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The Return from the Return to Narrative

Jan de Vries

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Abstract

Social scientific history in its various forms developed rapidly and enjoyed great influence in the 1960s and 70s. Around 1980 it was quickly and, in the United States decisively, eclipsed. An influential article predicting and announcing this shift was Lawrence Stone's, "The return of narrative", of 1979.

This lecture takes Stone's criticisms of social scientific history as its starting point, discusses the nature of the estrangement between history and the social sciences, and offers evidence that new questions are bringing history and the social sciences closer together again.

Keywords

Interdisciplinarity, narrative history, new history, economic history, social scientific history, Lawrence Stone.

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Preface

When I was asked to deliver a Max Weber Lecture my thoughts immediately focused on Weber as exemplar of *the historically-informed social scientist*.¹ As an economic historian, I have spent several decades now pondering two profoundly different disciplines and the challenges and rewards of attempting to combine or integrate them. Moreover, in my time as an academic administrator at Berkeley, as dean and vice provost, I was faced with repeated calls for greater inter-disciplinarity – break down the walls, dismantle the silos! – but I saw also the living reality of disciplinary autonomy, (which seems, in fact, to be a condition for the maintenance of a discipline). So, I thought it might be appropriate to use this lecture to address the relationship of history with the social sciences (economics, but not only economics) as it has evolved over the past generation and how it might develop in the near future.

It seemed appropriate, but on further reflection, it revealed itself as one of my less inspired ideas. I am not qualified to speak on my chosen topic for this afternoon: I am no philosopher of history or epistemology, nor am I a specialist in historiography.² I must speak primarily from experience and untutored reflection, and that, in turn, is limited by an academic career led primarily in the United States, where these relationships may have played out rather differently than on the European continent. But as these cautionary thoughts came to me, there was no turning back. So I will proceed with my paper, which is perhaps more of a sermon. Like all good Protestant sermons it has three parts, and I take as my text the book of Stone, 1979, pages 74 through 96.

The Revival of Narrative

In the mid 1970s a broad range of scholars, spanning the ideological spectrum, were actively engaged in what has been called New Historical research and debate. I will speak about some of the participants in this broad movement in more detail later, but for now it is sufficient to simply mention the French Annales School, the American New Economic History, the British Marxist Social History, Historical Sociology in several forms, including modernization theorists, comparative revolutions theorists, and world-systems theorists.

Needless to say, they disagreed with each other on nearly everything. If there was a single point of agreement, it was this: the rejection of narrative history. It led Peter Burke to introduce the final volume of the New Cambridge Modern History, which appeared in 1979, with the following claim:³

In the twentieth century we have seen a break with traditional narrative history, which, like the break with the traditional novel or with representational art or with classical music, is one of the important cultural discontinuities of our time.

Obviously, no single influence can claim full credit for this historiographical discontinuity, but the most profound factor must be the spread of an uncomfortable feeling that the narrative form greatly restricts the types of possible historical questions and feasible modes of explanation. Narrative history has attached to it like a ball and chain the discrete, short-term historical event – l'histoire événementielle. And, if by then fifty years of Annales School preaching had done anything, it had undermined the notion that this should be the foundation stone of historical explanation.

In the opinion of Bob Dylan "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."⁴ But history in those years did have a weatherman, and in the very year that Peter Burke associated the New History with the future and the *avant garde*, the weatherman spoke.

¹ Max Weber, The Methodology of the Social Sciences (New York, The Free Press, 1949).

² For an expert study of this theme as Weber understood it: Fritz Ringer, Max Weber's Methodology: The Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences (1997).

³ Peter Burke, "Introduction," New Cambridge Modern History, Vol. 13 (Cambridge, 1979), p. 1.

⁴ Bob Dylan, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," Columbia Records, 1965.

Lawrence Stone (a British historian then teaching at Princeton University, where he was founding director of the Shelby Cullum Davis Center for Historical Studies) sensed that the vast majority of historians, certainly in Britain and the United States, had no heart for the new scholarship. Or, if they once paid allegiance to it, they were now withdrawing it.

Why? Stone identified two broad reasons. First, the political sentiments that had led many to pay lip service to material and collective historical analysis were now eroding. Stone pointed to disillusionment with economic determinism and an associated decline in ideological commitment, especially to Marxism. Historians were searching for another basis on which to advance their political commitments. Second, Stone felt that social scientific historians, and quantitative history especially, had not fulfilled their claims, had "failed to deliver the goods", and had alienated readers with its often inaccessible techniques and methodologies. Thus, they were disillusioned and perhaps also fearful.

