

Writing the Past in the Present: An Anglo-Saxon Perspective

Diogenes
58(1–2) 5–19
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0392192112441904
dio.sagepub.com


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Introduction

It is always difficult to step back from one's own practice as a historian and reflect on the present state of the historical discipline, its *raison d'être* and emerging developments. One is easily biased by one's own practice and prone to take for "best practice" what is in effect one's own predilection. As it is impossible to avoid perspectivity in historical writing (Lorenz 1997), the same is true for writing on historiography – especially contemporary historiography. If I try to step outside my own historiographical practice and assess recent developments in history which had major impact on how historians today understand their discipline, I can only do so from my own standpoint, which invariably colours my perception of where the discipline stands and how it is going to develop. Starting off with an assessment of the impact of the linguistic turn on history writing, I will go on to discuss a variety of subject areas which have risen to prominence in its shadow. These include: gender history, history from below and memory history. I will subsequently ask about the impact of the linguistic turn on traditional fields of history writing, such as political, social and cultural history. Even more recent than the linguistic turn has been the visual turn in the historical sciences. Its representatives have urged their fellow historians to go beyond their traditional focus on texts. The importance of material culture approaches to historical writing will be used as an example of the significance of calls to move "beyond texts". The current trend towards interdisciplinarity is also closely linked to the linguistic turn, which has lowered disciplinary borders and pointed towards common strategies and methods across a wide variety of humanities and social science subject areas. And, last but not least, I will address the ability of the linguistic turn to undermine the power of national narratives in historical writing and its implications for comparative and transnational history writing. Together with the recent boom in global and world history, which is rooted less in theory and methodology than in the impact of the most recent wave of globalisation on historical consciousness, transnational forms of history writing might well spell the beginning of the end of the long dominance of national history writing over the profession.

Any reader of this article will be struck by the Western-centric view on history writing that I provide. Indeed, the perspective of this article is in many respects even narrower and prioritises

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historical writing in the English-speaking world over other parts of Europe. With the exception of postcolonial ideas, which have entered the mainstream of Western historical thinking and have reconfigured much of history writing in the Western metropolises, most of my examples are rooted in Anglo-Saxon and wider European historical practice. I do not want to condemn non-Western forms of history writing to what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) famously called “the ‘waiting-room’ version of history” (9). I entirely agree with Chakrabarty that “the problem of getting beyond Eurocentric histories remains a shared problem across geographical boundaries”. (17) But Chakrabarty also emphasised that Western concepts and ideas are both inadequate and indispensable (6), and as far as the history of historical writing is concerned, it would appear to this observer that many of the most recent trends did originate in the “West” and then spread from there to the “margins”. By contrast, in many parts of the non-Western world, historians are either struggling with scarce resources (e.g. lack of books and basic research facilities, especially in sub-Saharan Africa), strong political interventions of state power in their everyday work, or with overcoming the Marxist and/or nationalist promises of yesteryear. There is undoubtedly an Islamic historiography in the making, but it remains ill-defined and infested either with religious fundamentalism or with variants of nationalism. It certainly does not appear a fruitful departure for historiography as a whole (Millas 2008: 503–505; Iggers and Wang 2008: 348–351). It seems indicative of the allure of the West that there is still a strong intellectual brain-drain from the non-Western to the Western world. However, I might easily have overlooked important developments which happened in non-Western historiographies over recent decades and which should be mentioned in a review of where the discipline stands today. These limits are entirely my own, and I would love to learn more about how the development of history in other parts of the world relates to what I have set out below.

Before starting my necessarily brief overview of what I regard as the most significant developments in the discipline of history over the last three decades, let me briefly reflect on the *raison d’être* of the subject. Its rise to prominence in the nineteenth century was tightly linked to the service it provided to nation state formation. Whether opposing empires or legitimating existing or aspiring nation states, the most well-known national historians were busy providing historical master narratives. The overwhelming majority of professional historians were trained as and saw themselves as national historians. They frequently became nationalist historians, especially in the context of the First and Second World Wars during the first half of the twentieth century. In some cases, especially in Germany, they helped to plan and legitimate ethnic cleansing and genocide. Even after 1945 it was by no means easy to move the discipline away from national history. When a more critical historiography emerged from the late 1950s onwards, it was almost invariably still a national historiography. Hence it remains, in my view, one of the most important tasks of the historians of today to try and denationalise their discipline. In other words, in light of the always powerful and often catastrophic liaison between nationalism and history writing, historians today ought to be wary of national history and attempt to foster and move towards more transnational perspectives. This is undoubtedly difficult and laborious, as it means familiarising oneself with at least two (and sometimes more) national and regional historical contexts, learning different languages and seeking to understand different cultures. Furthermore, forms of transnational history writing, such as European or world history, have a significant track record of their own and in many cases they have been affected by the nationalist virus, which had such an important influence on the profession. Hence history as a discipline will only be able to withstand the lure of collective identity formation (of which nation was undoubtedly the most powerful, but by no means the only show in town; one readily thinks of class, religious and indeed ethnic/ race identities), if it is forever critical, questioning and oppositional. In the best intellectual traditions of the West, it needs to speak truth to power,

rather than speak on behalf of power. History writing is often at its best if it is capable of tickling out the many ambiguities and contradictions of the historical process, when it highlights its openness and underlines the many possibilities that are buried in the past.

