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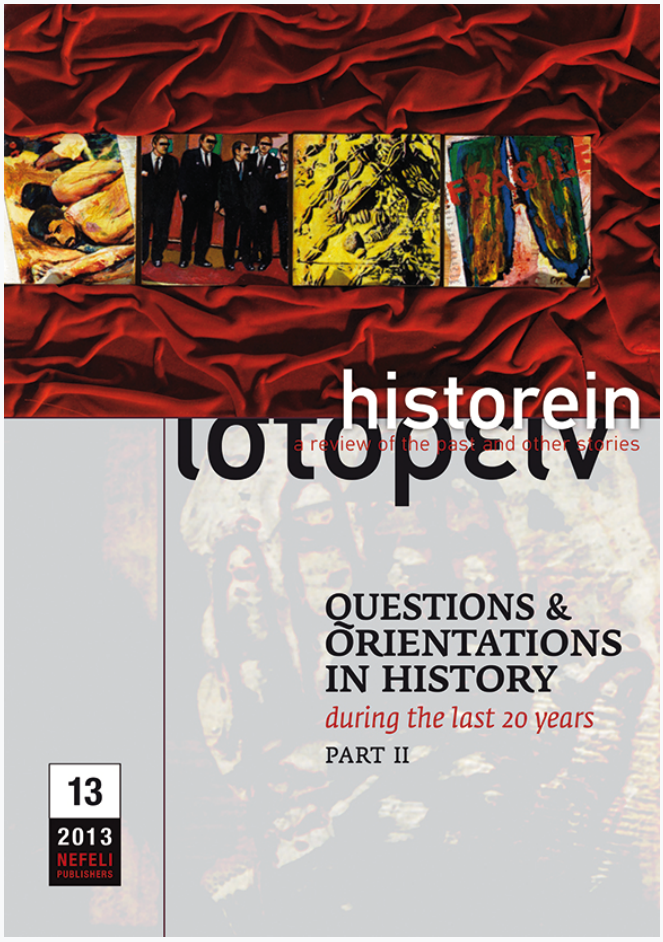

Trajectories of social history: a report

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Trajectories of social history: a report

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I propose to consider the position of historical practice today, with an emphasis on social history and particularly from the point when it overlapped with the cultural turn. I do not intend to offer a complete picture of the trajectories of social history because that would require a much more extensive work, particularly since social history is not a unified field of historical practice. My purpose is to pose some questions regarding the new possibilities offered by the linguistic or cultural turn for social history and to ponder the different historical practices today without denying the important contribution of social history to modern historiography. For the purposes of this paper, my presentation begins with a short and probably schematic overview of the "history of social history" since the last decades of the previous century and continues with the discussion of the main argument.

The emergence of social history as a dynamic field in its own right can only be traced after the end of second world war and particularly during the 1960s. When in 1971 Eric Hobsbawm declared that it was a good time to be a social historian, social history was taking the shape that would make it the dominant model of historical analysis for the next 20 years.[1] Certainly the renowned historian did not claim that he invented the term social history, but he used it in a very confident way to show that it could serve a new project in the field of history, namely total history, which in his own words meant that "the social or societal aspects of man's being cannot be separated from other aspects of his being".[2] Schematically put, this project of social history, which here I call structural, combined an emphasis on structure and structuration, with the scientific optimism that social history would make possible the knowledge of history and

society as totalities and, finally, with keeping an open mind towards the social sciences which, according to Hobsbawm, were at that same time taking their own historical turn. Social history never represented a unified field since it encompassed differing research agendas and priorities, most particularly Marxism and the *Annales* school. But there was much common ground. As William Sewell suggests, in contrast to mainstream political history, social history combined the study of people ignored until then by historical scholarship, like the labouring poor and the working classes, with the effort to study and integrate all social experience into a totality or structure.[3] New questions and new categories of documents rapidly broadened the fields of social history and spread its influence and attraction. Of course, the arrival of social history to this level of sophistication was not sudden but, to a large extent, the outcome of overlapping influences, both internal and external to the practice of history.