In, "The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history," Stone foresaw historians refocusing their research increasingly on individual agency and eschewing analytical for descriptive modes of explanation. "If I am right," he concluded, "the movement to narrative... marks the end of an era: the end of the attempt to produce a coherent and scientific explanation of change in the past."⁵

This struck me at the time as a breathtaking statement, and confession. Stone himself had been a leading practitioner of a sort of social scientific history – he had tried to produce coherent explanations of the English Civil War and the rise of modern family life that relied on social scientific analysis. In this article he was predicting where history as a discipline was headed. It was in a direction that appeared to reject his own life's work, but he did not seem to regret it at all. Indeed, he seemed to take some pleasure in tearing down his own temple.

And, his prediction was accurate. Indeed, Stone's prescience was not limited to "Anglo-Saxon" scholarship, for the shift toward micro-history and a narrowing of the venerable Annaliste concept of *mentalité* was underway in France at the same time.⁶ By the time of the "linguistic/cultural turn" of the early 1980s the project to more closely integrate history and the social sciences seemed bizarre to the great majority of historians, who could only utter the word "science" with an ironic tone of voice.⁷

Narrative history

Narrative refers to the organization of material in a chronological sequential order to form a single coherent story (with possible sub-plots, of course). One might express surprise that history could take any other form, since chronology is so closely associated with it, and since historians, of course, have always told stories. Indeed, the ancients regarded history as a branch of rhetoric rather than philosophy. Moreover, it would be an exaggeration to claim that even social scientific historians ever completely abandoned narrative. But they ceased to rely on it to give explanatory meaning to their work: they questioned its epistemological validity, or its cognitive value, and they felt it even prevented asking the right historical questions. Narrative relies on description more than analysis, focuses on man, or the individual actor, more than circumstances, and emphasizes the particular more than the collective experience.

To defenders of narrative, its virtue is usually seen to reside in its correspondence to the form in which people live and experience life. Thus, Paul Ricoeur claimed that narrative is the literary genre that provides the best analogy for the actuality of life.⁸ Life and narrative both take place

⁵ Lawrence Stone, "The revival of narrative," *Past and Present* 85 (1979), p. 91

⁶ The multi-stranded flight from Braudelian determinism is chronicled in (Burke, 1990, 65-93). Burke judged the Annales School to be so fragmented and diverse (as of 1990) as to no longer exist as a "movement." (pp. 106-07)

⁷ The English word "science" has taken on a much more restricted meaning than, say, the German *wissenschaft*. It is effectively restricted to the nomothetic disciplines, based on deduction and aspiring to lawmaking. The following statement of Braudel, made at the end of the third volume of *Civilization and Capitalism*, is today met with incredulity: "Is it not the secret aim and underlying motive of history to seek to explain the present? And today, now that it is in touch with the various social sciences, is history not also becoming a science of a kind, imperfect and approximate as they are,..." Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, The Perspective of the World* (New York, 1982), pp. 619-20

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, 3 vols* (Chicago, 1984-88).

chronologically. Similarly, Hayden White argued that the function of history is to produce stories that will disclose (not explain or analyze but disclose, as in reveal) the condition of the present time.⁹ Both of these theorists of narrative make claims that seem to associate the writing of history with the writing of fiction. They emphasize, thereby, the subjective, creative activity of the historian who must employ the imagination in order to construct a history via observation, empathy and understanding. Imagination is essential to bridge the chasm of historical distance that exists between now and then. “The past is a foreign country”, it became fashionable to say, with the implication that one could never “know” it in anything like a scientific way. To think otherwise was naïve.

The critics of narrative history directed their criticism precisely at its very “naturalness”: narrative has a seductive power that carries the reader along; it offers an intellectual satisfaction when “things fall into place”. We might concede all these points and yet still object that good stories may well be untrue. Chronology is not causation; description is not explanation – understood in the sense not simply of elucidation or making clear, but of determining the cause.¹⁰

Surely, one might counter, a carefully constructed narrative may be essential to explain events in this latter sense? Perhaps; but it will rarely be sufficient. After all, how do we decide which narratives to use, of the many that might plausibly be constructed? The discipline in the traditional discipline of history is, I believe, the obligation to seek concurrence among all available evidence in the construction of a narrative. Yet, even here it appears that the criteria for concurrence must reside outside the framework of the narrative itself.¹¹

“A characteristic of secular, modernist academic culture is its commitment to metaphors of verticality: surface reality vs. a deeper, hidden reality”.¹² Indeed, things directly observable are not real reality at all. The task of inquiry – scientific inquiry – is to get down to what is fundamental, and usually hidden from direct view. Thus, explanation is deeper than description, and the normal practices of narrative historians are easily dismissed as epistemologically naïve.

This had been the criticism of traditional history made in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, and it had bit hard. On many fronts, and not only in economic history, it supported the development of a new history that would gain explanatory power by alliance with the social sciences and would cease to rely on the narrative structure itself in order to impart meaning. When, in 1972, the Social Science History Association was founded in the US (later a European version would be established), it organized itself into at least a dozen distinct disciplinary networks. Historians over a broad range were eager to embrace the social sciences.