Talking about the *raison d'être* of the discipline, let me perhaps also emphasise that it seems to me high time to bury at long last the idea that professional historians are the only ones who can speak about the past with real authority. This is an idea which became prominent at times when professional historians were desperate to acquire more cultural capital. The equation between professionalism and authority was ideally suited to convincing states and other agencies to provide generous funding to academy institutes and university history departments. As a result, a sharp dividing line was drawn between professional historiography and amateur historiography. However, this division largely ignored the fact that many amateur historians adhered to very similar principles and worked out of very similar tool-boxes to those used by professional historians. Professional historians receive “scientific” training as historians and therefore are at a methodological and theoretical advantage when it comes to the “scientific” writing of history, and yet amateur historians have often adhered to the same standards as professional historians, even when attempting to popularise the results of increasingly specialised research undertakings. This is also why, in many cases, professional historians remained very adept at popularising history, and at the same time, why amateur historians produced significant “scientific” historical works. The distinction between the professional and the amateur needs to be relativised further and the notion of professionalism needs to be demasked as a rhetorical and material strategy of self-legitimation, resource enhancement and political empowerment. The linguistic turn of the 1970s, perhaps more than any other body of theory in the twentieth century, has drawn our attention to how artificial hard distinctions between “professional” and “amateur” often are and how precarious disciplinary divides can be.

The impact of the linguistic turn on the historical profession

The older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual, must give place to the recognition that we can only know the *actual* by contrasting it with or likening it to the *imaginable*. ... it is a fiction of the historian that the various states of affairs which he constitutes as the beginning, the middle, and the end of a course of development are all “actual” or “real” and that he has merely recorded “what happened” in the transition from the inaugural to the terminal phase. ... both the beginning state of affairs and the ending one are inevitably poetic constructions, and as such, dependent upon the modality of the figurative language used to give them the aspect of coherence. This implies that all narrative is not simply a recording of “what happened” in the transition from one state of affairs to another, but a progressive *redescription* of sets of events in such a way as to dismantle a structure encoded in one verbal mode in the beginning so as to justify a recoding of it in another mode at the end. This is what the “middle” of all narratives consist of.

This famous passage from Hayden White’s *Tropics of Discourse* (1978: 99) brings together some of the central propositions of what is frequently referred to as postmodernism, the linguistic turn or the return of narrative to historical writing. (Roberts 2001; Jenkins 1997)

Many professional historians today would be wary of claiming that their histories tell the reader “what actually happened”, but equally many historians would be opposed to seeing no difference at all between their practice and what writers of fiction are doing. There is a much sharper awareness in the historical profession now than there was thirty years ago of the importance of language in the writing of history. Few historians nowadays would claim that language is a mirror

reflecting social reality. Language is widely seen as contributing in a major way to constituting and constructing reality rather than simply mirroring it. This does not necessarily mean that all interpretations are of equal value and that no reading can be privileged over another, nor does it mean that there is no social reality outside of discourse. Our views of the past are always shaped by linguistic construction, but the materiality of the past exists outside of language. The aim of scholarly discourse, mediated through a set of agreed methods and practices, is to arrive at inter-subjective agreements on the best approximation of what happened in the past, i.e. how to analyse and interpret the materiality of the past. These agreements will always be open to challenge and will invariably change over time, but without them we will be at a loss to defend the past against abuse, e.g. holocaust denial (Friedlaender 1992). If the wilder shores of the linguistic turn, with its claim that there is no social reality outside of language, remain deeply contested and are rejected by the vast majority of practising historians, many have come to appreciate the anti-essentialist aspirations of the linguistic turn. It undermined foundationalist stories framed around master narratives of nation, race, class or religion. The radical insistence on the many histories rather than the one history has helped to highlight the positionality of any author and to make all readings of the past, by their very nature, provisional.

