Marilyn Strathern, "Ubiquities," Annals of Scholarship 9 (1992): 199–208, and Laurie Nussdorfer, "Review Essay," History and Theory 32 (1993): 74–83. As Nussdorfer concludes, "it may be quite some time before...we have something to replace the great lost paradigms of the postwar era" (p. 83). In other words, the cultural turn raised more questions than it could answer.

20. In his critique of historical sociology Goldthorpe never raises the issue of the definition of the social, "Uses of History" focuses instead on the interpretation of historical evidence. Social historians have discussed changes in their notion of what constitutes "the social" in social history, but they have paid less attention to the ways in which the social has been constructed as a category of analysis in the first place. See, for example, Steven C. Hause, "The Evolution of Social History," French Historical Studies 19 (1996): 119–214. For a discussion of the relationship between historical sociology and social history, see "Comment and Debate: Historical Sociology and Social History," in Social Science History 11, no. 3 (spring 1987): 173–187.


23. William Sewell, Jr., Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848 (Cambridge, 1980) was the first major study self-consciously to apply the approach advocated by Geertz to a historical topic. It made a tremendous impact on social historians and promoted the trend toward the study of culture, both among established scholars and those who came of age intellectually in the second half of the 1980s and 1990s. An example of the latter is Richard Bienacki, who focused on the causal role of culture in shaping factory regimes and social relations in the German and British woolen industry. Begun in the 1980s as a dissertation (and recipient of the ASA Dissertation Award in 1989), his study, The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914 (Berkeley, 1995), was published in the University of California Press series Studies on the History of Society and Culture (series ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt).


28. William Sewell provides a penetrating discussion of failed efforts by leading historical sociologists such as Immanuel Wallenberg and Theda Skocpol to utilize forms of explanation that derive from the methodology of the natural sciences. See "Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology" in McDonald, ed., The Historic Turn, pp. 245–80, esp. 248, 254–62.

29. There is now a growing literature on cultural studies, and we do not pretend to summarize it here. For one helpful overview, see Richard Johnson, "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" Social Text, no. 16 (1986–87): 38–80.

30. We are grateful to William Sewell for underlining the importance of this point.

32. A similar line of criticism is opened by Ann Swidler when she maintains that "too-easy embrace of the notion that culture is ubiquitous and constitutive can undermine any explanatory claims for culture. Then emphasis on culture becomes a species of intellectual hand waving, creating a warm and cozy atmosphere, while other factors continue to carry the real explanatory weight": "Culture Power and Social Movements," in Johnston and Klandermans, eds., *Social Movements and Culture*, p. 38.

33. There is now an enormous literature exploring Kuhn's intentional and unintentional effects on the social studies of science and their relativist implications. For an overview, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), pp. 163–66.

34. Hayden White's *Metahistory*, with its emphasis on modes of employment, and his essays, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), were influential in stimulating social scientists to think more critically about narratives.


36. Some of these issues about narrative and postmodernism are discussed in Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth*.


38. See, for example, Gyan Prakash, ed., *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, 1995).

The Concept(s) of Culture

WILLIAM H. SEWELL, JR.

The aim of this chapter is to reflect upon the concept—or more properly the concepts—of culture in contemporary academic discourse. Trying to clarify what we mean by culture seems both imperative and impossible at a moment like the present, when the study of culture is burgeoning in virtually all fields of the human sciences. Although I glance at the varying uses of “culture” in a number of disciplines, my reflection is based above all on the extensive debates that have occurred in anthropology over the past two decades—debates in which some have questioned the very utility of the concept. I feel strongly that it remains as useful, indeed essential, as ever. But given the cacophony of contemporary discourse about culture, I also believe that the concept needs some reworking and clarification.

The current volatility of the concept of culture sharply contrasts with the situation in the early 1970s, when I first got interested in a cultural approach to social history. At that time it was clear that if you wanted to learn about culture, you turned to the anthropologists. And while they by no means spoke in a single voice, they shared a widespread consensus both about the meaning of culture and about its centrality to the anthropological enterprise. I began borrowing the methods and insights of cultural anthropology as a means of learning more about nineteenth-century French workers. Cultural analysis, I hoped, would enable me to understand the meaning of workers’ practices that I had been unable to get at by using quantitative and positivist methods—my standard tool kit as a practitioner of what was then called “the new social history.” I experienced the encounter with cultural anthropology as a turn from a hardheaded, utilitarian, and empiricist materialism—which had both liberal and marxist faces—to a wider appreciation of the
range of human possibilities, both in the past and in the present. Convinced that there was more to life than the relentless pursuit of wealth, status, and power, I felt that cultural anthropology could show us how to get at that "more."

Anthropology at the time had a virtual monopoly on the concept of culture. In political science and sociology, culture was associated with the by then utterly sclerotic Parsonsian theoretical synthesis. The embryonic "cultural studies" movement was still confined to a single research center in Birmingham. And literary studies were still fixated on canonical literary texts—although the methods of studying them were being revolutionized by the importation of "French" structuralist and poststructuralist theory. Moreover, the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s marked the glory years of American cultural anthropology, which may be said to have reached its apogee with the publication of Clifford Geertz's phenomenally influential *Interpretation of Cultures* in 1973. Not only did anthropology have no serious rivals in the study of culture, but the creativity and prestige of cultural anthropology were at a very high point.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the intellectual ecology of the study of culture has been transformed by a vast expansion of work on culture—indeed, a kind of academic culture mania has set in. The new interest in culture has swept over a wide range of academic disciplines and specialties. The history of this advance differs in timing and content in each field, but the cumulative effects are undeniable. In literary studies, which were already being transformed by French theory in the 1970s, the 1980s marked a turn to a vastly wider range of texts, quasi-texts, paratexts, and text analogs. If, as Derrida declared, nothing is extratextual ("il n'y a pas de hors-texte"), literary critics could direct their theory-driven gaze upon semiotic products of all kinds—legal documents, political tracts, soap operas, histories, talk shows, popular romances—and seek out their intertextualities. Consequently, as such "new historicist" critics as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose recognize, literary study is increasingly becoming the study of cultures. In history the early and rather self-conscious borrowing from anthropology has been followed by a theoretically heterogeneous rush to the study of culture, one modeled as much on literary studies or the work of Michel Foucault as on anthropology. As a consequence, the self-confident "new social history" of the 1960s and 1970s was succeeded by an equally self-confident "new cultural history" in the 1980s. In the late 1970s, an emerging "sociology of culture" began by applying standard sociological methods to studies of the production and marketing of cultural artifacts—music, art, drama, and literature. By the late 1980s, the work of cultural sociologists had broken out of the study of culture-producing institutions and moved toward studying the place of meaning in social life more generally. Feminism, which in the 1970s was concerned above all to document women's experiences, has increasingly turned to analyzing the discursive production of gender difference. Since the mid-1980s the new quasi-discipline of cultural studies has grown explosively in a variety of different academic niches—for example, in programs or departments of film studies, literature, performance studies, or communications. In political science, which is well known for its propensity to chase headlines, interest in cultural questions has been revived by the recent prominence of religious fundamentalism, nationalism, and ethnicity, which look like the most potent sources of political conflict in the contemporary world. This frenetic rush to the study of culture has everywhere been bathed, to a greater or lesser extent, in the pervasive transdisciplinary influence of the French poststructuralist trinity of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault.

It is paradoxical that as discourse about culture becomes ever more pervasive and multifarious, anthropology, the discipline that invented the concept—or at least shaped it into something like its present form—is somewhat ambivalently backing away from its long-standing identification with culture as its keyword and central symbol. For the past decade and a half, anthropology has been rent by a particularly severe identity crisis, which has been manifested in anxiety about the discipline's epistemology, rhetoric, methodological procedures, and political implications. The reasons for the crisis are many—liberal and radical guilt about anthropology's association with Euro-American colonialism, the disappearance of the supposedly "untouched" or "primitive" peoples who were the favored subjects for classic ethnographies, the rise of "native" ethnographers who contest the right of European and American scholars to tell the "truth" about their people, and the general loss of confidence in the possibility of objectivity that has attended poststructuralism and
postmodernism. As anthropology's most central and distinctive concept, "culture" has become a suspect term among critical anthropologists—who claim that both in academia and in public discourse, talk about culture tends to essentialize, exoticize, and stereotype those whose ways of life are being described and to naturalize their differences from white middle-class Euro-Americans. If Geertz's phrase "The Interpretation of Cultures" was the watchword of anthropology in the 1970s, Lila Abu-Lughod's "Writing against Culture" more nearly sums up the mood of the late 1980s and the 1990s.3

As John Brightman points out in his superb commentary on the recent disputes about culture in anthropology, the anthropological critics of the 1980s and 1990s have exhibited widespread "lexical avoidance behavior," either placing the term "culture" in quotation marks when it is used, refusing to use "culture" as a noun while continuing to use it as an adjective (as in "cultural anthropology"), or replacing it with alternative lexemes such as "habitus," "hegemony," or "discourse." This emerging anthropological taboo seems to me mistaken on two counts. First, it is based on the implicit assumption that anthropologists "own" the lexeme and that it is therefore responsible for any abuses that might be perpetrated by others employing the term. Second, it assumes that anthropological abstention from the use of the lexeme will magically abolish such abuses. The truth is that the term has escaped all possibility of control by anthropologists: whatever lexical practices the anthropologists may adopt, talk about culture will continue to thrive—in both abusive and acceptable ways—in a wide range of other academic disciplines and in ordinary language as well. Moreover, as Brightman again points out, even the critical anthropologists find it impossible to give up the concept of culture, as opposed to the lexeme. James Clifford's lament that "culture is a deeply compromised concept that I cannot yet do without" seem emblematic of the unresolved ambivalence: the concept is compromised and he hopes in the future to do without it, but because it continues to perform valuable intellectual work the fateful act of renunciation is indefinitely deferred. If, as I believe, Clifford is right that we cannot do without a concept of culture, I think we should try to shape it into one we can work with. We need to modify, rearticulate, and revitalize the concept, retaining and reshaping what is useful and discarding what is not.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CULTURE?

Writing in 1983, Raymond Williams declared that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." Its complexity has surely not decreased since then. I have neither the competence nor the inclination to trace out the full range of meanings of "culture" in contemporary academic discourse. But some attempt to sort out the different usages of the word seems essential, and it must begin by distinguishing two fundamentally different meanings of the term.

In one meaning, culture is a theoretically defined category or aspect of social life that must be abstracted out from the complex reality of human existence. Culture in this sense is always contrasted to some other equally abstract aspect or category of social life that is not culture, such as economy, politics, or biology. To designate something as culture or as cultural is to claim it for a particular academic discipline or subdiscipline—for example, anthropology or cultural sociology—or for a particular style or styles of analysis—for example, structuralism, ethno-science, componential analysis, deconstruction, or hermeneutics. Culture in this sense—as an abstract analytical category—only takes the singular. Whenever we speak of "cultures," we have moved to the second fundamental meaning.

In that second meaning, culture stands for a concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices. Culture in this sense is commonly assumed to belong to or to be isomorphic with a "society" or with some clearly identifiable subsocietal group. We may speak of "American culture" or "Samoa culture," or of "middle-class culture" or "ghetto culture." The contrast in this usage is not between culture and not-culture but between one culture and another—between American, Samoan, French, and Bororo cultures, or between middle-class and upper-class cultures, or between ghetto and mainstream cultures.