Social science history did not succeed in achieving all its aspirations. Stone refers to disappointment in its achievements as a cause of the revival of narrative. But here, I suspect he was being disingenuous. What he along with many historians most disliked about the new history – why his prediction was so laced with *shadenfreude* – were its technical inaccessibility and the scale of its ambition. Historical research in the new mode required team efforts, large data bases, computers (which then meant punch cards, main-frame computers, codes) and, of course, recourse to methods and theories that were not intuitively available to the uninitiated. In short, it had to assume the organizational form of a “science”. For him, this was a big step too far. Even the most ambitious historian was expected to communicate his/her findings to an educated lay reader without mediation. This is deeply ingrained in historians.

Social science was acceptable as an ‘add-on’, as a way to orient one’s thinking. One might borrow its vocabulary or its conceptual categories, opportunistically and for limited purposes. Indeed, in Peter Burke’s recent History and Social Theory, this limited appropriation still remains as far as he

⁹ Hayden White, “The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory,” in White, The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore, 1987), p. 53.

¹⁰ Francois Furet, “From narrative history to problem-oriented history,” in Furet, In the Workshop of History (Chicago, 1982), pp. 54-67. He argues that narrative relies on a logical fallacy: *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. the confusion of temporal sequence with causal explanation.

¹¹ Allan Megill, Historical Knowledge, Historical Error. A contemporary guide to practice (Chicago, 2007), Ch. 3.

¹² Megill, Historical Knowledge, ch. 4.

will go.¹³ In his view, empiricists and theorists are not two close-knit groups [that might collaborate in a joint enterprise], but two ends of a spectrum....theory can never be simply ‘applied’ to the past. Thus Burke repeats as obvious in 2005 what Stone insisted upon in 1979: history is and should always remain an artisanal craft. A dose of social science might add to the beauty of the product, but an embrace of social science would corrupt its purpose.¹⁴

The responsibility for this state of affairs – the limited transformative effect of the new history – cannot all be laid at the feet of historians, their manifest shortcomings notwithstanding. It takes two to tango, and the theories offered by social sciences had, and have, significant deficiencies for historical explanation. One can go further: at the time historians were turning to the social sciences, the social sciences exhibited very little interest in history. Most social sciences were consolidating the structural theories that defined them as sciences, and were eager to distance themselves from their historical-institutional roots in the late nineteenth century. I will turn to this in the second part of this paper.

But, first, a final word about this revival of narrative. It was not only disillusionment with social scientific history that provoked the reaction Stone described. It was also disillusionment with what might be called the promise of modernity and the promise of material determinism. The world of the 1970s was not leading to the Promised Land, the land promised, or predicted, by most social science theories then prevailing. Like a suitor spurned, historians turned to a new love object that denied the beauty and especially the power of the old one. And when they turned, their new narratives were quite different to the old ones of traditional history.¹⁵

Ironically, the revival of narrative took place in an intellectual environment of, “incredulity towards master narratives of all types.” This is Lyotard’s definition of post-modernity. Michael Foucault regarded the very continuity of narrative as suspect, since it unavoidably privileged the central subject of the narrative. Thus, the new narrative history, more than Stone suspected, would be petite narrative, thick description as an end in itself, micro-history in a subjective register.

Post-modern scholarship certainly has made positive contributions. I do not wish to deny this, but this is not the place to chronicle them. The post-modern challenge called into question the social scientific epistemologies with which the New History had hoped to enter into dialogue. This, by itself, might have advanced the agenda of those aiming for a more historical social science, since there was much to criticize about the social sciences. Specifically, the claim to universality in social scientific theory needed to be challenged. A universal theory transcends time and place – it transcends history – and this deserved debate.

But another feature of post-modernism raised up a formidable barrier to engagement in such a debate, while it powerfully advanced historical fragmentation. There is no real spur to empirical refinement in post-modern scholarship. This weakened the already fragile belief that historical knowledge is cumulative and self-corrective. A discipline without such a sense offers its practitioners no strong reason to pay attention to each other, let alone to the existing stock of empirical findings. At best, small communities of discourse survive in this process of intellectual involution, and the

¹³ Peter Burke, History and Social Theory (Ithaca, NY, 2005). According to Charles Tilly, “Three Visions of History and Theory,” History and Theory 46 (2007), p. 300 ‘He [Burke] assumes that historians are trying to make sense of particular times, places, phenomena, and transformations for which theorists may supply effective tools of description and explanation.’

¹⁴ Charles Tilly, “Three Visions,” p. 300. Similarly, William Sewell sees the relationship of history and social science as a one-way street. Historians use social theory to orient their thinking, or borrow its vocabulary, but they do not commonly intervene actively in social-theoretical debates. William Sewell, Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation (Chicago, 2005), Ch. 1.