Over the past years, the rise of conceptual history to a budding field of enquiry, practised almost everywhere on the globe, is a significant sign that historians use concepts, ideas and language far more self-reflexively than before, even without buying into the idea that there is nothing outside language. In particular the works of J. G. A. Pocock (2008), Quentin Skinner (Palonen 2003) and Reinhard Koselleck (2002) have had a major impact on conceptual history. Pocock drew attention to the linguistic contexts which framed political discourses in the early modern era. Skinner insisted that speech acts were vital to an understanding of how discourse worked in any given era. Hence texts could not be analysed on their own terms, but only against the background of their discursive and social contexts. And Koselleck also argued that all historical concepts need to be fully historicised before they could be properly understood. Whilst there is not enough room to do full justice to the complexities of their ideas and whilst important differences characterise the writings of all three historians, they contributed in a major way to an understanding of texts as literary and linguistic constructions rooted in a particular time and place.

As texts position themselves in a given discursive field, which needs to be carefully reconstructed by historians, they ally themselves with and acquire different forms of power. Historians traditionally thought of power as state power, but thanks largely to the writings of Michel Foucault (Gordon 1980), historians have gained a much more complex understanding of the connection between power and knowledge and how power impacts on individuals in a wide variety of contexts and settings. Foucault himself examined the connection between knowledge and power in his histories of social institutions, e.g. the prison system, mental hospitals and medical institutions more generally and in his widely influential histories of sexuality. His insistence that knowledge was tightly linked to power (later expressed in his concept of “governmentality”) inspired scores of historians to apply his ideas to the field of historical exploration. Edward Said’s hugely influential book on Orientalism (1978), which itself was inspirational to many historians of colonialism and postcolonialism, would be unthinkable without Foucault.

From women’s to gender history

The power-knowledge nexus identified by Foucault gave a major boost to transforming women’s into gender history throughout the 1980s (Downs 2010). From the 1960s onwards, second-wave

feminism brought with it a desire among (largely female and often feminist) historians to rediscover the contribution of women to history. In 1986 Joan Wallach Scott (1986; see also Scott 1996), however, argued that it was not enough to rediscover women's contribution to shaping the past, but that it was vital to trace and uncover the manifold ways in which gender relations were a vital ingredient in almost all histories and determined wider power structures in society. The aim was to prevent the ghettoisation of women's history and bring it into the mainstream of historical studies. Gender history also gave rise to the study of masculinity and "men's studies". Under the impact of the linguistic turn the very categories of "woman" and "man" now became de-essentialised. Scores of gender historians not only analysed the micropolitics of power in the family household, but also came to conceive of gender as a vitally important way of signalling relationships of power in a great variety of political and societal contexts. The journal *Gender and History*, founded in 1989, gave a platform for such research and the discussion of its theoretical underpinnings (Davidoff, McClelland and Varikas 1999). Under the influence of the linguistic turn, gender identities were largely perceived as discursive constructions and gender historians went about analysing the experiences of men and women as derived from those discursive constructions. Whilst many feminist historians were wary of reducing experience to discourse and warned of the circular self-referentiality of those only recognising the reality of language, younger historians were undoubtedly dynamised by the poststructuralist turn of feminist historiography, even if gender history to this day is struggling to find answers to the question how precisely historians should link the discursive construction of gender to social and historical experiences. But that, of course, is not only a problem for gender historians.

History from below

The impact of Foucault could also be felt among historians who were keen to write the history of the everyday life of ordinary men and women. People's history as history which sets out to explore the lives of ordinary people has a long and distinguished track record and goes back in many parts of Europe to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The writings of Karl Marx were undoubtedly an important influence on many attempts to recover the lives of those whom high political history had routinely forgotten. In Western Europe, the 1960s witnessed a revival of neo-Marxism, which contributed to history movements keen to recover the histories of those who had not made it into the mainstream history books (Thompson 1966; Lüdtkke 1995). The history workshop movement in England, microstoria in Italy, Alltagsgeschichte in Germany and many parallel movements across the Western world all sought to recover marginalised experiences and voices. Iconic publications connected to these various history from below movements include Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's history of a small village called *Montaillou* (1975), Carlo Ginzburg's tale of a sixteenth-century miller entitled *The Cheese and the Worms* (1975), Natalie Zemon Davis's account of the (extra-)ordinary life of *Martin Guerre* (1984), where she famously filled in the gaps in the archival material with her own imagination of what could have been "actual".