This distinction between culture as theoretical category and culture as concrete and bounded body of beliefs and practices is, as far as I can discern, seldom made. Yet it seems to me crucial for thinking clearly about cultural theory. It should be clear, for example, that Ruth Benedict's concept of cultures as sharply distinct and highly integrated refers to culture in the second sense, while Claude Lévi-
CULTURE AS A CATEGORY OF SOCIAL LIFE

Culture as a category of social life has itself been conceptualized in a number of different ways. Let me begin by specifying some of these different conceptualizations, moving from those I do not find especially useful to those I find more adequate.

Culture as learned behavior. Culture in this sense is the whole body of practices, beliefs, institutions, customs, habits, myths, and so on built up by humans and passed on from generation to generation. In this usage, culture is contrasted to nature: its possession is what distinguishes us from other animals. When anthropologists were struggling to establish that differences between societies were not based on biological differences between their populations—that is, on race—a definition of culture as learned behavior made sense. But now that racial arguments have virtually disappeared from anthropological discourse, a concept of culture so broad as this seems impossibly vague; it provides no particular angle or analytical purchase on the study of social life.

A narrower and consequently more useful conceptualization of culture emerged in anthropology during the second quarter of the twentieth century and has been dominant in the social sciences generally since World War II. It defines culture not as all learned behavior but as that category or aspect of learned behavior that is concerned with meaning. But the concept of culture-as-meaning is in fact a family of related concepts: meaning may be used to specify a cultural realm or sphere in at least four distinct ways, each of which is defined in contrast to somewhat differently conceptualized noncultural realms or spheres.

Culture as an institutional sphere devoted to the making of meaning. This conception of culture is based on the assumption that social formations are composed of clusters of institutions devoted to specialized activities. These clusters can be assigned to variously defined institutional spheres—most conventionally, spheres of politics, economy, society, and culture. Culture is the sphere devoted specifically to the production, circulation, and use of meanings. The cultural sphere may in turn be broken down into the subspheres of which it is composed: say, of art, music, theater, fashion, literature, religion, media, and education. The study of culture, if culture is defined in this way, is the study of the activities that take place within these institutionally defined spheres and of the meanings produced in them.

This conception of culture is particularly prominent in the discourses of sociology and cultural studies, but it is rarely used in anthropology. Its roots probably reach back to the strongly evaluative conception of culture as a sphere of “high” or “uplifting” artistic and intellectual activity, a meaning that Raymond Williams tells us came into prominence in the nineteenth century. But in contemporary academic discourse, this usage normally lacks such evaluative and hierarchizing implications. The dominant style of work in American sociology of culture has been demystifying: its typical approach has
been to uncover the largely self-aggrandizing, class-interested, manipulative, or professionalizing institutional dynamics that undergird prestigious museums, artistic styles, symphony orchestras, or philosophical schools. And cultural studies, which has taken as its particular mission the appreciation of cultural forms disdained by the spokesmen of high culture—rock music, street fashion, cross-dressing, shopping malls, Disneyland, soap operas—employs this same basic definition of culture. It merely trains its analytical attention on spheres of meaning production ignored by previous analysts and regarded as debased by elite tastemakers.

The problem with such a concept of culture is that it focuses only on a certain range of meanings, produced in a certain range of institutional locations—on self-consciously “cultural” institutions and on expressive, artistic, and literary systems of meanings. This use of the concept is to some extent implicit with the widespread notion that meanings are of minimal importance in the other “noncultural” institutional spheres: that in political or economic spheres, meanings are merely superstructural excrescences. And since institutions in political and economic spheres control the great bulk of society’s resources, viewing culture as a distinct sphere of activity may in the end simply confirm the widespread presupposition in the “harder” social sciences that culture is merely froth on the tides of society. The rise of a cultural sociology that limited itself to studying “cultural” institutions effected a partition of subject matter that was very unfavorable to the cultural sociologists. Indeed, only the supercession of this restrictive concept of culture has made possible the explosive growth of the subfield of cultural sociology in the past decade.

Cultural as creativity or agency. This usage of culture has grown up particularly in traditions that posit a powerful “material” determinism—most notably Marxism and American sociology. Over the past three decades or so, scholars working within these traditions have carved out a conception of culture as a realm of creativity that escapes from the otherwise pervasive determination of social action by economic or social structures. In the Marxist tradition, it was probably E. P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* that first conceptualized culture as a realm of agency, and it is particularly English Marxists—for example, Paul Willis in *Learning to Labor*—who have elaborated this conception. But the defining opposition on which this concept of culture rests—culture versus structure—has also become pervasive in the vernacular of American sociology. One clear sign that American anthropologists and sociologists have different conceptions of culture is that the opposition between culture and structure—an unquestioned commonplace in contemporary sociological discourse—is nonsensical in anthropology.

In my opinion, identifying culture with agency and contrasting it with structure merely perpetuates the same determinist materialism that “culturalist” Marxists were reacting against in the first place. It exaggerates both the implacability of socioeconomic determinations and the free play of symbolic action. Both socioeconomic and cultural processes are blends of structure and agency. Cultural action—say, performing practical jokes or writing poems—is necessarily constrained by cultural structures, such as existing linguistic, visual, or ludic conventions. And economic action—such as the manufacture or repair of automobiles—is impossible without the exercise of creativity and agency. The particulars of the relationship between structure and agency may differ in cultural and economic processes, but assigning either the economic or the cultural exclusively to structure or to agency is a serious category error.

This brings us to the two concepts of culture that I regard as most fruitful and that I see as currently struggling for dominance: the concept of culture as a system of symbols and meanings, which was hegemonic in the 1960s and 1970s, and the concept of culture as practice, which has become increasingly prominent in the 1980s and 1990s.

Cultural as a system of symbols and meanings. This has been the dominant concept of culture in American anthropology since the 1960s. It was made famous above all by Clifford Geertz, who used the term “cultural system” in the titles of some of his most notable essays. The notion was also elaborated by David Schneider, whose writings had a considerable influence within anthropology but lacked Geertz’s interdisciplinary appeal. Geertz and Schneider derived the term from Talcott Parsons’s usage, according to which the cultural system, a system of symbols and meanings, was a particular “level of abstraction” of social relations. It was contrasted to the “social system,” which was a system of norms and institutions, and to the “personality system,” which was a system of motivations. Geertz and Schneider especially wished to distinguish the cultural system from the social system. To engage in cultural analysis, for them, was to
abstract the meaningful aspect of human action out from the flow of concrete interactions. The point of conceptualizing culture as a system of symbols and meanings is to disentangle, for the purpose of analysis, the semiotic influences on action from the other sorts of influences—demographic, geographical, biological, technological, economic, and so on—that they are necessarily mixed with in any concrete sequence of behavior.

Geertz's and Schneider's post-Parsonian theorizations of cultural systems were by no means the only available models for symbolic anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s. The works of Victor Turner, whose theoretical origins were in the largely Durkheimian British school of social anthropology, were also immensely influential. Claude Lévi-Strauss and his many followers provided an entire alternative model of culture as a system of symbols and meanings—conceptualized, following Saussure, as signifiers and signifieds. Moreover, all these anthropological schools were, in a sense manifestations of a much broader "linguistic turn" in the human sciences—a diverse but sweeping attempt to specify the structures of human symbol systems and to indicate their profound influence on human behavior. One thinks above all of such French "structuralist" thinkers as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, or the early Michel Foucault. What all of these approaches had in common was an insistence on the systematic nature of cultural meaning and the autonomy of symbol systems—their distinctness from and irreducibility to other features of social life. They all abstracted a realm of pure signification out of the complex messiness of social life and specified its internal coherence and deep logic. Their practice of cultural analysis consequently tended to be more or less synchronic and formalist.

**Culture as practice.** The past decade and a half has witnessed a pervasive reaction against the concept of culture as a system of symbols and meanings, which has taken place in various disciplinary locations and intellectual traditions and under many different slogans—for example, "practice," "resistance," "history," "politics," or "culture as tool kit." Analysts working under all these banners object to a portrayal of culture as logical, coherent, shared, uniform, and static. Instead they insist that culture is a sphere of practical activity shot through by willful action, power relations, struggle, contradiction, and change.

In anthropology, Sherry Ortner in 1984 remarked on the turn to politics, history, and agency, suggesting Pierre Bourdieu's key term "practice" as an appropriate label for this emerging sensibility. Two years later the publication of James Clifford and George Marcus's collection *Writing Culture* announced to the public the crisis of anthropology's culture concept. Since then, criticisms of the concept of culture as a system of symbols and meanings have flowed thick and fast. The most notable work in anthropology has argued for the contradictory, politically charged, changeable, and fragmented character of meanings—both meanings produced in the societies being studied and meanings rendered in anthropological texts. Recent work in anthropology has in effect recast culture as a performative term.

Not surprisingly, this emphasis on the performative aspect of culture is compatible with the work of most cultural historians. Historians are generally uncomfortable with synchronic concepts. As they took up the study of culture, they subtly—but usually without comment—altered the concept by stressing the contradictionness and malleability of cultural meanings and by seeking out the mechanisms by which meanings were transformed. The battles in history have been over a different issue, pitting those who claim that historical change should be understood as a purely cultural or discursive process against those who argue for the significance of economic and social determinations or for the centrality of concrete "experience" in understanding it.

Sociologists, for rather different reasons, have also favored a more performative conception of culture. Given the hegemony of a strongly causalist methodology and philosophy of science in contemporary sociology, cultural sociologists have felt a need to demonstrate that culture has causal efficacy in order to gain recognition for their fledgling subfield. This has led many of them to construct culture as a collection of variables whose influence on behavior can be rigorously compared to that of such standard sociological variables as class, ethnicity, gender, level of education, economic interest, and the like. As a result, they have moved away from earlier Weberian, Durkheimian, or Parsonian conceptions of culture as rather vague and global value orientations to what Ann Swidler has termed a "tool kit" composed of a "repertoire" of "strategies of action."
many cultural sociologists, then, culture is not a coherent system of symbols and meanings but a diverse collection of "tools" that, as the metaphor indicates, are to be understood as means for the performance of action. Because these tools are discrete, local, and intended for specific purposes, they can be deployed as explanatory variables in a way that culture conceived as a translocal, generalized system of meanings cannot.

CULTURE AS SYSTEM AND PRACTICE

Much of the theoretical writing on culture during the past ten years has assumed that a concept of culture as a system of symbols and meanings is at odds with a concept of culture as practice. System and practice approaches have seemed incompatible, I think, because the most prominent practitioners of the culture-as-system-of-meanings approach effectively marginalized consideration of culture-as-practice—if they didn't preclude it altogether.