Although, as I have suggested, the practice of social history followed different paths, social historians agreed that their work had much to do with the study of structures, most notably economic structures. In the 70s the concept of structure was already available and used in various professional and nonprofessional historical networks. Although with different twists, structural approaches were most common among Marxist and neo-Marxist social scientists, *Annalistes* historians and anthropologists and linguists of different sorts, particularly in France, Britain and the US. Of course these different networks were not identical and one would have all the good reason to argue that British Marxists and Annalist historians for example should not be lumped together. One could also add that none of these networks were internally unified and coherent. This I concede. It is not my intention to proclaim the unity of these networks nor underestimate their methodological and epistemological differences and their different intellectual traditions. It is hard to miss the point, for example, that most *Annalistes* historians focused on structures and the *longue durée* whereas Marxists studied social transitions, most notably the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Nor, on the other hand, do I wish to disregard the reciprocal influences existing among these networks which shaped much common ground.[4] All these apart, it is not unreasonable to suggest that structure as a fundamental category of historical analysis became acceptable to all historians who styled themselves social historians. This choice is understood by the fact that structures could accommodate and relate different elements or series of elements of an economic, demographic, environmental and even cultural nature into a whole. In other words, this new social history was founded on the belief that structure and structuration provided the intellectual and methodological means for adequate answers to complex questions, explaining composite phenomena in the long run – some would say in the very long run. In addition, structures could be put on a hierarchical axis according to criteria set by networks of historians or social scientists. On this axis, cultural aspects were usually placed on the superstructure or the *troisième niveau* and were reduced to some other more fundamental level, most particularly economics.

Despite the major advances which social history brought to the practice of history, these came at a cost, or so one could say with hindsight. The structuralist perspectives tended to marginalise if not erase human agency. The idea that agency was determined in more ways than one by impersonal structural factors, some of which were not even comprehensible to human consciousness, was at the basis of major historical works, such as the *Mediterranean in the Age of Phillip II* (1949), by Fernand Braudel, who, among others of the *Annales* school, staged a relentless attack on pre-

viously dominant historical categories and practices, such as the event and narrative for example, and proposed new directions of historical analysis using novel perspectives such as the *longue durée* or the three-tiered models of chronicity and *histoire-problem*. These directions put structure and structuration in sharp relief. Long-term processes in geography, the environment, demography and the economy were far more important than human agency, whose history Braudel understood as the traditional history on the scale of individual men which was brief, exciting but also dangerous because it was related to their passions, dreams and illusions.[5] On the contrary, structure and structuration appear in the form of a construct that gets in the way of history, hindering its flow and shaping it; a structure that, although it may wear out, will last long enough to outlive a number of human generations. This "anonymous history, working in the depths and most often in silence", was the realm of the historian, instead of "a history arbitrarily reduced to the role of heroes".[6] Structural factors were vital to the framing of social experience and transcended immediate human experience and short time spans.

Of course, the project(s) of social history exemplified by the *Annales* becomes more complicated if one takes into consideration the relations with French structuralism. It is well known, for example, that particularly in France a war almost broke out between history and structuralism of the Lévi-Strauss kind.[7] The extent of the influence of French structuralism on *Annalistes* historians remains, in my mind, an open question. The radical twist which Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault gave to structuralism and the epistemological displacements which prepared the ground for poststructuralism were not easily compatible with the line of thought and research of the *Annales* school. This becomes even more complicated if we consider the internal differentiation of this school between different "generations" and "sensitivities". Yet one could discern a strong similarity among the major threads of the *Annales* school and structuralism as regards human agency. The old [male] individual of humanism, endowed with free and unlimited will, rationality and inherent intentionality, that dominated the historical narratives of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, became the target of structuralist attack. Braudel distrusted both human agency and short time spans as capricious and delusive departures from historical knowledge. Barthes and Foucault, among others, rejected the very idea of intentionality as the free play of self-conscious individuals and declared the "death of the author".[8]