Postcolonial history, which emerged from the Subaltern Studies Group in India, founded in 1982, has been one of the most successful forms of history from below on a global level (Majumdar 2010; Castle 2001). Its impact could not only be felt across historical studies in the developing world, especially in Latin America, but reached right into the metropolises of history writing in North America and Europe. It resulted in a fundamental critique of a Western-centric progressive idea of history, according to which the West set the pace for a universal historical

development, which the rest of the world could only follow. Instead, postcolonial scholars championed the idea of multiple modernities and the hybridisation of cultures as a consequence of the imperialisation of the world. Postcolonialism explored the manifold ways in which empire led to both resistance and complicity among the colonised. They stressed local experiences without losing sight of those locations being set in wider universal narratives. Like other history from below movements, postcolonial scholars were deeply influenced by neo-Marxism, but they went beyond traditional Marxist emphasis on economic foundationalism to emphasise cultural aspects of domination with E.P. Thompson, in particular, often acting as an inspiration for postcolonial scholars, such as Said, Homi Bhaba, Gyan Prakash and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In their writings, neo-Marxism combined with poststructuralist thinking to set the tone for postcolonialism's analysis of discursive constructions of colonial power.

All of these various forms of history from below had a direct political agenda which they derived from their perspectivity of writing about and on behalf of those social groups which had been oppressed in the past. As "people's historians" thought of such oppression as continuing into the present, history writing had a directly liberating and emancipatory function. Whilst initially social class formed a foundational narrative with many "people's historians", the attention to class (and in particular the working class) gave way to a desire to document and analyse manifold struggles of diverse social groups for recognition and acceptance in specific localities.

Under the influence of anthropology, history from below moved toward producing what Foucault had termed "archipelagos of local knowledges", i.e. analyses of how power operated in human interactions. Methodologically Clifford Geertz's ideas about "thick description" informed many histories from below (Geertz 1973). The promise of anthropology was that it would liberate history from the power of metanarratives which had been in the very epicentre of the criticism provided by the linguistic turn. By turning to close observation of social experiences and to symbolic behaviour of social actors, historical anthropology was supposed to stay closer to its historical subject and avoid the grand narratives. Causal explanation was to give way to the interpretation of meaning. Modernisation theory was the *bête noir* of many historians who sought to escape from its "conceptual traps" and use cultural anthropology to rediscover those historical phenomena which modernisation theory had relegated to the sidelines (Medick 1987).

Memory history

My last prominent example of the twin impact of the linguistic turn and Foucauldian theory refers to the recent boom in memory history (Cubitt 2007; Confino 2010). If all history is representation of the past, then memories of the past have an important impact on the diverse ways in which this past becomes both meaningful and powerful in the present. Memory and history draw closer together in that both are about re-inscribing stories of the past. But history is also about analysing how memory works in its retelling of the past. Memory history has been deeply intertwined with the growing popularity of memory debates in societies more generally. Declarations of repentance and claims for reparation are often bound up with discourses on memory which go far beyond historical study. Like in the history from below approaches it is the politics of history writing which is thrown into sharp relief by memory studies.

Historians of memory have paid particular attention to what is variously called "collective memory", "social memory" or "cultural memory". Taking their cue from the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the German egyptologist Jan Assmann as well as the literary studies scholar Aleida Assmann, and being influenced by the *Annalistes'* attention to memory, which

ranged from Marc Bloch to Jacques Le Goff and Roger Chartier, historians of memory often refer to forms of “material heritage” which has symbolical significance within a given society. Memory historians start from the assumption that our understandings of the past are derived from both an individual and a collective engagement with what comes to us as stories and remnants of the past. Memory is not so much a reliving or re-activating of a past experience as it is a reconfiguring and re-interpreting of that experience. Memory is unthinkable without experience, but it is equally unthinkable without narrativity and emplotment. The memory of an event is thus intrinsically different from the event itself. Memory historians have not been primarily interested in how truthful a particular memory is but rather what that memory tells us about the historical consciousness of a given society. The production of historical consciousness is a multi-level affair and functions both from the top downwards and from the bottom upwards. Many historians have pointed to the fact that what has been constructed as one particular type of historical consciousness is often received very differently by different groups in society (Melman 2006).

Historians dealing with memory often do so, because they see a need of society to engage with its past collective experiences. This would be particularly true for German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and its desire to engage with Germany’s National Socialist past. The flagship journal of memory history, *History and Memory*, was founded in 1989 by Saul Friedlaender, whose own memory of the Holocaust had an important influence on his writing of the history of the Holocaust (Kansteiner 2009). However, memory history has been prominent in many societies with a traumatic historical past. The very concept of trauma, problematical as it is, therefore has gained considerable prominence in historical studies over recent years (Kansteiner 2004). Another powerful motif for engaging with memory history lies in its alleged power to do historical justice to groups or individuals which are perceived as having been wronged in the past. Memory history is thus directly linked to a human-rights discourse which has become prominent in several humanities-based disciplines over recent years.

Historians of collective memory are by and large aware that the essentialisation of collective memory belongs to collective identity discourses which seek to homogenise the many stories into grand narratives (Niethammer 2000). Whilst collective memory can be used to underpin collective identity (e.g. in the many “lieux de mémoire” projects which have proliferated across Europe following Pierre Nora’s (1984–1993) deeply problematical undertaking), it is today widely recognised among historians of collective memory that collective memories always are contested and constructed and that they need to be analysed as such.