This can be seen in the work of both Clifford Geertz and David Schneider. Geertz’s analyses usually begin auspiciously enough, in that he frequently explicates cultural systems in order to resolve a puzzle arising from concrete practices—a state funeral, trances, a royal procession, cockfights. But it usually turns out that the issues of practice are principally a means of moving the essay to the goal of specifying in a synchronic form the coherence that underlies the exotic cultural practices in question. And while Geertz marginalized questions of practice, Schneider, in a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, explicitly excluded them, arguing that the particular task of anthropology in the academic division of labor was to study “culture as a system of symbols and meanings in its own right and with reference to its own structure” and leaving to others—sociologists, historians, political scientists, or economists—the question of how social action was structured.24 A “cultural account,” for Schneider, should be limited to specifying the relations among symbols in a given domain of meaning—which he tended to render unproblematically as known and accepted by all members of the society and as possessing a highly determinate formal logic.25

Nor is the work of Geertz and Schneider unusual in its marginalization of practice. As critics such as James Clifford have argued, conventional modes of writing in cultural anthropology typically smuggle highly debatable assumptions into ethnographic accounts—for example, that cultural meanings are normally shared, fixed, bounded, and deeply felt. To Clifford’s critique of ethnographic rhetoric, I would add a critique of ethnographic method. Anthropologists working with a conception of culture-as-system have tended to focus on clusters of symbols and meanings that can be shown to have a high degree of coherence or systematicity—those of American kinship or Balinese cockfighting, for instance—and to present their accounts of these clusters as examples of what the interpretation of culture in general entails. This practice results in what sociologists would call sampling on the dependent variable. That is, anthropologists who belong to this school tend to select symbols and meanings that cluster neatly into coherent systems and pass over those that are relatively fragmented or incoherent, thus confirming the hypothesis that symbols and meanings indeed form tightly coherent systems.

Given some of these problems in the work of the culture-as-system school, the recent turn to a concept of culture-as-practice has been both understandable and fruitful—it has effectively highlighted many of the earlier school’s shortcomings and made up some of its most glaring analytic deficits. Yet the presumption that a concept of culture as a system of symbols and meanings is at odds with a concept of culture as practice seems to me perverse. System and practice are complementary concepts: each presupposes the other. To engage in cultural practice means to utilize existing cultural symbols to accomplish some end. The employment of a symbol can be expected to accomplish a particular goal only because the symbols have more or less determinate meanings—meanings specified by their systematically structured relations to other symbols. Hence practice implies system. But it is equally true that the system has no existence apart from the succession of practices that instantiate, reproduce, or—most interestingly—transform it. Hence system implies practice.26 System and practice constitute an indissoluble duality or dialectic: the important theoretical question is thus not whether culture should be conceptualized as practice or as a system of symbols and meanings, but how to conceptualize the articulation of system and practice.
THE AUTONOMY OF CULTURE

Let me begin this task by stating some assumptions about practice. I assume that human practice, in all social contexts or institutional spheres, is structured simultaneously both by meanings and by other aspects of the environment in which they occur—by, for example, power relations or spatiality or resource distributions. Culture is neither a particular kind of practice nor practice that takes place in a particular social location. It is, rather, the semiotic dimension of human social practice in general. I further assume that these dimensions of practice mutually shape and constrain each other but also that they are relatively autonomous from each other.²⁷

The autonomy of the cultural dimension of practice can also be understood by thinking about culture as a system. The cultural dimension of practice is autonomous from other dimensions of practice in two senses. First, culture has a semiotic structuring principle that is different from the political, economic, or geographical structuring principles that also inform practice. Hence, even if an action were almost entirely determined by, say, overwhelming disparities in economic resources, those disparities would still have to be rendered meaningful in action according to a semiotic logic—that is, in language or in some other form of symbols. For example, an impoverished worker facing the only manufacturer seeking laborers in that district will have no choice but to accept the offer. Yet in accepting the offer she or he is not simply submitting to the employer but entering into a culturally defined relation as a wageworker. Second, the cultural dimension is also autonomous in the sense that the meanings that make it up—although influenced by the context in which they are employed—are shaped and reshaped by a multitude of other contexts. The meaning of a symbol always transcends any particular context, because the symbol is freighted with its usages in a multitude of other instances of social practice. Thus, our worker enters into a relationship of “wageworker” that carries certain recognized meanings—of deference, but also of independence from the employer and perhaps of solidarity with other wageworkers. These meanings are carried over from the other contexts in which the meaning of wage work is determined—not only from other instances of hirings but from statutes, legal arguments, strikes, socialist tracts, and economic treatises. They enter importantly into defining the local possibilities of action, in this case perhaps granting the worker greater power to resist the employer than the local circumstances alone would have dictated.

To understand fully the significance of this second sort of autonomy, it is important to note that the network of semiotic relations that make up culture is not isomorphic with the network of economic, political, geographical, social, or demographic relations that make up what we usually call a “society.” A given symbol—mother, red, polyester, liberty, wage labor, or dirt—is likely to show up not only in many different locations in a particular institutional domain (motherhood in millions of families) but in a variety of different institutional domains as well (welfare mothers as a potent political symbol, the mother tongue in linguistic quarrels, the Mother of God in the Catholic Church). Culture may be thought of as a network of semiotic relations cast across society, a network with a different shape and different spatiality than institutional, or economic, or political networks.²⁸ The meaning of a symbol in a given context may therefore be subject to redefinition by dynamics entirely foreign to that institutional domain or spatial location: thus, for example, in the 1950s a particular political meaning of the symbol “red” became so overpowering that the Cincinnati Reds baseball team felt the need to change its name to “the Redlegs.” This fact is what makes it possible—indeed virtually guarantees—that the cultural dimension of practice will have a certain autonomy from its other dimensions.

If culture has a distinct semiotic logic, then by implication it must in some sense be coherent. But it is important not to exaggerate or misrepresent the coherence of symbol systems. I assume the coherence of a cultural system to be semiotic in a roughly Saussurian sense: that is, that the meaning of a sign or symbol is a function of its network of oppositions to or distinctions from other signs in the system. This implies that users of culture will form a semiotic community—in the sense that they will recognize the same set of oppositions and therefore be capable of engaging in mutually meaningful symbolic action. To use the ubiquitous linguistic analogy, they will be capable of using the “grammar” of the semiotic system to make understandable “utterances.”

It should be noted, however, that this conception actually implies only a quite minimal cultural coherence—one might call it a thin coherence. The fact that members of a semiotic community recognize a
given set of symbolic oppositions does not determine what sort of statements or actions they will construct on the basis of their semiotic competence. Nor does it mean that they form a community in any fuller sense. They need not agree in their moral or emotional evaluations of given symbols. The semiotic field they share may be recognized and used by groups and individuals locked in fierce enmity rather than bound by solidarity, or by people who feel relative indifference toward each other. The posited existence of cultural coherence says nothing about whether semiotic fields are big or small, shallow or deep, encompassing or specialized. It simply requires that if meaning is to exist at all, there must be systematic relations among signs and a group of people who recognize those relations. That this Saussurian conception implies only a thin cultural coherence seems consonant with certain deconstructionist arguments. The entire thrust of deconstruction has been to reveal the instability of linguistic meaning. It has located this instability in the signifying mechanism of language itself—claiming that because the meaning of a linguistic sign always depends on a contrast with what the sign is opposed to or different from, language is inevitably haunted by the traces of the very terms it excludes. Consequently, the meaning of a text or an utterance can never be fixed; attempts to secure meaning can only defer, never exclude, a plethora of alternative or opposed interpretations.

Cultural analysts who—like me—wish to argue that cultural systems are powerfully constraining have often drawn back from deconstructionist arguments in horror. I think this is a major mistake; indeed, I would maintain that a broadly deconstructionist understanding of meaning is essential for anyone attempting to theorize cultural change. Deconstruction does not deny the possibility of coherence. Rather, it assumes that the coherence inherent in a system of symbols is thin in the sense I have described: it demonstrates over and over that what are taken as the certainties or truths of texts or discourses are in fact disputable and unstable. This seems entirely compatible with a practice perspective on culture. It assumes that symbol systems have a (Saussurian) logic but that this logic is open-ended, not closed. And it strongly implies that when a given symbol system is taken by its users to be unambiguous and highly constraining, these qualities cannot be accounted for by their semiotic qualities alone but must result from the way their semiotic structures are interlocked in practice with other structures—economic, political, social, spatial, and so on.29

Thus far in this section I have mainly been considering culture as system. But what I have said has implications for how we might conceptualize culture as practice. First, the conception of culture as semiotic implies a particular notion of cultural practice. To engage in cultural practice is to make use of a semiotic code to do something in the world. People who are members of a semiotic community are capable not only of recognizing statements made in a semiotic code (as I have pointed out above) but of using the code as well, of putting it into practice. To use a code means to attach abstractly available symbols to concrete things or circumstances and thereby to posit something about them. I would also argue that to be able to use a code means more than being able to apply it mechanically in stereotyped situations—it also means having the ability to elaborate it, to modify or adapt its rules to novel circumstances.

What things in the world are never fully determined by the symbolic net we throw over them—this also depends on their preexisting physical characteristics, the spatial relations in which they occur, the relations of power with which they are invested, their economic value, and, of course, the different symbolic meanings that may have been attributed to them by other actors. The world is recalcitrant to our predilections of meaning. Hence, as Marshall Sahlins has pointed out, every act of symbolic attribution puts the symbols at risk, makes it possible that the meanings of the symbols will be inflected or transformed by the uncertain consequences of practice. Usually, such attributions result in only tiny inflections of the meaning of symbols. But on some occasions—for example, when Hawaiian chiefs used the category of tabu to enforce their monopoly on trade with Western merchants—novel attributions can have the result of transforming the meaning of a symbol in historically crucial ways.30

Part of what gives cultural practice its potency is the ability of actors to play on the multiple meanings of symbols—thereby redefining situations in ways that they believe will favor their purposes. Creative cultural action commonly entails the purposeful or spontaneous importation of meanings from one social location or context to another. I have recently worked on a telling example of the importation of meaning. The men and women who captured the Bastille in July of 1789 were unquestionably characterizable as "the
people" in the common sense of "the mob" or the "urban poor." But Parisian radicals and members of the French National Assembly played on the ambiguity of the term to cast those who took the Bastille also as a concrete instance of the abstract category of "the people" who were said to be sovereign in radical political theory. Importing the association between the people and sovereignty from the context of political theory into that of urban crowd violence had the not inconsequential effect of ushering the modern concept of revolution into the world.31

CULTURES AS DISTINCT WORLDS OF MEANING

Up to now, I have been considering culture only in its singular and abstract sense—as a realm of social life defined in contrast to some other noncultural realm or realms. My main points may be summarized as follows: culture, I have argued, should be understood as a dialectic of system and practice, as a dimension of social life autonomous from other such dimensions both in its logic and in its spatial configuration, and as a system of symbols possessing a real but thin coherence that is continually put at risk in practice and therefore subject to transformation. Such a theorization, I maintain, makes it possible to accept the cogency of recent critiques yet retain a workable and powerful concept of culture that incorporates the achievements of the cultural anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s.

But it is probably fair to say that most recent theoretical work on culture, particularly in anthropology, is actually concerned primarily with culture in its pluralizable and more concrete sense—that is, with cultures as distinct worlds of meaning. Contemporary anthropological critics' objections to the concept of culture as system and their insistence on the primacy of practice are not, in my opinion, really aimed at the concept of system as outlined above—the notion that the meaning of symbols is determined by their network of relations with other symbols. Rather, the critics' true target is the idea that cultures (in the second, pluralizable sense) form neatly coherent wholes: that they are logically consistent, highly integrated, consensual, extremely resistant to change, and clearly bounded. This is how cultures tended to be represented in the classic ethnographies—Mead on Samoa, Benedict on the Zuni, Malinowski on the Trobriands, Evans-Prichard on the Nuer, or, for that matter, Geertz on the Balinese. But recent research and thinking about cultural practices, even in relatively "simple" societies, has turned this classic model on its head. It now appears that we should think of worlds of meaning as normally being contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, mutable, and highly permeable. Consequently the very concept of cultures as coherent and distinct entities is widely disputed.