¹⁵ This is my interpretation. Immediately after Stone wrote, Eric Hobsbawm, his long-time colleague on the editorial board of Past and Present, offered his take on the matter in “On the revival of narrative,” Past and Present 86 (1980), pp. 2-8. In comparison with Hobsbawm’s other interventions in historiographical debate it is a strikingly flaccid piece, seeking only to deny that anything of importance was going on. What Stone surveyed, according to Hobsbawm, was simply “the continuation of past historical enterprises by other means” (p. 8).

resulting fragmentation is now a universal lamentation of the historian.¹⁶ We have hundreds of histories, but no history.

Social Science History or Historical Social Science?

I introduced myself earlier as an economic historian. Economic history strives to be an interdisciplinary field of study, and while some such fields seek the interstices of established disciplines in order to escape from all discipline, mine expressly subjects itself to both – both history and economics – with the aspiration of contributing to not one but two disciplines. This aspiration makes us highly sensitive – like canaries in the cage taken down into the mines – to developments in either discipline that aid or hinder collaboration between these very different disciplines.

How different? Karl Popper 50 years ago pronounced economics the first of the social sciences to have “gone through its Newtonian revolution.”¹⁷ We might imagine these evolved economists as the first amphibians among the social scientist fish, laboriously learning to use their stubby little fins to scramble upon the shore. By now they have moved well inland into the Newtonian forest, and, as if in acknowledgement of this, a form of Nobel Prize is awarded to economists, but not to any other social scientists.

Meanwhile, as I have just recounted, history as a discipline moved further out to sea. The prospect of evolving as scientists lost its appeal to the historian fish. Instead, historians in the past three decades have shed several of their functional limbs to become rather simpler organisms, organisms that attract attention increasingly by their bright color, and exotic and diverse forms.

Some see this as inevitable and, all things considered, desirable: it represents the working out of a natural division of labor between the deductive and the inductive discipline, between a nomothetic (predictive, law-giving) economics and an idiographic (unique, descriptive) history. But, I have just tried to show that the gap is now larger than before, and is not simply a reflection of eternal academic structures. I will turn now to discuss ways in which a closing, or reduction of the size of the gap, has been explored since history’s return to narrative.

Round One: New Economic History and the Annales School

The first approach, certainly in the United States, was to make history more social scientific by appropriating both methods and theories, especially from economics, sociology, and political science. This reflected to some degree a Cold War inspired desire for a more objective historical scholarship, one with standards sufficiently rigorous to withstand ideological manipulation. This interest was widely shared among historians in the United States, but the search for rigor was certainly pushed furthest in economic history.

“There,” as Naomi Lamoreaux observed, “a small group of economists launched a veritable revolution, seizing control of the discipline’s organizations and using them to build a coherent body of scholarship based on the application of economic theory and econometric techniques to the study of the past.”¹⁸ The New Economic History (which, as it aged, took to calling itself “cliometrics”) confronted traditional history with a direct challenge to its practices and norms. The articulation of clear, testable hypotheses needed to be made central to scholarly inquiry in history, as it was already in economics.¹⁹ Testable historical hypotheses required the articulation of counter-factuals, alternative

¹⁶ This is the objective of Naomi Lamoreaux’s, “Economic History and the Cliometric Revolution,” in A. Molho and G. Wood, eds., Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past (Princeton, 1998). Adrian Wilson introduced his Rethinking Social History with the complaint that, “social history lacks a clear sense of direction or unifying perspective, ” and “is closed off, isolated from the historical disciplines more generally” (1993: 8). See also, Megill, Historical Knowledge, Ch.8. Megill defends the “fragmentation” of the discipline. Indeed, he pronounces himself to be “profoundly suspicious of attempts to overcome disciplinary fragmentation.” (p. 159).

¹⁷ Karl Popper, The Poverty of Historicism (London, 1960) p. 60n.

¹⁸ Naomi Lamoreaux, “Economic History and the Cliometric Revolution,” p. 59.

¹⁹ Major statements of the new agenda include: Douglass North, “The state of economic history,” American Economic Review 55 (1965), pp. 86-91; Robert Fogel, “The reunification of economic history with economic theory,” American Economic Review 55 (1965), pp. 92-98; Donald McCloskey, “Does the past have useful economics?,” Journal of

histories, as it were. All of this certainly challenged the discipline of history, but it uncritically embraced economics. Indeed, economic historians ran the danger of becoming a type of applied economics, deploying neoclassical theory to study the same market phenomena and the same necessarily short-term processes that preoccupied most of their mainstream economist colleagues.

This academic adventure was dramatic: journals were transformed; reputations turned upside down; audacious claims made about what really happened in history, including what caused the Great Depression of the 1930s. The current chair of the Federal Reserve Bank and Obama's first chair of the Council of Economic Advisors both made important contributions to historical monetary policy. Yet, however dramatic, this New Economic History did not have much influence on either discipline: history turned away and, as noted, economics was not directly challenged.