Particular types of history, some of the most important of which I chose to discuss all-too-briefly above, have benefited tremendously from the impact of the linguistic turn and Foucauldian ideas. However, the theoretical presuppositions connected to these trends have also considerably reshaped traditional areas of historical investigation, such as political, social and cultural history.

Political history

Once upon a time virtually all history was political history understood as the history of states, governments and inter-state power relations (including, very prominently, diplomatic history). With the advances of, first, social history, and, subsequently, cultural history from the 1950s onwards, political history began to look old-fashioned, out-dated and backward but, more recently, what could be termed the cultural history of politics has had something of a renaissance. For some time now, historians have been trying to reconceptualise political history in order to bring together high politics (with its attention to administrative elites and their intrigues) and popular politics (with its

emphasis on the everyday and on mass politics). They regard the dichotomy between high and low and between elite and popular as unhelpful and insist instead on the fundamental interconnectedness of politics to other spheres of life. They want to think together the discursive formation of the political with the impact of economic and social structures, and state power (Lawrence 2009). An important starting point for many of these attempts, at least in the English-speaking world, has been Gareth Stedman Jones' *Languages of Class* (1982), who, in poststructuralist mode, argued: "Language disrupts any simple notion of the determination of consciousness by social being because it is itself part of a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place. What we must therefore do is to study the production of interest, identification, grievance and aspiration within political languages themselves" (21 f.). The revival of political history over recent years is unthinkable without such attention to political languages. If we look at the popularity of studies analysing the impact of religion on politics or the politics of consumption or the globalisation of politics in transnational perspective, we see how, in all of those areas, attention to the language of politics has been key for many years now.

Social and economic history

If political history was reshaped by the linguistic turn, this is much less the case for social and economic history. Being present as a challenge to traditional political history in many parts of Europe and North America from the late nineteenth century onwards, it rose to prominence – and some might even say dominance – in the historical profession in the post-Second World War period. Its heydays were arguably the 1960s and 1970s (Stearns 2001). Under the influence of Weberian and Marxist structuralism it set out to describe the economic and social structures which allegedly determined people's lives and the course of history. In many of the more Marxist-inspired histories, class became a foundational reality, to which all other developments were only secondary. Social structure was prioritised and agency in history was downplayed.

Labour history became a particularly prominent field of social history, as it was not only perceived as a subject which rescued the struggling working classes from the forgetfulness of the dominant historical narratives, but also because it was seen as fuelling contemporary struggles for emancipation. It was politically relevant as well as historiographically pertinent. When the political project stalled and many parts of Europe as well as North America saw a return to neo-Conservatism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, labour history entered a prolonged period of crisis, from which it is struggling to recover. With "the forward march of labour halted" (Jacques and Mulhern 1981) and with the linguistic turn's questioning of its foundationalist grand narrative, it increasingly looked like a sub-discipline which had become the refuge for old (and mostly bitter) men. Labour history's decline across the Western world can be seen as a direct consequence of its inability to relate to the fundamental changes initiated by theories about the relation between language and social reality. There are, of course exceptions to the rule, and a younger generation of labour historians has been trying to move the subject area to less foundationalist and more culturalist and comparative shores (e.g. Biernacki 1995; Welskopp 2000; for a review of recent developments in British and German labour history see also Berger 2006).

It would also be true to say that other areas of social history fared better than labour history. Thus, for example, the history of the welfare state continues to be a prominent area of research. Some social historians have begun to rethink social history by giving more attention to language, discourse and symbols. They found the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens useful

in re-introducing the agency of subjects to the power of given structures. “Practice theory” has been championed as one way in which the meandering of the historical process between agency and structuration can be caught by the historian. The histories of work, the development of market places, the histories of social inequality and of social movements are gaining renewed popularity among a younger generation of historians, the more they seek to employ frames which seek to recuperate forms of social and cultural practice. The very fact that the major European history conference is called European Social Science History Conference might be interpreted as a sign of the resilience of social history, although anyone attending the conference might wonder why it is called thus given its overall credo of “anything goes”.

Economic history, like social history, also ignored the linguistic turn at its peril. From its heydays in the 1960s and 1970s, when economic history underpinned the neo-Marxist foundationalist narrative, it became more and more a sub-field of historical studies which was only accessible to the initiated (Hudson 2000). The move to econometrics meant that so much specialised and detailed knowledge of complex economics was necessary in order to understand economic history that it soon ceased to have a wider impact on the profession as a whole. The theoretical underpinnings of econometrics were deeply problematical, for it sought nothing less than to put history back on the path of science and objectivity from which it had allegedly strayed. Whilst it promised definitive answers to some of the most fundamental problems in history, it increasingly found itself preaching only to the converted. There are exceptions to the rule however, and a range of more recent economic histories have attempted to merge the economic, social and cultural spheres, arguing that it is impossible to understand economic developments without wider cultural frames. Thus, for example, there has been increasing attention to the cultural meaning of economic institutions and practices.