Cultures are contradictory. Some authors of classic ethnographies were quite aware of the presence of contradictions in the cultures they studied. Victor Turner, for example, demonstrated that red symbolism in certain Ndembu rituals simultaneously signified the contradictory principles of matrilineal fertility and male bloodletting. But he emphasized how these potentially contradictory meanings were brought together and harmonized in ritual performances.32 A current anthropological sensibility would probably emphasize the fundamental character of the contradictions rather than their situational resolution in the ritual. It is common for potent cultural symbols to express contradictions as much as they express coherence. One need look no farther than the central Christian symbol of the Trinity, which attempts to unify in one symbolic figure three sharply distinct and largely incompatible possibilities of Christian religious experience: authoritative and hierarchical orthodoxy (the Father), loving egalitarianism and grace (the Son), and ecstatic spontaneity (the Holy Ghost). Cultural worlds are commonly beset with internal contradictions.

Cultures are loosely integrated. Classic ethnographies recognized that societies were composed of different spheres of activity—for example, kinship, agriculture, hunting, warfare, and religion—and that each of these component parts had its own specific cultural forms. But the classic ethnographers typically saw it as their task to show how these culturally varied components fit into a well-integrated cultural whole. Most contemporary students of culture would question this emphasis. They are more inclined to stress the centrifugal cultural tendencies that arise from these disparate spheres of activity, to stress the inequalities between those relegated to different activities, and to see whatever "integration" occurs as based on power or domination rather than on a common ethos. That most anthropologists now work on complex, stratified, and highly
differentiated societies, rather than on the "simple" societies that were the focus of most classic ethnographies, probably enhances this tendency.

Cultures are contested. Classic ethnographies commonly assumed, at least implicitly, that a culture's most important beliefs were consensual, agreed on by virtually all of a society's members. Contemporary scholars, with their enhanced awareness of race, class, and gender, would insist that people who occupy different positions in a given social order will typically have quite different cultural beliefs or will have quite different understandings of what might seem on the surface to be identical beliefs. Consequently, current scholarship is replete with depictions of "resistance" by subordinated groups and individuals. Thus James Scott detects "hidden transcripts" that form the underside of peasants' deference in contemporary Malaysia and Marshall Sahlins points out that it was Hawaiian women who most readily violated tabus when Captain Cook's ships arrived—because the tabu system, which classified them as profane (noa) as against the sacred (tabu) men, "did not sit upon Hawaiian women with the force it had for men." Cultural consensus, far from being the normal state of things, is a difficult achievement; and when it does occur it is bound to hide suppressed conflicts and disagreements.

Cultures are subject to constant change. Cultural historians, who work on complex and dynamic societies, have generally assumed that cultures are quite changeable. But recent anthropological work on relatively "simple" societies also finds them to be remarkably mutable. For example, Renato Rosaldo's study of remote Ilngot headhunters in the highlands of Northern Luzon demonstrates that each generation of Ilngots constructed its own logic of settlement patterns, kinship alliance, and feuding—logics that gave successive generations of Ilngots experiences that were probably as varied as those of successive generations of Americans or Europeans between the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries.

Cultures are weakly bounded. It is extremely unusual for societies or their cultural systems to be anything like isolated or sharply bounded. Even the supposedly simplest societies have had relations of trade, warfare, conquest, and borrowing of all sorts of cultural items—technology, religious ideas, political and artistic forms, and so on. But in addition to mutual influences of these sorts, there have long been important social and cultural processes that transcend societal boundaries—colonialism, missionary religions, inter-regional trading associations and economic interdependencies, migratory diasporas, and, in the current era, multinational corporations and transnational nongovernmental organizations. Although these transsocietal processes are certainly more prominent in more recent history than previously, they are hardly entirely new. Think of the spread of such "world religions" as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism across entire regions of the globe or the development of extensive territorial empires in the ancient world. I would argue that social science's once virtually unquestioned model of societies as clearly bounded entities undergoing endogenous development is as perverse for the study of culture as for the study of economic history or political sociology. Systems of meaning do not correspond in any neat way with national or societal boundaries—which themselves are not nearly as neat as we sometimes imagine. Anything we might designate as a "society" or a "nation" will contain, or fail to contain, a multitude of overlapping and interpenetrating cultural systems, most of them subsocietal, transsocietal, or both.

Thus all of the assumptions of the classic ethnographic model of cultures—that cultures are logically consistent, highly integrated, consensual, resistant to change, and clearly bounded—seem to be untenable. This could lead to the conclusion that the notion of coherent cultures is purely illusory; that cultural practice in a given society is diffuse and decentered; that the local systems of meaning found in a given population do not themselves form a higher-level, societywide system of meanings. But such a conclusion would, in my opinion, be hasty. Although I think it is an error simply to assume that cultures possess an overall coherence or integration, neither can such coherences be ruled out a priori.

**HOW COHERENCE IS POSSIBLE**

Recent work on cultural practice has tended to focus on acts of cultural resistance, particularly on resistance of a decentered sort—these dispersed everyday acts that thwart conventions, reverse valuations, or express the dominated's resentment of their domination. But it is important to remember that much cultural practice is concentrated in and around powerful institutional nodes—including
religions, communications media, business corporations, and, most spectacularly, states. These institutions, which tend to be relatively large in scale, centralized, and wealthy, are all cultural actors; their agents make continuous use of their considerable resources in efforts to order meanings. Studies of culture need to pay at least as much attention to such sites of concentrated cultural practice as to the dispersed sites of resistance that currently predominate in the literature.\textsuperscript{37}

Even in powerful and would-be totalitarian states, centrally placed actors are never able to establish anything approaching cultural uniformity. In fact, they rarely attempt to do so. The typical cultural strategy of dominant actors and institutions is not so much to establish uniformity as it is to organize difference. They are constantly engaged in efforts not only to normalize or homogenize but also to hierarchize, encapsulate, exclude, criminalize, hegemonize, or marginalize practices and populations that diverge from the sanctioned ideal. By such means, authoritative actors attempt, with varying degrees of success, to impose a certain coherence onto the field of cultural practice.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, one of the major reasons for dissident anthropologists’ discomfort with the concept of culture is that it is so often employed in all of these ways by various powerful institutional actors—sometimes, alas, with the help of anthropologists.

The kind of coherence produced by this process of organizing difference may be far from the tight cultural integration depicted in classic ethnographies. But when authoritative actors distinguish between high and low cultural practices or between those of the majority ethnicity and minorities or between the legal and the criminal or between the normal and the abnormal, they bring widely varying practices into semiotic relationship—that is, into definition in terms of contrasts with one another. Authoritative cultural action, launched from the centers of power, has the effect of turning what otherwise might be a babble of cultural voices into a semiotically and politically ordered field of differences. Such action creates a map of the “culture” and its variants, one that tells people where they and their practices fit in the official scheme of things.

The official cultural map may, of course, be criticized and resisted by those relegated to its margins. But subordinated groups must to some degree orient their local systems of meaning to those recognized as dominant; the act of contesting dominant meanings itself implies a recognition of their centrality. Dominant and oppositional groups interact constantly, each undertaking its initiatives with the other in mind. Even when they attempt to overcome or undermine each other, they are mutually shaped by their dialectical dance. Struggle and resistance, far from demonstrating that cultures lack coherence, may paradoxically have the effect of simplifying and clarifying the cultural field.

Moreover, dissenting or oppositional groups work to create and sustain cultural coherence among their own adherents, and they do so by many of the same strategies—hierarchization, encapsulation, exclusion, and the like—that the authorities use. Once again, it is notable that the concept of culture is as likely to be deployed politically by dissident groups as by dominant institutions, and with many of the same exclusionary, normalizing, and marginalizing effects as when it is deployed by the state. To take an obvious example, dissident nationalist and ethnic movements nearly always attempt to impose standards of cultural purity on those deemed members of the group and to use such standards to distinguish between those who are and are not group members.

None of this, of course, implies that cultures are always, everywhere, or unproblematically coherent. It suggests instead that coherence is variable, contested, ever-changing, and incomplete. Cultural coherence, to the extent that it exists, is as much the product of power and struggle for power as it is of semiotic logic. But it is common for the operation of power, both the efforts of central institutions and the acts of organized resistance to such institutions, to subject potential semiotic sprawl to a certain order: to prescribe (contested) core values, to impose discipline on dissenters, to describe boundaries and norms—in short, to give a certain focus to the production and consumption of meaning. As cultural analysts we must acknowledge such coherences where they exist and set ourselves the task of explaining how they are achieved, sustained, and dissolved.

It is no longer possible to assume that the world is divided up into discrete “societies,” each with its corresponding and well-integrated “culture.” I would argue forcefully for the value of the concept of culture in its nonpluralizable sense, while the utility of the term as pluralizable appears to me more open to legitimate question. Yet I think that the latter concept of culture also gets at something we need to retain: a sense of the particular shapes and consistencies of
worlds of meaning in different places and times and a sense that in spite of conflicts and resistance, these worlds of meaning somehow hang together. Whether we call these partially coherent landscapes of meaning “cultures” or something else—worlds of meaning, or ethnoscapes, or hegemonies—seems to me relatively unimportant so long as we know that their boundedness is only relative and constantly shifting. Our job as cultural analysts is to discern what the shapes and consistencies of local meanings actually are and to determine how, why, and to what extent they hang together.

NOTES

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2. One outcome of these efforts was William H. Sewell, Jr., Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848 (Cambridge, 1986).

3. This turn of historians to anthropology was quite widespread in the 1970s, not only in America, where it informed the work of such scholars as Natalie Davis and Robert Darnton, but also in France, England, and Australia, where anthropology influenced such scholars as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Jacques Le Goff, Keith Thomas, Peter Laslett, and Rhys Isaac.


8. The most celebrated expression of this angst is the collective volume edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley, 1986).


13. The two types of meanings I have distinguished here can be overlaid, so that the cultural aspects of the life of a people or a social group are distinguished from the noncultural aspects of its life. Hence, “Balinese culture” may be contrasted to “Balinese society” or “the Balinese economy.” In anthropological usage, however, “culture” also is commonly used to designate the whole of the social life of a given people, so that “Balinese culture” becomes a synonym for “Balinese society” rather than a contrastive term.


15. Williams, Keywords, pp. 90–91.


17. Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” and “Ideology as a Cultural System,” in Interpretation of Cultures, pp. 87–125, 193–233; Common Sense as a Cultural System” and “Art as a Cultural System,” in Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (New York, 1983), pp. 73–93, 94–120.


19. Talcott Parsons, The Social System (Glencoe, Ill., 1959). Geertz and Schneider were both students of Talcott Parsons and Clyde Kluckhohn in the Harvard Department of Social Relations and they taught together during the 1960s at the University of Chicago, then the epicenter of cultural anthropology.


29. This is not, of course, the usual conclusion arrived at by deconstructionists, who would insist that these "other structures" are no less textual than semiotic structures and that making sense of them is purely a matter of intertextuality. This epistemological and perhaps ontological difference between my position and that of deconstruction should make it clear that I am appropriating from deconstruction specific ideas that I find useful rather than adopting a full-scale deconstructionist position.