In the same period, but on another continent, others responded differently to the challenge of interdisciplinarity, by advancing the audacious claim that rather than making history social scientific, social science should be made historical. To those seized with this vision, the first step was to renovate history as a discipline, to allow it to take its place as the "queen of the social sciences." This was the stated objective of the French *Annalists*.²⁰ The most influential of them in the post-war era was Fernand Braudel, who argued that to become the unifying center of all the social sciences, the historical profession had to overcome its continued allegiance to a "pernicious humanism" (what he later describes as a "militant anthropocentrism").²¹ Furnished with a "clear awareness of the plurality of social time" and capable of incorporating the dialectics of both time and space, history – and history alone – could reconstitute the global nature of human phenomena.²²

Braudel's was a double critique: of a history too fond of the mere event (those "crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs"), and of "imperialistic" social sciences, fragmented and lacking in depth.²³ His vision was of a reformed history that could open a dialogue with the social sciences. The intention was not so much to refashion history after the social sciences as to make social science historical. This is an important distinction. History was to become a modern discipline not simply by incorporating existing, ahistorical social theory – however much Braudel had fallen under the influence of French Structuralism – but by deploying a new concept of duration and periodization, and a radically broadened (less anthropocentric) field of vision with respect to context and agency.

This vision was much discussed among historians, but there is little evidence that it attracted the attention of social scientists, with the possible exception of anthropologists, whose discipline had serious problems of its own. It was a strong vision, but is now visible only to those old enough to know where to look.

Round Two: Loosening structures and rediscovering events

Time passes. Historians and social scientists go their separate ways. Dialogue between them becomes less frequent and less amicable: social scientists are positivist apologists for the rich and powerful with their universalist – read Eurocentric – theories; historians are self-indulgent storytellers to the self-pitying of the world.

But the problem remains, and there are important new efforts to address them. But – unlike in the post-war decades – the attempts of the past two decades to restore history to social science and social theory to history have come from social scientists. They feel more acutely the weakness of

(Contd.) _____

Economic Literature 14 (1976), pp. 434-61; Robert Fogel and G.R. Elton, Which Road to the Past? (New Haven, CT, 1983).

²⁰ A movement of French historians who took their name from their journal, Annales (Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations), which, since 1994 has taken the name, Annales (Histoire, Sciences Sociales).

²¹ Fernand Braudel, "Histoire et Sciences Sociales: la Longue Durée," Annales E.S.C. 13 (1958), 725-53; "Pour une économie historique," Revue économique 1 (1950), pp. 37-44.

²² François Dosse, L'histoire en miettes: des 'Annales' à la nouvelle histoire (Paris, 1987), [History in Crumbs], p. 89. "It [history] alone had access to what [Braudel] called the 'ensemble of the ensembles'."

²³ See his 1950 inaugural address to the College de France, in, Fernand Braudel, Ecrits de l'histoire (Paris, 1969).

ahistorical theory, perhaps. Perhaps they see opportunities left on the table by historians – data and case studies supplied by these useful drones, which historians themselves will not or cannot pursue.

There are more strands to this story than I can recount, or than I know. Here are a few. The New Economic Historians, as they deployed the power of neoclassical theory on historical data, soon became rather full of themselves (Stone was hyper-sensitive to this), but they included in their number scholars who recognized the Faustian nature of the bargain they had struck. They had powerful tools to discern the working of market forces in history. But, the tools depended for that power upon a mechanistic world view that allows to the past, at most, a transient role in shaping events. In short, they could give precise answers to rather narrow questions – what was the rate of return on capital invested in a slave in 1860. They tended to find, over and over again, that markets worked. They had the same answer to every question.

The problem is “structure”. Economic theory relies heavily on the concept of equilibrium: which is the imagined state that would be attained when all economic agents have accomplished all desired adjustments in endogenous variables to achieve their aims. To wit, when all initial conditions and intervening events – exogenous shocks – in the past have been rendered irrelevant, when their effects have been so eroded as to become inconsequential. Which is to say, the long run in economics is not historical, nor does it lead us to historical insights. It is just the opposite; it refers to the state in which history has been erased, revealing pure, stable, unchanging structure.

When Alfred Marshall, in his *Principles of Economics* of 1890 adopted the epigraph *Natura non facit saltum* [nature makes no leaps] he appropriated from evolutionary theory as recently developed by Darwin, Lamarck and Buffon the doctrine of continuity: nature always has the time at its disposal to achieve its aims. Neoclassical theory also embraced a probability theory that proved its great operational strength: economic actions displayed ergodic processes possessing a limiting, invariant probability distribution – which form the basis of the unique, stable equilibrium condition in which markets clear and the system can, will, and must reproduce itself.