Cultural history

The rise of cultural history from the 1980s largely coincided with the impact of the linguistic and narrative turn on history writing. There is, of course, a much older form of cultural history, which largely looked at the development of high culture. And we can trace to the inter-war period a prominent sociology of culture connected to the names of Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Ernst Troeltsch, amongst others, who attempted to systematise the historical knowledge about culture. The Frankfurt School, in particular Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, explored diverse forms of cultural history. The Annales school in France explored cultural mentalities and the cultural roots of societal change. And in the United States and Great Britain “cultural studies” were heavily influenced by Marxist perspectives from the 1950s onwards, orienting themselves towards Raymond Williams’ famous dictum that “culture is ordinary” (Williams 1989 [1958]). But what is frequently referred to as the cultural turn in history from the 1980s onwards is unthinkable without the linguistic turn. The field of the “new cultural history” (Hunt 1989) has become so broad and has influenced so many sub-fields that it seems impossible to go through particular themes or topics. Cultural history certainly contributed to an extension of what could be studied historically. Hence, for example, we witnessed the proliferation of studies on emotions and feelings, and the body became a major object for study by cultural historians. Violence, especially collective violence, was another area which the new cultural history began exploring with a vengeance. But what unites cultural history approaches is their insistence on history as a process which is significantly shaped by actors. Human beings have tried to make sense of the world around them by ways of cultural practices and representations. They have constructed their

identities discursively and the task of cultural historians is to retrace those inscriptions that are left of those constructions. Given the predilection of cultural historians for the study of identities, it is not by chance that cultural history has led to a renaissance of studies on nationalism and nation formation since the 1980s, which was, after all, a decade of neo-nationalism in parts of Europe and North America.

The visual turn and material culture

The emphasis on culture brought with it the desire among historians to extend their subject matter beyond textual artefacts from the past and include a wide range of visual material. Some older cultural historians such as Johan Huizinga or Michael Baxandall had already used pictorial material in their histories as did Georges Duby and other representatives of the *Annales* school. With the proliferation of cultural histories of everyday life, and histories of memory, the body and landscape, historians felt an ever-greater need to take images into account, not only as illustrations but as historical sources and evidence. Peter Burke's book *Eyewitnessing* (2001), which was translated into many languages, can be seen as a paradigmatic publication reflecting history's desire to move beyond text, but it also has been interpreted as a book which carefully circumscribed the use of the image as historical evidence and ultimately remains wedded to the primacy of the text over the image (Horsley, 2009). Burke discusses photographs, portraits, icons and a great variety of other images which have been crucial to understanding histories of the sacred, of power and protest, of material culture and social and cultural development more generally. Other historians, often those working on the borderlines between art history and history, have emphasised that images bring the historians and their audiences "face to face with history" (Bann 1998). The visual turn in history involves a recognition that images are at least as ambiguous and polysemic as texts and that they cannot be understood without acquiring a deep understanding of how to read images, which often involves different interpretative techniques from the ones that are needed for reading a text.

Images play a crucial role in the history of material culture. Without images showing what "things" looked like in the past, it would be difficult to write histories of these things, or at the very least the histories would be greatly impoverished by just having to rely on textual descriptions. Cultural historians intent on moving beyond text rediscovered material objects as primary sources for historical research in the 1980s. All sorts of material objects from houses and clothing to toothbrushes and money have become the focus of major historical studies seeking to explore the relationship between people and things. Things can be sources from which the historian takes information about the past, or things can be the object studied by historians. But the things themselves, as historians of material culture have argued, possess agency – through their materiality they create and shape experiences and identities. Materials, objects and things are, in other words, routes to past experience. Historians have focused on the production of material objects as well as their consumption. In their emphasis on taking seriously the materiality of objects, historians of material culture have sought to push the discipline beyond linguistics, and many have indeed stressed the rootedness of the study of material objects in social and economic history. However, as much of the work in this field testifies to the power of the "cultural turn" and focuses on the discursive construction of the meaning of objects, material culture studies cannot easily deny its indebtedness to the linguistic turn. As with *History and Memory*, the appearance of a new journal in this field of study, the *Journal of Material Culture*, founded in 1996, signified the coming of age of a new development in historiography. It described material culture studies being focused

“on the ways in which artefacts are implicated in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities” (Miller and Tilley 1996: 5). Like memory studies, material culture studies have also been inherently interdisciplinary (Harvey 2009).