Method and Metaphor
after the New Cultural History

RICHARD BERNACKI

Why, after resounding intellectual success, do some new cultural historians place the eclipse of the social history of the 1960s and 1970s on a prospective horizon rather than in an elapsed past? As we all know, the new cultural history took shape in the 1980s as an upstart critique of the established social, economic, and demographic histories. In the eyes of many, myself included, the new history succeeded some time ago in making its agenda preeminent. Not only did it dislodge the assumption that researchers can take economic developments or pregiven social categories as the interpreters of changing forms of cultural expression, but it also stood on its own as an exciting project for exploring the hypothesis that social practices are constructed through the meanings they coordinate. When distinguished historians such as Joan W. Scott and Roger Chartier argue against “social history,” they now have difficulty citing eminent, active social historians who are worthy targets of criticism. Yet they continue to define what is distinctive about the work of cultural historians today by writing as if even now, social historians and many others innocently believe that they can treat discursive expression and human experience as reflections of material conditions and institutions. Scott accuses historians of treating social experience as “a realm of reality outside of discourse.”

Why this attachment of many cultural historians to an intellectual adversary that is, as it were, treated as immortal even when on its sickbed? The cultural historians usually deliver their criticisms of social history at a general, philosophical level. They rarely bother to fashion even straw man examples of social explanations against which their cultural alternatives can glimmer by contrast. Instead, their attachment to social history is a symptom of affiliation and dependency. The new cultural history altered the substance of historical argument by surreptitiously taking over the organizing gestures of the approach it aimed at supplanting. Its exemplary investigators have not merely ferreted out the unapparent import of changes in the methods by which, say, rulers display their authority or educators discipline their subjects. They followed the social historians in building explanations that rest on appeals to a “real” and irreducible ground of history, though that footing is now cultural and linguistic rather than (or as much as) social and economic. Just as the old historians advanced their project by naturalizing concepts such as “class” or “social community,” so cultural historians construed their own counter notions, such as that of the “sign,” as part of the natural furniture of the human world, rather than as something invented by the observer. The celebrated turn to cultural history rested on unacknowledged continuity.

My aims in this essay are to diagnose the predicaments of method that contributed to this surprising continuity during the cultural history “revolution” of the 1980s; to assess the effects of that continuity; to point to recent departures that suggest we are in the midst of a second turn, or group of turns, heading toward a very different kind of cultural history; and to appreciate the state of play in this “post-revolutionary” style of inquiry. In part this story can be understood through the way the early proponents of the new cultural history overserved bits of Clifford Geertz’s philosophical magic and through the return now of some, more faithfully, to the crux of Geertz’s exhilarating agenda for studying how culture works. Certainly the historians’ use of “culture” during the 1980s as a guide to a real fundament is nowhere more evident than in their selective and self-protective incorporation of Geertz’s ideas. I do not mean the Geertz who is taken by some as implying that cultures form unitary and centered wholes; nor at all the Geertz whose work, others suppose, grows out of the concept that at the site of research there is a single ethnographic reality waiting to be discovered; nor, finally, the Geertz whom some target for seeking only collective idioms in individual expression. Instead, I mean spellbinding features of Geertz that historical investigators accepted without argument—and, sometimes, still do.

“As interworked systems of construable signs,” Geertz declared,
"culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly— that is, thickly— described." "Historical analysts have understood this famous statement of project in The Interpretation of Cultures to be calling for an emphasis on the explication of particular meanings, as opposed to the enumeration of causal generalities. But an equally important principle entered the conduct of research without notice. Culture became a background condition underlying observable practices: it constituted the setting "within which" they are described. By disallowing any move that would put culture on the same plane as other elements with which it might be compared (it "is not a power"), Geertz introduced the actuality of culture as a general and necessary truth rather than as a useful construction. The investigators' abstract theory of the semiotic dimension and of its elemental constitution was an unacknowledged exception to the principle that knowledge is local, situated, and conjured by convention.

Geertz's emphasis on culture as a grounding reality rather than as a fabricated element of analysis legitimized the breakthrough works of the new cultural history. In the revelatory essays collected in The Great Cat Massacre, Robert Darnton described cultural elements as substances more natural and immediate— maybe we even say more "factual"— than those captured in the aggregate statistics of socioeconomic analysts. "Cultural objects are not manufactured by the historian," Darnton declared. "They give off meaning." In Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution, Lynn Hunt, like other path breakers at the start of the 1980s, cited anthropology— that of Geertz in particular— as final philosophy, not just illustrative aid. To motivate study of political icons, Hunt asserted that the substance and purpose of public life are ultimately symbolic. "Political symbols," she summed up, are "the ends of power itself." Roger Chartier recently updated this emphasis on culture as a grounding constituent in his evaluation of Foucault's contributions, endorsing a distinction between social institution and textual representations while insisting that "the real weighs equally on either side."

The early masterpieces of the new cultural historians have forever enriched our interpretive skills. But we may have reached a point at which essentializing the semiotic dimension or "culture" as a naturally given dimension of analysis is shutting off reflection and disabling possibly illuminating interpretations of history.

THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF CULTURE

It is crucial for me to emphasize that the new historians have not necessarily taken culture— conceived as a kind of linguistic system or as the symbolic mediator of agents' experiences— as the only genuine cause or as the ultimately determinative influence. To the contrary, it has sometimes served them just as well to place culture beside other separate, abstract dimensions— such as power relations or socioeconomic resources— so that it, too, is naturalized and deprived of its status as a historically generated "seeing as." At issue is not the influence the new cultural historians attribute to culture, but solely the means by which they construe that influence and invoke it in their explications of historical process. My hunch is that the ritual invocations of Geertz may have reflected not so much the independent force of philosophical currents as the historians' recourse to a figure that would stabilize their use of evidence.

The defining strategy of the new history is that it incorporates culture into historical explications with the minimal premises that culture is indispensable and irreducible. The operation of these two premises can be seen in their original clarity in the work of E. P. Thompson. Thompson himself, of course, bridged the older social and the newer cultural history. Since he remained outside the circle of those who developed the culturalist or linguistic bent without reservation, Thompson kept challenging himself to respecify the causal standing of the intellectual and moral traditions he had traced in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. His strategy was to describe with compelling detail how the earnings of the proud artisans, the prices of tools and bread in the countryside, and wage differentials in the new mechanical industries conformed to community expectations and to notions of social honor. He used these particulars to illustrate the premise that the economy becomes a historical force only as it is encoded in culture and interpreted in experience. By establishing the symbolic order as a historical object in this fashion, Thompson believed that he demonstrated that culture was as primary to history as any contrasting term, whether it was glossed
as "the economic" or "the material." He wrote: "I am calling in question... the notion that it is possible to describe a mode of production in 'economic' terms; leaving aside as secondary (less 'real') the norms, the culture, the critical concepts around which this mode of production is organized." 14

In such reflections Thompson granted culture its role by negative assertion: it cannot be dispensed with; it is not less "real." 15 He did not isolate in situ the presumptive differences in historical process that he could attribute to the configurative influence of a particular cultural element or complex. His primary reliance on intensive case studies, like that of most historians and of Geertz, clarifies the relations among elements in a single setting rather than seeking the reasons for differences in outcomes in a variety of settings. This design of research requires a philosophy to show that the disclosed patterning is not merely compelling but also "real," that it selects processes and does not merely accompany them, and that it composes an effective ground and "explanation." Geertz presents it the other way around, as if the theory came before any context of inquiry: an "is" —the order of signs truly is an ontological ground of social life—mandates that the decipherment of meanings constitutes the appropriate mode of explanation. Thompson's example suggests that from early on, the method of single case study pressed historians to naturalize the concept of culture.

Still, if histories portray the ways in which agents' conduct is necessarily informed by a symbolic framework, we are compelled to return to the substantive question that Geertz first posed: What configured those signs or symbols and what made them seem existentially real? How does grasping their generation of meaning enable us to account for crucial variation in result? 16 To explain a historical process in all its richness, components unlimited in type and scope are needed. Almost any element can thereby satisfy the criterion of historical indispensability, but it does not thereby define an approach or deserve analytic emphasis. Accordingly, the exercise of classifying a particular complex of meanings as "requisite" or "enabling" has no significance. With Thompson's demonstrations, culture might serve as an indispensable reservoir of reconstructable symbols for the construction of practices, while the forces of market and technological development, by guiding their use and by deciding which of those symbols seems existentially real or effective, might on their own configure the survival, the reshaping, and the use of those malleable resources—and thus the development of symbolically constituted practice.

At the level of historical process, Thompson himself offers compelling evidence of culture's dependency. He shows how the moral economy and corporate tradition were reshaped to suit the needs of capital. 17 The common people's invocation of the moral economy survived only so long as it facilitated the process of rank price bargaining among the common people, gentry, traders, and local authorities. 18 Thompson accounts for the differences in the workers' cultural representations of time by "work situations," "technological conditioning," and "changes in manufacturing technique." 19 Of course Thompson movingly portrays the irreducibility of culture—the meanings created by the articulation of signs cannot be reduced to a different, nonlinguistic kind of order. Yet verifying this reality does not show that culture in its own right initiates or directs historical outcomes—or, in a word, that it makes a nonresidual difference. 20

If this diagnosis has some accuracy, researchers who illustrate merely the indispensability and irreducibility of the semiotic dimension are likely to leave the explanations of outcomes in particular settings to other demographic, economic, or political logics. Cultural analysts will unintentionally diminish culture to a design, however imperfect, of the forces cited by the old social historians, such as the taken-for-granted efforts of dominant actors to marginalize other groups. 21 Sarah Maza recently called attention to the reductionist moment in one of Darnton's rightly celebrated essays, "Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose." To be sure, Darnton insists that venerable rural stories have their own symbolic coherence. Yet in practice, Maza notices, Darnton's strategy "is to ask what concrete experiences most peasants would have had in common and, once these are identified—scarcity, hunger, recurrent epidemics, high mortality—to explain the ways in which the tales express material conditions in storied form." 22 Likewise, in "Titan, Ovid, and Sixteenth-Century Codes for Erotic Illustration," Carlo Ginzburg puts in the foreground the hidden order of signification in new genres of Italian mythological paintings. Having established the irreducibility of these new conveyors of meaning, Ginzburg asks about the background from which they emerged and concludes: "In the final analy-
sis, all this probably can be explained by the demographic strains emerging in European society." Analogously, in labor history, Patrick Joyce in his earliest, landmark analyses of British factory life attributes the power of paternalist cultural regimes to their correspondence with the level of mechanization.23

Do these examples of material or social reductionism represent accidental lapses or are they evidence of some more general divergence between declared principles and actual practice of explanation? Not just the weight of examples but the composition of the purest works of the new language-focused history suggests that the lapses are fundamental.24 In her justly canonized essay "Work Identities for Men and Women," Joan Scott follows the play of imagery in "economic" discourse among Parisian garment workers during the 1840s. Yet she cites the crude material pressures of declining wages and de-skilling as the cause of workers' adoption of such discourse.25 Why could not a different type of idiom have coordinated the workers' understanding of their problems? Why should the analysts encode the workers' problems as "economic" rather than as generated by, say, cultural breakdowns in the production of publicly responsible citizens? By accepting the workers' distress as economic, Scott leaves in place unreconstructed social theory; by taking the link between the character of the problem and the cultural response as unproblematic—in effect collapsing the two—she accepts reductionism by default.26

Setting the explanatory task as showing that culture is indispensable and irreducible fits the historians' preference for minimal, therefore more easily establisable, explanatory claims. But its inadequacy for establishing the distinctive, autonomous contribution of culture in particular historical outcomes leads analysts to resort to a maximal philosophical claim that culture is an all-encompassing constituent and that our contrived concept of "culture" should be taken as reflecting the basic constitution of the world.27 That stance leads analysts to shy away from difficult questions about the creation and use of cultural forms—most particularly whether, when, and how particular cultural elements make a distinguishable difference of their own for historical outcomes. If we do not confront these issues directly, Scott shows, our case studies are likely to leave intact older theories that subvert our own agenda.