This is a powerful concept. But it tells us that all events – in the long run – are transient in their effects. This too will pass. Braudel had scolded historians for a too-strong fascination with mere events. Neoclassical economics taught that events (shocks to equilibrium) were of no real account in the long run. But is this so? Does history really not matter to economic life?

There have been two influential responses to the ahistorical character of neoclassical economics. The first was to bring back institutions. I say “back” because the chief rival to classical and neoclassical economics before the triumph of the neo-classical synthesis (between the time of Marshall and Paul Samuelson) had been what came to be called the German historical school. A better name is historical-institutional: it held that economic behavior was not embedded in timeless structures but was contingent on institutions, forming complexes that exhibited an organic unity, or spirit, each of which possessed its own possibilities and, indeed, its own economics.²⁴ But I also say back, because the task now was not to acknowledge that history matters because of institutions – exogenously determined – but to bring historical institutions into the realm of economic explanation – to endogenize institutional change.

This began with Douglass North’s theory of institutions. He took the Coasian theory of the firm and the concept of transaction costs and applied it to the state, and sought to identify a market for institutions (produced by the state, like a firm produces its products). It produced institutions in an historical context, some of the outcomes encouraged efficient behavior, while others encouraged rent

²⁴ The German historical school criticized the marginalist school for its misplaced scientism, by which all sorts of normative claims, based on little more than subjective judgments, were unconsciously entering the theoretical cannon of economics. The school claimed to describe “how the world works,” but could at most describe how the world ought to work, under certain assumptions. The remedy for this was a more historically based economics, sensitive to the differences between societies and within societies over time. Led by Gustav von Schmoller and Karl Bücher, what perhaps misleadingly came to be called the German historical school did battle with fellow central Europeans (the Austrian school) and the Cambridge based Neoclassical economists. In the United States, sympathetic economists included John Cummins, J. M. Clark and Wesley Mitchell, founder of NBER (1920). See: Heath Pearson, “Was there really a German School of Historical Economics?,” *History of Political Economy* 31 (1999), pp. 547-62.

seeking.²⁵ Later, the New Institutional Economics developed further, exploring how institutions evolved historically from the bottom up, through private solutions to principle-agent problems, creating private-order institutions that then interact with state power.

In both approaches to institutional change, structure becomes something repeatedly reformulated through an internal dynamic; it is something akin to what historical sociologists and political scientists call “systematic constructivism”, where transactions among persons, groups, and other social sites lead to accumulations of systematic knowledge that can alter existing structures.²⁶ The historical challenge in this work is to distinguish “fateful” events from “mere” events. An historical economics, or social science generally, would identify sequences of events in the past that exert lasting effects upon current conditions (cast a long shadow forward in time).

Paul David and Brian Arthur, in the second major response to the ahistoricism of economics, invoked non-ergodic probability theory to characterize these fateful events. This refers to probability outcomes *that are highly sensitive to initial conditions* – to initial moves. They do not gradually shake off early moves in an evening-out process, but take a particular direction, and close the door to alternatives, under the influence of these fateful moves. The economy’s later course – whether in institutions or technologies, or spatial concentrations of production – is dependent on the path laid out early on – it is path dependent.²⁷

Where is path dependence likely to be important? Not everywhere, but wherever the economy exhibits positive feedback effect, increasing returns to scale. Here multiple equilibria and indeterminacy are found. Another, perhaps more important generator of path dependence, is more widespread: the irreversibility of investment. Sunk costs are sunk. How easily can one walk away from them? Are these conditions rare or pervasive? This is a question that remains to be answered. The literature is large and growing, but, it seems, does not following a clear path. My point, however, is that this is a question for historical research more than for theoretical reflection.

One can see in both the institutional and path dependence theorizing efforts to loosen structural constants without losing all coherence; to recognize the power of human agency while preserving the ability to distinguish important, fateful, acts from ‘mere’ events; and to capture the irreversibility of time’s arrow, which creates long-persisting sub-optimality. The “spirit” of this work – to borrow a word from the German historical school – shows affinities to other academic developments, in complexity theory, evolutionary biology, and, I believe, cosmology.²⁸ Is it simply the flavor of the month – or decade – or is it a “fateful” break with an obsolete physical model?

Historical sociology and the related social history.

In economics, Paul David, Avner Grief, Douglass North, and others urge the discipline to become more historical: to loosen the straightjacket of structure as embodied in neoclassical theory by incorporating the modifications to structure introduced by historical sequences – fateful events, irreversibilities, and joint solutions – that form new institutions, lock-in new technologies and interpersonal commitments. The point is not that structure does not matter, but that it needs to be endogenized.

²⁵ For an introduction to these concepts see: Douglass North and Robert P. Thomas, The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History (Cambridge, 1973); Douglass North, Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance (Cambridge, 1990).