Interdisciplinarity

The visual turn, memory studies, historical anthropology, material culture studies and indeed many of the most cutting-edge developments in historiography, which have been related to the linguistic turn, often included calls for greater interdisciplinarity, as historians realised that they could learn from an exchange with representatives from other disciplines, including art history, cultural studies, media studies, literary studies, anthropology and psychology. It would be true to say that even before the linguistic turn, older forms of social history, for example, were adamant in their calls for greater interdisciplinarity – focusing in particular on the overlaps between disciplines such as sociology, economics and political sciences with history. However, the linguistic turn with its questioning of firm borders between fact and fiction had brought a renewed interest in the interface between history and other disciplines. In the areas inspired by the linguistic turn, scholars from a great variety of disciplines now rub shoulders and emphasise the importance of intertextuality in understanding diverse aspects of the past. In one of my own fields of study, national identity, such intertextuality and interdisciplinarity has been very much to the fore in recent years (Berger, Eriksonas and Mycock 2008) with a growing recognition that the narrations of nations can only be understood if the intertextuality of those narratives is fully accounted for. Clear-cut disciplinary boundaries will have to be questioned, and links between different disciplines and genres need to be forged in order to understand fully diverse forms of historical representation of the nation. The journal *Memory Studies*, founded in 2008, was explicit in stressing the interdisciplinary nature of its undertaking: “The field of memory studies mobilizes scholarship driven by problem or topic, rather than by singular method or tradition. Yet divergence in backgrounds and assumptions must be highlighted and deliberately negotiated, not wished away. Only by encouraging the open, careful contesting of concepts can we exploit the strengths of the daunting range of disciplines – from neurobiology to narrative theory, from the developmental to the postcolonial, the computational to the cross-cultural, and on and on – which can all drive the collective and various enterprises involved” (Hoskins, Barnier, Kansteiner and Sutton 2008: 5 f.).

Comparative and transnational history

If, under the influence of the linguistic turn, history has been edging closer to interdisciplinarity and intertextuality, it also has become far more comparative and transnational in its orientation since the 1980s. Although it would be dangerous to underestimate the continued power of national histories over historical consciousness even today, as the various national history wars from Yugoslavia to Australia and the USA demonstrate, the historical profession has taken significant steps to overcome historiographical nationalism. Within the academy many, if by no means all, historians have become increasingly wary of the national frame and of national histories. In Europe, for example, a European Science Foundation Programme entitled “Representations of the Past: the Writing of National Histories in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Europe” has been scrutinising the link between nationalism and historical consciousness in comparative and transnational perspective (Berger, Conrad and Marchal, 2008 ff.).

Indeed, many of the brightest historians of the younger generation are attracted by comparative and transnational history writing. There has been some debate about comparative history

artificially isolating units of comparison and ignoring the many interrelationships between those units. Some historians have therefore accused comparative historians comparing national developments of reifying national histories. Instead they favour histories of cultural transfer, which concentrate on demonstrating precisely how hybrid national cultures and developments were, borrowing from other cultures and adapting diverse practices, policies, ideas and institutions (Werner and Zimmermann 2006).

Cultural transfer studies have highlighted the importance of borders as objects of historical studies. Border can mean demarcation, putting off limits that which is defined as not belonging, but border can also indicate preparedness for exchange and appropriation – a transmission belt of “the other” on the way to its adoption as one’s own. Border territories may variously be understood as sites of confrontation, intolerance and the collision of fundamentally incompatible “national” values and normative horizons and as terrains of exchange and fruitful dialogue. Border studies have so far been dominated by social science disciplines, in particular human geography, anthropology, political science and international relations. Only more recently, under the impact of cultural transfer studies, did history discover border studies.

Comparative history has been thriving throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and there is certainly a lot more comparative history than there is history of cultural transfer which might well have something to do with the conceptual problems of doing transfer history. But, as many historians have pointed out, it would be futile to construct firm borders between comparative and cultural transfer history. Instead, both have much to learn from each other. Comparative history undoubtedly needs to take into account the many histories of cultural transfer which took place between its units of comparison before a meaningful comparison can be made.

Quite apart from the internal debates about comparative history, its attractiveness among a younger generation of practising historians points to the denationalisation of the historical profession over the past decades. With some exceptions, professional historians have ceased being in the vanguard of nationalist story-telling in Europe and North America. Sadly, however, this development coincided with a loss of public importance of historians, and, sadder still, other non-professional public historians have often taken over the task of providing nourishment to the national historical consciousness, which can still be exploited to great effect by diverse political interests.