THE INSULATION OF CULTURAL ILLUMINATIONS

The early practitioners insulated cultural analysis from the vigor of opposing contentions. A frequent strategy was to assume the philosophical superiority of their approach by claiming that competing kinds of explanation fail to recognize that "economic" or "social" mechanisms are partially cultural as well. To be sure, symbols are as essential for designing the head of a drill press as for creating the octave of a sonnet. But declarations that the material of something (or everything) is symbolic are irrelevant to the challenge of explaining differences—and thus construable processes—in history. Neither reductionist economists in history nor, say, rational choice theorists in sociology differ from cultural historians in their outlooks on the constituents of historical process.

At the level of principle, many economists stand in perfect agreement with the sophisticated stance of the cultural historian Peter Sahlin. "Function and meaning are not alternatives," Sahlin persuasively concluded in Forest Rites; "the practical reason of an act is an interested deployment of meanings." Economists who study gift exchange and consumer behavior, for instance, assume that symbolic forms are not mere disguises for utilitarian calculation; rather, they emphasize that calculation starts from these forms. These economists apply form equations of investment and returns, as Colin Camerer did in his representative article "Gifts as Economic Signals and Social Signals." Yet the premise of these strategic simulations, as Camerer insisted, is that "gifts are symbolic of some qualities of gift givers or receivers; gifts are actions people take that convey meaning."28

What divides the cultural historian from an economist are primarily, and merely, matters of emphasis when it comes to explaining particular courses of development in history. The economist focuses on the tactically shifting exploitation of symbols over time.29 The cultural historian focuses either on the continuities and partial coherences of symbols and practices that transcend fluctuation in the pragmatic context of action or, conversely, on discontinuities that transcend an unfluctuating context of action. Either way, cultural analysts define the pragmatic contexts in which symbols are employed for the sake of revealing governing patterns that utilitarian manipu-
lation of symbols or adaptation to the environment do not readily explain. That was the explanatory challenge that drove Geertz to the intriguing question not just of how agents use symbols to project meanings (which, if they are only minimally coherent, can be mainly reactive or accommodating) but, more crucially perhaps, of how and when their use of symbols creates overriding experiential realities that affect the forms of action.

When economists proceed nowadays as if their explanations of regional and national differences in industrial and governmental institutions are plausibly complete (or completable), they see the task as one of isolating the differential causes, not one of reasoning all the way to the most basic enabling conditions of social conduct. The paradox is that the economists thereby proceed as nominalists who know how to wear their inventions lightly; the new cultural historians, by contrast, are in practice the realists of substance, who proceed as if theirs is a worthy method of inquiry by virtue of its derivation straight from an ultimate ground of human life—be it glossed as culture, signs, or text. Cultural historians’ sardonic self-reflection on the textual construction of both social life and historical explanation creates a metaphysical bond between life and its explication. The greatest conceit of scientism is not that there is one set of discoverable “facts”: it is that a mode of inquiry and argument derive from the essence of the world. That was the inaugural conceit among many new cultural historians, most of whom otherwise emphasized just the reverse—the social contrivancy of all concepts and practices under study from the past.

THE RETURN TO REALIST TROPE

Some early practitioners of cultural history shielded their inquiries by reviving what Hayden White has termed the “realist” trope of synecdoche. To be sure, they have relied on the self-critical trope of irony to articulate relations to outside, competing modes of explanation. At that level, they indicate some measure of disbelief in the ability of language to capture the makeup of things. But grasping culture as an ontological ground enables the new cultural historians to combine this formally ironic stance with a reliance on synecdoche inside their own scholarly game. They use that trope by taking disparate pieces of information as intimations of an underlying cultural

energy or character that suffuses each part with the quality of meaning. If they find consistencies in the structure or content of signs across arenas of practice or over time, they take this as prima facie evidence of culture’s organizing power or of a basic societal influence. In their view, repetition of cultural form across arenas of practice or across time is never just repetition. It necessarily points to intrinsic linkages of meaning, even when (or because) the analyst does not uncover the efficient causes manufacturing and reproducing the cultural forms.

Thomas Laqueur’s pithy and brilliant essay “Credit, Novels, Masturbation” is a recent model. Laqueur dazzles us with the linkages among three discursive formations in eighteenth-century France and Britain: those of the artificial economy running on credit, of imaginative novel-reading, and of anxiety about masturbatory disease. The contemporaneous surfacing of these three elements seems uncanny: “Elias’s and others’ suggestions,” Laqueur reasons, “demand that we look beyond the particular, micro-histories of each element of this constellation for some more general and overarching account.” To meet that challenge, Laqueur recasts each of the discourses as instances of a comprehensive movement to define “new forms of sociability[... new ways of understanding the self].” This underlying process, he suggests, united all the intellectual milieus—those of physicians, journalists, economists, philosophers—into “the same world.” The imputed actuality of this whole excludes consideration of efficient causes—of whether local, instrumental manipulations of varying purpose could also have yielded each discourse. Laqueur wins us over in short order, but this may be due to the way synecdoche discourages follow-up questions that would “denature” the meaningful character of the similarities across varied pieces of discourse.

The new cultural historians figure patterns over time by the same device. In labor history, for instance, cultural analysts take repetition of discursive constructions of “labor” as prima facie evidence of culture’s autonomous continuity. Yet it is equally conceivable that discursive forms recur, if only by reinvention, thanks to the daily cost-benefit calculations of agents who find them effective within a particular institutional environment. This is the cynical possibility that emerges from Michael Sonencher’s study of French artisanal
rhetoric. Not that this possibility is always fulfilled in historical process. But the realist presumption of a meaningful connection beneath symbolic repetitions over time preempts the questions of how the symbols are produced and validated, of whether and how the meanings they orchestrate represent a cause of their emergence and survival. When cultural historians treat the survival of signs and concepts as a nonpuzzle, they unintentionally replicate the stance of the old social historians in the Annales school who, analogously, granted demographic trends a stability and aura of their own.42

EXPLANATION VERSUS INTERPRETATION

Many of the new cultural historians have safeguarded their studies by insisting that interpretation is a distinctive kind of explanation, one that is irreconcilable with conventional notions of causation. In practice, however, even Geertz, who in part authorized this shield, makes intriguing, assessable, and seemingly "causal" claims about the way culture works; Ann Swidler, Ronald Jepperson, and Mark Schneider have identified many of the strongest.43 For example, Geertz assumes in most instances that the influence of aesthetic performances, even that of the Balinese cockfight, is heightened when it accords with the expectations generated in other domains of life, not when (as in some great art) it violates expectations to create awkward but engrossing tension. He also implies causation in assuming that symbols are most influential when they are polysemous and enigmatic, and when they resonate with ever-wider frames of reference—the Balinese cockfight connecting, for instance, with local appreciations of sexuality, animal savagery, male rivalries, and more. Yet some analysts have explored just the opposite hypothesis, namely, that certain kinds of art, sport, and literature acquire their freight of significance from simplicity and univocity.44

These opposing causal claims only confirm the importance of Geertz's breathtaking agenda. In his essays on religion, art, and law as different orders of experience, Geertz established the anthropological task as that of analyzing the varied means by which symbols become deeply meaningful and reality defining across different types of settings.45 Both the agenda of questions about how culture works and the illuminating exemplars, such as "Deep Play," thereby confound attempts to establish an abstract divide between interpretation and explanation.46 The riddle of what constitutes an adequate explication and of how to distinguish causal claims from interpretive ones has vexed the best minds in philosophy for more than a century.47 What is increasingly clear, however, is that the approach most likely to fulfill the promise of Geertz's agenda will avoid an a priori, definitional harrowing of the proper means for testing and modeling the creation of symbolic practices.48

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE SIGN

Taking culture as an ultimate nonfigural ground drove the new cultural historians to identify the agents' use of culture with inscribing and deciphering signs. The logic powering this linkage was profound: the notion of culture as ultimate ground demanded some investigatory model of culture that did not appear to be a perspectival metaphor, a mere "seeing as." The notion of "sign reading" met that inaugural requirement. Applied to the concrete site at which people read the marks of a lettered page, the construct "sign reading" is baptized as transparently real, as literal. Sign reading thereby escapes from the guise of instituted "sign" and can serve as the transcendent foundation for all understanding and meaningful practice. In consequence, sign reading served a naturalizing function in the new cultural history—as the pivot for merging verbal caption with the historically real—just as "class" had in the older social history.

The influence of the model of sign reading can hardly be underestimated. In The Great Cat Massacre, we all know, Parisian printers in revolt juxtapose signs as readable art and the bourgeois surveyor of Montpellier "reads" the city as a "text."49 It is also obvious that some of the burgeoning literatures on cultures of the body treat the human frame itself as a sign that agents use as if they write with it and read it.50 In addition, however, the notion that agents use culture in the way literatures use signs has guided many attempts to explain how culture works in the "hard" domains of warfare and manufacture. William Reddy has astutely traced the halting construction of concepts of exchange and of the market among nineteenth-century French employers and workers. In so doing, he convincingly translates the workings of industry into the imaginative signs used for their conception.51 Historians have also shown how the implements of technology were fashioned to serve as signs. The title of an essay
by Joel Pfeifer conveys some of the heavy wear taken by this model of culture: "Reading a Mid-19th-Century, Two-Cylinder Parlor Stove as a Text." It is a model of culture that every extensively employed metaphor in research, that of sign reading has been limiting as well as enabling. The model privileges the semantic contrasts among series of signs as the structuring principle of culture. This Saussure-affiliated approach by no means excludes a parallel emphasis on "practice" as the means for instantiating and transforming the system of signs. (Saussure had emphasized from the start that langue is both product and instrument of parole.) But from its perspective, to engage in practice is to use a semiotic code to stipulate something about the world. The best-known histories calling on this model of culture portray transformative conduct as language use that effects a metaphorical transfer or that stretches a prior category so as to encode circumstances anew. Such a notion of practice associates the experience of meaning with the apprehension of sign statements rather than with the processual action of statements as deeds. From its perspective, practice creates meaning by the signs it arranges, but practice itself has meaning only when it is reflected on in turn as a sign in relation to other signs.

My suspicion is that the model of "sign reading" renders sign system and practice complementary but not coequal. The structure/practice contrast recognizes only one kind of structure—synchronic connections among signs—to the exclusion of structures (and thus ways of making meaning) that are lodged in the processual execution of practice. Max Weber’s Protestant Ethic serves as a paradigmatic example of the problems historical researchers encounter when they attempt to locate the structure of culture in the relations among signs. Weber argued that the contrasts between religious and rationalistic economic development in Europe. But Weber had difficulty explaining how the sign system, in which the doctrine of predetermination served as cornerstone, was a cause of rationalized entrepreneurial conduct. Why did predetermination not produce, as logically would be expected, fatalistic resignation? (Weber responded by invoking a lack of adepts’ psychological needs for assurance.) Weber encountered the same kind of problem in explaining the survival of ascetic rationalism into the twentieth century. If people's reading of the world controls the form of their practice, Ann Swidler has asked, how are we to explain the strong continuity in rationalized economic conduct in Europe (and the rest of the world) despite epochal changes in religious belief and ideology? Historical investigations are hardly alone in showing the gap between belief and concrete lines of practice to be wide enough for the same belief to support varied practice, or for the same practice to be supported by different beliefs. In philosophy, for instance, Charles Taylor's unraveling of what it means to follow a prescription reveals the logical distance between agents' "reading," or discursive apprehension, of rules and agents' "doings," or applications, of those rules.