²⁶ Charles Tilly and Robert E. Goodin, The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁷ Path dependence can be defined as: processes in which the long-run character of the system depends critically on the history of the system, that is, on a specific sequence of events. Examples of its application include the celebrated case of the QWERTY keyboard, technology standardization more generally, regional economic development, market failure (or sub-optimality) and directionality.

²⁸ For an extended plea to build a “general theory” of society on a model supplied by biology, see: Christopher Lloyd, “Toward unification: Beyond the antinomies of knowledge in historical social science,” History and Theory 47 (2008), pp. 396-412.

The other social sciences have also experienced an “historical turn”. This – so far as I can assess it – has emphasized the past as context, as process, and, of course, as example – as case study and analogy – much more than it has involved the development of a historicized theory.

The structural sociology associated with modernization theory, but also Marxist-inspired materialism, inspired an historical sociology that has been called teleological temporality (by William Sewell). In works of this sort, history revealed the working out through time of the inherent logic of social development as understood within a modernist or a Marxist teleology. Such work could be very powerful – Wallerstein’s world-system and Tilly’s account of state-formation come to mind – but it was not so much based on historical data as it used historical data to illustrate and animate a theory.

More common in both sociology and political science are comparative historical studies. These treat historical events and episodes – revolutions and other political turning points usually – as so many separate trials of a laboratory experiment. This has led to influential theoretical statements (as in the work of Skocpol, Goldstone, Ertman, Pierson, but also in economics, by Acemoglu, Robinson, Johnson), but they do not really engage with the challenge of developing an historical social science. History is a trove of information. The independence of the case studies is too readily assumed, and the comparative analysis suffers – to put it in social scientific terms – from too few Ns and too many variables. One critic of sociology’s engagement with history put it this way:²⁹

Sociology uses history as long as it does not allow itself to become an object of history (in the sense of recognizing the historical contingency of its own discourse).

To be sure, criticisms from within these disciplines of their legacy of structural theories has generated a new interest in the interaction of determinate relationships and contingent events, and to an easy deployment of metaphors of feedback processes, configurations, crystallizations, and layerings. These terms all seek to suggest some classificatory order for historical happenings.³⁰ They are evocative but they remain highly informal and intuitive.

But my mission here is not to criticize specific work, but to note the absence in this historical turn of an engagement with the discipline of history, as such. The situation in the recent past seems to be the reverse of the post-war era discussed earlier: since the 1980s it has been historians who, as a body, are not prepared or inclined to engage with historical social scientists, and social scientists who have been groping toward historical alternatives to what might be called their legacy theories.

The present moment

Now, I see some sign that historians – history as a discipline (in the United States) – is emerging from the comfortable refuge it found and burrowed into 30 years ago. The historicist and culturalist outlook adopted then united them with other humanists and defended the humanistic domain against hostile, scientific criticism. Historians could see themselves as fighting the good fight in defense of cultural understanding, tolerance, and empathy in a hostile world. But they paid a price for this, and the price is now being recognized.

The social historian William Sewell was an enthusiastic social scientific historian, who made this cultural turn just as Lawrence Stone was announcing the revival of narrative history. He recently wrote an essay reflecting on his discipline as it had changed over his academic career.

“I worry”, he wrote “that the triumph of cultural history over social history has perhaps been too easy.... [It meant] the abandonment, without argument, of fundamental social-historical notions of social structure... The result is a form of history that is disarmed in the face of certain important questions posed to us by the history of our own era – the changing structure of world capitalism”³¹

²⁹ Terrence McDonald, “What we talk about when we talk about history: The conversation of history and sociology,” in Terrence McDonald, The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences(Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 92.

³⁰ Elizabeth S. Clemens, “Sociology as a historical science,” The American Sociologist 37 (2006), pp. 30-40.

³¹ William Sewell, Logics of History, Ch. 2. Another expression of regret, if not contrition, this time from a political scientist, “The collapse of the modernization literature is a clear case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The

In other words, historians and other social scientists who rejected structure for post-modern epistemology, for social construction founded in semiotics, language and signs, achieved only an illusionary liberation from uncongenial facts on the ground.

In this post-modern epistemology, the world is a highly malleable place, shaped and reshaped by semiotic practices. But a contrite Sewell now observes that it is not infinitely malleable. It does come back to bite you. And historians like himself, whose political engagement had initially led them to abandon structuralism, now find themselves disarmed, unable to explain the changing material world. He expresses, in short, a partial disillusionment with post-modern concepts: the insight that the social world is constituted by the interpretive practices of the actors who make it up once seemed liberating – liberating from the burden of history. But today it appears more like disarmament, a voluntary shedding of the tools needed to understand consequential historical change.