Global and world history

One of the most popular forms of transnational history writing today comes in the form of global and world history. It is no doubt inspired by the recognition that we are living through another major phase of globalisation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Universal history was already popular in the eighteenth century, and notable practitioners of world history after 1945 included Arnold Toynbee and William McNeill. However, from the 1990s onwards a veritable explosion of global and world histories has taken place (Iggers and Wang 2008: 387–394; Stuchtey and Fuchs 2003). Many of them have been inspired by Marxist economic and sociological thinking about the development of modern capitalism, whilst others have been less ideological in their exploration of transnational themes, including technological change, the environment, migration, the production and consumption of goods, and the spread of ideas, faiths and diseases. Again, the arrival of two new journals in English, the *Journal of World History*, in 1990, and the *Journal of Global History*, in 2006, can be seen as significant markers. Many global historians, in line with the recent endorsement of interdisciplinarity, have been seeking to gain insights from a

wide variety of subject areas, including evolutionary biology, paleontology, archaeology and literary studies. What unites global and world history approaches (and it is as yet quite unclear how the two are specifically delineated) is a desire to overcome national borders and an insight that historical explanation can gain from moving beyond national frameworks. Much of recent world and global history has also tried to overcome Western-centric models of development which were based on modernisation theories and saw Western development as model for all other societies and cultures.

Towards a happy eclecticism? History writing in the 21st century

In 1962 Thomas Kuhn, in a widely read book, postulated the idea that scientific progress worked through paradigm shifts. Whilst this idea was popular at a time when social historians set themselves up as heirs apparent of an older political history, it would seem now a strategy for dominance and power within the discipline. I would argue that history as a profession has moved to a happy eclecticism and that we should celebrate such eclecticism rather than attempt being prescriptive about what type of history should be written and how it has to be done. Historians remain, by and large pragmatists, who pick up bits of theory here and there, as it seems to be useful in explaining a particular problem or event they are dealing with. They are thus typical bricoleurs or chiffonniers rather than systematic theoreticians (Wohlfahrt 1986). There is no one theory which will provide a key to all of history.

I have emphasised above what I see as particularly fertile, prominent and important developments in history writing over the last decades. They have been deeply influenced by the linguistic and narrative turn, which can be traced back to the 1970s. They all tend to be immensely political. By this I do not mean that they are necessarily party-political, but that they have moved beyond an older understanding of the historical discipline as having to keep its distance from politics and indeed claiming that history writing should be autonomous from politics. Instead there is a growing recognition that “objectivity” is restricted to respecting the rules of the game, i.e. the established practices of historical scholarliness such as the practices of source criticism, of logical argument and of allowing for the possibility of checking, criticising and revising truth claims. But in accepting the perspectival nature of all knowledge, historians can acknowledge the political dimension of historiography without reducing history to politics. The realm of facts cannot be neatly separated from the realm of values and politics. A fact is only ever a fact within a specific framework of description. Factual statements presuppose normative choices. Knowledge is only possible within particular political-normative-ideological horizons of expectation. Historians have increasingly been willing to offer arguments which openly declare their social, cultural and political investments and implications. This is a marked departure from historicist scientific method. (I use “historism”/ “historist” to refer to the type of historical thought associated with Leopold von Ranke – the understanding of the present as being historically evolved – and “historicism”/ “historicist” about teleological historical thought of the kind associated with Plato, Hegel and Marx.)

It is also remarkable to what extent ideas about the relationship between language and social reality and about the connection between structure and agency in history have influenced a wide range of new beginnings. It did not only lead historians to take more seriously language and the discursive construction of the political, economic, social and cultural worlds, but it also gave rise to new forms of historical writing, among which conceptual history has been among the most prominent. The move from women’s to gender history has been inspired by the linguistic turn just as the history of below and memory history have been enriched and partly driven by insights from poststructuralism. In lowering the borders between fiction and non-fiction, the linguistic turn also

fostered moves towards interdisciplinarity and intertextuality. New forms of history writing, such as cultural materialism, visual histories and global/ world histories have a more marked interest in interdisciplinarity than traditional forms of history writing. Finally, through questioning existing master or grand narratives in historical writing, the linguistic turn also encouraged historians to move beyond the nation state as framework for their historical studies. The rise of comparative, transnational and cultural transfer studies since the 1980s and the strength of global and world history in the historical community today are testimony to the desire of many scholars to break with the strong national orientation of the profession.

Undoubtedly my own perspective underestimates the degree to which many historians still continue to write very traditional history about very traditional topics using traditional historicist methods. It is easy to overemphasise the importance of narrativity and the linguistic turn for a profession as broad and wide as history. However, I would claim that elements of the narrative and linguistic turn have underpinned some of the most interesting recent developments within the subject area, and it is those developments, I believe, that the discipline will build on in future.

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