THREE VISIONS OF CULTURE IN PRACTICE

To draw more convincing links between culture and the construction of practice, then, historical investigators are beginning to focus more immediately on the implicit schemas employed in practice, rather than analyzing only representations of or for practice. To frame these schemas—which Geertz called, less pretentiously, "the informal logic of actual life"—historical investigators have appealed to three visions of culture in use. Each vision offers a different means for emphasizing that the schemas organizing symbolic practice are not defined only by semantic relations in a sign system.

First, in the temporally unfolding use of symbols, agents call on bodily competencies that have their own structure and coordinating influence. For example, historians of the establishment of credible experimentation in seventeenth-century Britain have underscored that the replication of tests depended on tacit know-how to make and operate instruments, a capacity that was lodged and standardized in body and hand, never represented on paper or in speech. These forms of understanding were transferred by a nonverbal enculturation of the body. Historians using this vision have identified novel forms of cultural coherence across practices based on corporeal principles of "how-to" rather than on semantic relations among verbal signs. In the development of experimental science, for instance, some have surmised that a body hexis linked together the performance of experiment, the use of the body in reading the published results, and the holding of the body to secure social and thus scientific credibility. This vision of practice enriches the metaphors of language use with the insight that agents who engage in symbolic practice by any
spoken or written idioms are not only representing but also occupying the world.⁶²

The second vision of practice builds on the assumption that for signs to say something about the world, they have to be so put together that they can be taken as “pointing toward” the world. The generalizable know-how of applying the signs to context and of building whole series of sign statements has an autonomy of its own. This vision frames the “informal logic of everyday life” as a perduring ethos or style of practice. It thereby helps resolve one of Weber’s historical quandaries: the style of rational, this-worldly asceticism continued to organize business culture and the techniques of self-scrutiny and interpretation even after the shared religious definition of the ends of conduct, and thus of conduct’s meaning, was completely transformed.⁶³ The implication is not that culture is unimportant. Rather, analysts can reframe culture as the organizing style of Protestant practice, which proved more effective in structuring and directing historical process than were the beliefs conveyed by Protestant signs.

Cultural analysts recently extended this historical insight when they found egregious deficiencies in how accountants actually applied double-entry bookkeeping, a key emblem of economic rationality, in the era of capitalist takeoff. The accountants’ lapses hint that the technique’s spread in Europe was not due entirely to its real or imagined contribution to a meaningful end, that of profit making. Instead, the format of accounting fit into a broader ethos of calculation, abstraction from context, and spatial representation of information independent of the culturally framed goals and ultimate meaning of conduct.⁶⁴ Similarly, Foucault’s Discipline and Punish suggested that minute disciplinary procedures cohered into an overarching style of practice even when their organizing principles were not articulated discursively. Because they were applied silently, they subverted the clamorous Enlightenment discourses.⁶⁵ Historical studies such as these share the assumption that culture influences outcomes by offering a ready store of techniques and capacities on which agents call to build their lines of conduct. The central insight of this vision is that cultural realms are to be distinguished from one another by their modalities for putting signs into action, not by the varieties of their sign systems.

A third vision extends this insight to reach a paradox (best clarified through illustration): the pragmatic form of a symbolic practice may carry messages apart from the signs those practices use.⁶⁶ This is the unifying figure of Benedict Anderson’s enormously influential Imagined Communities. Anderson, unlike many who analyze the invention of national identity, does not argue from the imagery of nationalist texts or from the manipulation of emblems of nationality. He reasons from the experience of reading in an anonymous community of print consumers. Every reader in the act of digesting the morning newspaper is “well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.” The readers receive the core principle of the national community—that they are equal members of a collective “we” moving through calendrical time—as an implied principle of practice.⁶⁷ By a similar logic, my comparative research on nineteenth-century piece-rate scales in German versus British weaving mills found that weavers received cross-nationally differing concepts of labor as a commodity only in the process of using those scales. When posted as written texts on the factory walls, the schedules all appeared to gauge the same object: finished cloth. The weavers in both lands used the schedules to maximize earnings, not to conform to a premise about the transfer of labor.⁶⁸ Yet by accustoming themselves to different ways of comparing the value of their fabrics, German weavers experienced the expenditure of labor power, British weavers the length of output, as the denominator of abstract, quantifiable labor.

These three emerging visions—culture as the corporeal know-how of practice, as the organizing ethos of practice, and as the experienced import of practice—can easily overlap in any particular study. Yet each of the three encourages us to return to an examination of informal, practical coherence as Geertz first advised. Each looks at the articulation of cultural forms, as Geertz said, “from the role they play (Wittgenstein would say their ‘use’) in an ongoing pattern of life, not from any intrinsic relations they bear to one another.”⁶⁹ Each one identifies culture less by a distinctive base—sign system—than by a distinctive process of use that is interpenetrated with other elements. Most important, each of these three visions has
its own methodological illuminations and muddles. Thus the view of culture as an organizing style of practice helps us understand how cultural forms are reproduced by agents’ active strategizing, not by inertia or passivity; the view of culture as experienced import of practice offers a way of explaining the resonance of ideologies with agents’ self-created experience. Yet the interpretive obstacles are forbidding. Historical researchers by and large have as evidence of the past only what has been inscribed in static texts or in material artifacts appropriated as texts. How best to extrapolate from text to body hexis, from sign to the lived “doing” of communicative practice? How should one fit together these varied perspectives of culture, including the valuable accomplishments of the older model of “sign reading”? Once we have found multiple kinds of structure within practice, the challenge may no longer be only that of articulating practice with structure. The trick may be to hatch ways of articulating different kinds of structures with each other.\(^71\)

THE PRESENT STATE OF PLAY

The tantalizing question is not just how these problems will work themselves out in the end, but what their emergence and undertaking amount to in the present. One change is that historians are beginning to deconstruct the guiding figure of “reading a text,” bringing the new perspectives of culture in use back to the baptismal site of book reading. In employing the metaphor of reading a text, the early new cultural historians relied on the apparently self-evident premise that reading is a process that takes place within the mind of an individual reader as he or she makes connections among signs. However, German historians, including Erich Schön and Friedrich Kittler, have completed remarkable studies that recast reading as a bodily practice. Schön illustrates this perspective by tracing a historical shift in the principles for setting the body to work in processing the marks of the printed page. In the early eighteenth century, silent readers positioned themselves, whether on their feet or on chairs, to move and sway as they registered words. This technique conditioned identification with a text’s subject matter by the physical empathy of the body. At the end of the eighteenth century, new means of reading immobilized and bracketed the body. By correlating readers’ responses to text with their corporeal technique, Schön indicates how the material change produced more flexible attachments to protagonists and subject matter. Reading could take place as fanciful experiment, not physical identification. In Schön’s provocative depiction, ideas seem to come to life through a know-how of the body, and they enjoy their vitality within a physical habitus.\(^72\)

Schön’s investigation is one of several that put reading into unexpected contexts by treating it as an enacted process. This is not to say that recent works offer a new truth for what reading actually is. But they remind us that the whole ground of the new cultural history’s way of grasping meaning is nothing more than a recently concocted “seeing as.” Given the power exercised over the contemporary historical imagination by models of reading, investigators seem likely to take increasing stock of these departures. As that happens, the reigning model of “reading a text” will be seated beside multiple metaphors of reading as symbolic practice. We may recover the pluralist repertoire of the eighteenth century, when more diverse senses of book reading—as a corporeal process, as a social art, as a structured ritual, and as a contingent event—were in circulation. Just as the old social history unraveled because of debate around the analytic status of “class,” so the new cultural history is showing stress around “sign reading.” In both instances, researchers applied uncharacteristic, incongruous models to an exemplary site of social practice. As a result, they destabilized the figure that had naturalized much prevailing theory.\(^75\)

A second implication of this ferment is that it enjoins a shift in the motive of inquiry. If we are no longer comfortable asking how well an explanation resonates with our sense of ultimate constituents or how well it approaches an ideal of verisimilitude, perhaps we will consider a criterion that usually is more demanding and sometimes troublesome to apply: how well does an explanation drawing on a nominalist model of cultural process account for change or for differences of interest between historical cases, at least relative to competing varieties of explanation? Bellwether historians seem to be shifting to this standard. In The Family Romance of the French Revolution, Lynn Hunt shows how the revolutionaries’ metaphors of familial relations established an enduring dynamic of politics not only in France but in an affiliated comparison case, the United States. Hunt hews to the analytic question of how agents used the family imagery to steer the desecration and resanctification of authority. She asks
how the metaphors were drawn from their context and how they
made a difference. But, shrewdly, she does not ask how they can be
attached to any transhistorical foundation in culture or the psyche.

The new cultural historians have long applied stringent measures
for assessing analyses of the experienced meaning of signs. Darnton’s
invocation of a collective idiom in “Workers Revolt: The Great Cat
Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin,” Natalie Davis’s allegedly “pres-
entist” assumptions in her study of Martin Guerre, Carlo Ginzburg’s
etymological reductionism in the Witches’ Sabbath—each of these
well-known foci of criticism and counterargument takes as its
starting point not just the authenticity of reconstructions. These
interchanges also turn on the usefulness of competing, general mod-
els of how meaning is generated. In another well-known example,
Joan W. Scott asserted that Gareth Stedman Jones overlooked impor-
tant messages in the British Chartist movement because he misun-
derstood the fundamentals of signification. “By failing to attend to
how meanings rest on differentiation,” she concluded, “he missed
both class and gender in their specific manifestation in Chartistism.”

With such keen interest in models of how culture works, it may not
take much to shift historians away from their claims about the
essence of cultural phenomena and move them toward questioning.
I hope, the isolable effect of particular cultural forms and the means
sufficient for reproducing or changing them. Guides may be found
among the growing number of works, such as David Laitin’s Heg-
emony and Culture, that strictly compare the accuracy of radically op-
opposed explanations for the change and reproduction of salient cul-
tural markers.

Comparing the adequacy of competing explanations does not re-
require historians to bracket their sharpened awareness of the power of
each theory to construct its own confirmatory objects and evidence.
To the contrary, juxtapositioning illuminations of overlapping periods or
of shared puzzles is the only self-consistent response to that aware-
ness. Otherwise, we affirm in the abstract that theory constructs
“fact” but we give up exploring in what respect the most powerful
theories of our time do so. Only by confronting incompatible, even
odious approaches can we unmask the suppositional character of
our own terms and “natural” observations (including those of “cul-
ture”). For instance, theories about the French Revolution ad-
vanced by François Furet and by Marxist analysts created their own

partially incommensurable historical domains. Yet their bounded
points of conflict aided a more critical examination of the concepts
of each school. The same can be observed in William Sewell’s critique
of Charles Tilly’s history of collective action in France. Sewell re-
tains Tilly’s pivotal terms—“state,” “reactive violence,” “proactive
violence.” But he compares Tilly’s uses of these terms with his own
uses in a radically different, cultural framework of analysis. By juxtapos-
ing their historical observations, Sewell specifies Tilly’s exclusion
of the meaningful import of state organization and of collective
action. The message of Paul Peyerabend and others who highlight
the incommensurability of theories is that productive interchange
has taken place when—or because—the opponents also dispute
each others’ observations. If we do not legitimate our concepts and
theories by attaching them to an ultimate foundation in the objects
under study, we can do so by adopting the procedures of inquiry and
contest best suited for laying bare our self-made construals of those
objects. As philosophers of science have long suggested, we can base
the legitimacy of inquiry on the procedures by which we carry out
and revise our research, rather than on the pledged verisimilitude of
its results. As a matter of principle, then, the constructivist account
of knowledge offered by most cultural analysts obligates them to put
at the forefront of research design an attempt to comparatively assess
opposing explanations.