But the issue isn't only disillusion and fear. It is also interest: new interests in large-scale historical questions for which the cultural turn – however valuable in other contexts – is not suited, or not sufficient. This is not the place or the hour to delve into the new frontiers of historical research in any detail. It must suffice simply to note that global history is today the unavoidable mantra of historical research. While economic historians have long studied globalization as manifested in long-distance trade, industrial competition, multi-national firms, etc., today the global, or trans-national, is the preferred scope in which to study many political, social and cultural questions as well. This type of history requires structure – some understood framework to distinguish the stable from the moving parts of the multiple contexts involved in a global historical investigation.

Another example is the new interest in large scale comparative history. The cultural turn succeeded in destabilizing the Eurocentric theories (of, among others, Max Weber), which long had held both historians and social scientists to a sort of path dependent course of research. Once it broke that mold and proclaimed a sort of multi-cultural victory, there emerged pressing new questions, derived from current events (the rise of Chinese and other non-western economies), for which cultural studies had no answer. What has come to be known as the “Great Divergence” literature has pressed the case for the value of theory-informed systematic comparative historical study.³²

I can also point to the technological changes of the past twenty years that now simultaneously “flatten the world” (Thomas Friedman's new world competitiveness), and greatly increase intra-country income inequality. Capitalism today is not the same beast that historians felt they knew and turned away from in 1979. It was Sewell's point that historians, after the cultural turn, were left without tools to study the further evolution of capitalism. They only know how to critique the high modernist, “fordist” economic life that we can now only look back on with nostalgia.

A fuller discussion would need to refer to the new environmental history and the debate that will now be renewed, by events since 2007, over what was once thought to be a settled question: the fiscal versus monetarist interpretations of the Great Depression.

Sewell's self-critical analysis of history's path over these past 30 years led him to call – coming from another direction – for something akin to the path dependence and new institutionalism of the economists. Historical events, he argued, should be seen as happenings that transform structures. “To understand and explain an event...is to specify what structural change it brings about and to determine how the structural change was effected.”³³ (Ch. 7)

(Contd.) _____

discipline jettisoned an undesirable functionalism and teleology... Along with it went the discipline's most sustained efforts to think about long-term processes of social and political change.” Paul Pierson, “Big, Slow-Moving and Invisible,” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences (Cambridge, 2003), p. 199.

³² Kenneth Pomeranz, The Great Divergence. China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy (Princeton, 2000); R. Bin Wong, China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience (Ithaca, NY, 1998); R. Bin Wong and Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, Before and Beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Prasanna Parthasarathi, Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850 (Cambridge, 2011).

³³ Sewell, Logics of History, pp. 219.

Sewell, too, distinguishes between mere events and fateful events. To do so, historians need to break with narration, to suspend time, temporarily, in order to analyze and explain. Thus “there can be no adequate *diachronic* narrative of an event without a *synchronic* understanding of the structures that the event transforms.” (ch.7)

To conclude, I want to return to Stone’s 1979 paper. “I detect”, he wrote “an undercurrent sucking historians back to a form of narrative history.” I did not detect this then – I was surprised by it. But I now detect an undercurrent sucking historians back, away from narrative history and away from micro- and subjectivist histories and back to a concern with coherent, causal explanation of societal change.

One might hope, then, that they engage more directly and fruitfully with social scientists who for some time now have been addressing the rigidities and ahistorical character of their own theoretical equipment.

One is tempted to say that those abandoning narrative should meet with those abandoning structure somewhere in mid-field. Or that theorists and empiricists should learn to respect each other. Obviously the matter is not so simple; it is not really a question of compromise and reconciliation. Rather, the task before both historians and social scientists is to reformulate their understandings of both structures and events.

Structure in the sense of society as a reified totality needs to give way to an understanding of the multiplicity of structures and their intersections and interactions. There are mental or cultural structures (mentalities) as well as material structures, and while they ordinarily shape people’s practices, it is also, under certain conditions, people’s practice that constitutes, reproduce and alter structures.

Events as historians understand and recount them need to yield to a distinction between mere events and fateful events, sequences leading to path dependent outcomes, and structure-modifying acts. This, in turn, requires a sustained attention to explanation.

Having said all this, I cannot help but note that this prescription conforms broadly to the vision of layers of time developed by Fernand Braudel and the Annales School. He spoke of structures, enduring features – changing glacially if at all, that constrained human action and of events, mere events, that were as numerous as they were fleeting, and powerless to change anything of importance. But in between these two extremes of historical time he located something called *conjuncture*. Here events and structures came together in fateful ways. Just what happened in this middle range of historical time, where combinations and sequences of action reset what we might call “the course of events” was only sketched out, and this mysterious category of time was often the butt of jokes by less visionary, more down-to-earth historians. Then historians had few allies among the social scientists. Today there are a good number – a critical mass? – of historical social scientists seeking an historicized understanding of this realm where agency and structure confront each other, and, if I am right, a new era in which historians will seek to offer coherent explanations of change in the past.