A final change resulting from the use of “culture” as a nominal
tool is that investigators are making problematic what can be con-
structed analytically as a sign. Studies that relied on the notion of cul-
ture as sign reading conferred the status of sign on almost anything
that was perceived—and thus meaningfully encoded. But if viewing
something as “cultural” entails explaining how that feature works
to make a difference in its own right, then assigning it the status
of “sign” has to be argued for by demonstration. My research on
nineteenth-century factory practices provides a tentative example of
such an effort. I tried to match German and British weaving mills that
developed contemporaneously; that used the same technology; and
that responded to the same economic constraints. Finding consis-
tencies in the premises of a constellation of industrial practices in a
single country might not by itself show that culture directed the for-
mation of manufacturing practice instead of responding to it. But
the discovery that nationally distinctive constellations of time disci-
pline, worker remuneration, and use of shop space arose despite compelling cross-national similarities in their supporting economic environments goes further: it offers a basis for supposing that the practices assumed their shape because of their communicative functions. In that instance, viewing those practices as cultural constructs—and as "signs," if you like—arguably illuminates the source of their cross-national difference and meaningful patterning.

Use of multiple-case comparisons for identifying signs and for exploring their meaning is becoming more common as analysts move from studying verbal forms to examining institutions and their material imprints. No one, it seems, can ascertain what message the design of, say, a factory entrance carries, or demonstrate that it was installed for the purpose of carrying that message, except by contrasting it with doors (and the whole range of practices linkable to them) in other semiotic communities. Consequently, even the microhistorians, sometimes the most localist of interpreters, are aligning multiple cases for comparative insight. Comparison is more than a technique; however, it is affiliated now with prominent philosophic shifts in the conduct of cultural history. Comparison highlights the inventive but disciplined moment of evidence making. For it affirms that what we recognize as significant about practices varies with the comparisons we conjure. Since comparativists can justify their demarcation of contrasting "cases" only by the tenability of the explanations that result, their method accentuates how the level of analysis for cultural patterns—local network, province, civilization—is a conclusion rather than a premise of investigation. The boundaries of semiotic communities and the type of coherence of cultural forms the researcher sights depend on the chosen level of analysis. Most important, in my view, the method of comparison requires only that cultural explanations account for differential features between cases, not that explanations lay claim to finding within each case a fixed, authentic center point in agents' experience.

A STORY IN CONCLUSION

At the outset of this essay, I tried to show that the early new historians' emphasis on the founding reality of culture was a corollary of a method that limited them to showing the cultural order as indispensable and irreducible. My intent was to outline an explanatory predicament, not to cover the gamut of forces that were sufficient to produce our intellectual history. But supposing the plausibility of sketches depends on their incorporation into a powerful narrative, I must try to simplify my tale. That is the only excuse for me to close with a story that responds to a final question: if the new cultural history rested on the conceit that its methods and metaphors duplicate the order of human existence, why was this contradiction not contested from its moment of birth? My hypothetical answer returns us to the start, to the meaning of the cultural historians' strange reliance on the old social history as an affiliated opposite.

In its early days the new cultural history took advantage of the inherited metaphysic of "material" versus "ideal." Within that tradition, the terms of social historians and economistic Marxists could be glossed as crudely foundational, as pointing downward to a material base, even when the status of their terms in the practice of inquiry could also be, and often was, that of perspectival metaphor. Conversely, the terms of the new cultural historians—"sign," "symbol," "text"—appear antifoundational, even when their status in the conduct of research is that of an ultimate nonfigural ground. The encoding survived not simply because the "ethereal," "imagined" "immaterial" connotations of the notions of "sign" and "symbol"—their rhetorical content—overrode the form of argument into which they were inserted. My hunch is that the new cultural history tried to prolong the life of social history because it needed a counterposition against which its own terms might appear more securely antifoundational. The early cultural history existed by grace of the philosophical lifeline that its opponent held out to it.

Each of the methodological departures of the most recent cultural history works to disrupt the established humanist encoding of research. That earlier encoding betrayed in practice the ideals of liberal, pluralist inquiry by excluding many competing paradigms from discussion. According to the settled categories of the early cultural history, the enterprise of comparison for the sake of isolating the causes of differences appeared "scientistic." In the more current scholarship, to the contrary, research attuned to difference rather than essence is what keeps investigators aware that every concept of analysis, including that of "sign," is only a device for "seeing as." In the older encoding, posing the question of why cultural forms are ever reproduced seemed to substitute mechanics for meanings. In
the newer kinds of research, however, it prevents us from reifying culture as a naturally enduring "structure" and enjoins us to ask how agents put it to work. The early theory exemplified the order of culture by the intellectualist model of "sign reading." From more current perspectives, the proliferation of rival theories about meaning in practice is essential for sustaining the concept of culture as a figural device. In this setting, a "nominalist" stance is not a philosophical end point. It is a suggestion for how we may invigorate our concepts by enabling them to vex us. Though this whole intellectual story is still in motion, explanation and interpretation are already blurring.09 Let us endeavor once more to take leave of the old ground of social history, no longer through enthusiasm for some alternative foundation of history but only through devotion to elevating the flight of conversation.

NOTES


9. Lynn Hunt, Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 54, 87; quotation 54, emphasis added. "Legitimacy," Hunt further suggests, "is the general agreement on signs and symbols" (p. 54).


16. These questions were formulated as a guide to research by Clifford Geertz himself, especially in his reflections on political culture: "How much," Geertz asked, "does the symbolic apparatus through which the state power forms and presents itself, what we are used to calling its trappings . . . really matter?"; "History and Anthropology," New Literary History 21 (1990): 333, emphasis added. The deciplierment of cultures, Geertz reminds us, is not an
alternative to the analysis of causes and effects, but part of that enterprise, see Local Knowledge. Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology (New York, 1985), p. 34.


26. In her essay "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History" in Gender and the Politics of History, Scott relies on a similar anchor. First she perspicaciously outlines the meaningful relations among different bodies of social discourse in nineteenth-century Britain. When she moves to her chief task of explanation, however, her gestures are surprisingly reductivist. What, she asks, accounts for shifts in the resonant constructions of "class" during the nineteenth century? (Scott sets this as her motivating question at p. 66.) Chartist constructions acquired their resonance across different realms of social debate, she writes, by "evolving the notion of property in labor for disenfranchised and otherwise propertyless men." Scott starts her explanation by assuming the fit between the original cultural construct of "propertyless" and the social positions of propertyless agents (p. 62).

27. Geertz's expression that social life is organized "in terms of symbols" makes them underlying constituents, the "terms of life," but does not delimit the symbols' effects. See Local Knowledge, p. 25; Interpretation of Culture, p. 150.

28. Sahlin, Forest Rites, p. 129.


35. The rhetorical stance of the new cultural historians has inspired such essay undertakings as Kenneth Greenberg's essay in the American Historical Review on the reception of the Fleece Mermaid in the antebellum South. Greenberg explicates the Mermaid's intrinsic connections with popular attitudes toward domesticity, knowledge, and—the human nose: see "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," American Historical Review 95 (1990): 57-74. The sheer prominence of titles listing incongruous artifacts illustrates this reliance on the underlying trait of meaning to produce a unity. As with Greenberg's essay "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel," so with Thomas Laseage's "Credit, Novels, Masturbation" (in Choreographing History, ed. Susan Leigh Foster [Bloomington, Ind., 1995]) or Louise White's "Cars out of Place: Vampires, Technology and Labor" (Representations, no. 43 [summer 1993]: 37-50). Titles carry the aura of unifying mechanisms. In this instance their form leads the reader into the process of inferring a cultural unity underlying discrete fragments when the body of the article does not ferret out the tangible levers that produced such a unity.

36. Cultural historians can thus make the changes in representations dependent on incidental factors belonging to diverse orders—the economic, the demographic, the political—because these contingencies help select
among intellectual pathways without breaking the "intrinsic" connections among ideas.

37. Laqueur, "Credit, Novels, Masturbation," p. 127. New cultural historians may no longer reduce culture to social structure, but some reduce it to social function.


39. Recent moves in cultural analysis that break with the notion that cultures work as unified wholes have paradoxically safeguarded the trope of synecdoche. They permit investigators to explain patterns by intrinsic bonds of meaning even if the coherences are merely partial and isolated.

40. For an acute dissection of this logic in Gareth Stedman Jones's essay, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 72–73.


45. I see this task as the motive of Geertz's essays on religion, art, common sense, and law as distinctive kinds of "cultural systems." For an up-to-date précis on work inspired by this agenda, see Ann Swidler, "Cultural Power and Social Movements," in *Social Movements and Culture,* ed. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis, 1995), pp. 27–29, 34–36.

46. For Geertz's retention of bits of the language of causality, see *Local Knowledge,* p. 34.


48. Martin Bubel captured this sentiment in his claim that "to speak of "construction" is already to tap into the vernacular of our causal talk"; "Pragmatism to the Rescue?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56 (1995): 659.

49. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre,* chaps. 2 and 3.


57. Taking the stance of this-worldly asceticism for granted, we might still ask why it produced innovative entrepreneurial conduct rather than just rational monopoly planning and bureaucratic conscientiousness.


62. We are apt to mistake any investigation calling on the notion of "embodied understandings" as an attempt to reinstate a new, material foundation to history. In the nominalist approach, however, the rhetorical con-

RichardHabermas: The truth of materiality, does not overrule its function as a scientific investigation tool. It deals with the meaning of things in the context of cultural studies.


83. Biernacki, Fabrication of Labor, part 1.

84. In the field of industrial relations, for example, investigators who think of culture as a framework for agents to read the environment have been able to show over and again how producers inject a meaningful order into any given set of work institutions. See Willis, Learning to Labor, pp. 150–171. But the producers’ very ability to do so centers culture on the subjective evaluation of factory institutions that originate and change this way or that (perhaps only as required by the exigencies of capitalist competition). The model makes culture a superimposition by which agents contemplate practice from without, not a structure for configuring practices from within. See Luhmann, Object of Labor, p. 359.

85. For application of a similar interpretive strategy to practices of sport, see Christiane Eisenberg’s ingenious comparison of the historical development of German and British horse racing in “Pferderennen zwischen ‘Hindernis’ und ‘Heldenkultur’,” in Pionier und Nachfolger? ed. Hartmut Berghoff and Dieter Ziegler (Bochum, 1992), pp. 235–58.


87. For example, see Florim Eastmond and Peter Mason, The Mammoth and the Mouse: Microhistory and Morphology (Baltimore, 1997).