Marxist social historians, on the other hand, focused on structures for their own reasons.[9] The history of Marxist historiography is controversial. Although there are few authoritative histories of Marxist historiography per se, there are countless discussions about Marx, Marxism and history in various publications of case studies or other issues. The emphasis is usually put on western Marxism, if not exclusively on British Marxism alone, whereas other variants of Marxism, particularly those developed in the socialist countries, are usually ignored if not trivialised. Marxist materialist history, particularly its western variants, inherited the ambivalence of classical Marxism about the mechanism of social change – that is whether the shift from one mode of production to the next is the outcome of class struggle or the consequence of the discrepancies between productive forces and productive relations. Although there was much debate among Marxist historians and social scientists, this tension was never adequately resolved. British Marxist historians in particular focused on the agency of the labouring classes but almost always in a way which bound them to bigger economic structures. Even E.P. Thompson's sub-

tle analysis of working-class culture, with its emphasis on how labouring men constituted their own class culture, is not entirely removed from economic reductionism and completely fails to see class also as a gendered concept.[10] Thompson criticised Althusserian structuralism for its insistence on structure and its denial of human agency and, rejecting broad theoretical models, insisted on the value of history as a form of explaining historical change through human agency.[11] Despite his ambivalence towards the base/superstructure dichotomy, Thompson did not question the objective position of class, only the workings of culture to accelerate or to impede class consciousness. Emphasis on structure, in terms of modes of production or the base/superstructure model, was always dominant in Marxist interpretations of social change, thus collapsing agency to structural constraints.The shaping of social history, which Hobsbawm celebrated in 1971, was also influenced by factors external to history itself. According to some, these factors were associated with major sociocultural trends. William Sewell links the rapid development of social history, as a distinct field of historical practice, to the kind of scientific optimism which followed Fordist capitalism, this pact among big business, labour and government, greatly responsible for the postwar boom and the expansion of university education to accommodate the needs of the capitalist organisation of western societies.[12] Fordism has produced, Sewell believes, a predictable form of society which, at the same time, has offered itself to quantifiable and accurate knowledge. Others, like Geoff Eley argued that the scientific optimism of the 60s and 70s, bound as it was to experimentation, openness and interaction between the social sciences and history, influenced the practice of history immensely. In Anglo-Saxon and French academic environments, interdisciplinarity won the day and many historians sought in sociology a promising field for renewing their methods and advancing historical specialisation in the form of novel subfields such as family history, urban history or the history of youth and childhood.[13] However, interdisciplinarity seemed at the time a one-way thing: the turn of historians to sociology was not reciprocated. Sociologists mostly treated historical works as sources of information and did historical work themselves, usually at their own peril, to support their own generalisations because they often felt that their questions were not answered by existing historical scholarship.[14]

The structural model of social history dominated the field for more than two decades before it succumbed to specific pressures and decline. This development was not predictable. The structural model was quite successful in providing convincing interpretations of various aspects of social life in their interaction and offered, particularly in many of its Marxist forms, interesting though crude versions of social change. The linearity and causality underpinning this model increased its appeal, particularly among an audience of social scientists searching explanations for social change, although the prevailing metaphor used, that of basis and superstructure, led to the neglect of those aspects of social experience that did not fit comfortably with the basic elements of structure. The macroscopic perspective of social history grasped history on a big scale, either in terms of a set of static but long-term structures, or in terms of a grand narrative of social change, i.e. the passage from feudalism to capitalism. All these sounded well until cracks started to appear in the model.

When did the crisis of this model occur? The answer to this question is complicated and would require far more space than this short paper commands. One could argue, though, that the structuralist perspective reached its limits even at the time when it was most celebrated. As Carlo Ginzburg convincingly suggested, the macroscopic perspective could see subaltern classes only under

the spectre of anonymity and therefore was unable to conceive the uniqueness of a case such as that of the miller Menocchio.[15] Ginzburg did not question the universality underpinning the project of social history and believed that the microhistorical perspective of his work on the sixteenth-century mental world of Menocchio could offer useful insights into the popular culture of his age. However, Ginzburg made a point regarding the tension existing between structure and agency, big and small scale. I think that this tension was vital to the decreasing influence of the structural model of social history. The merits of this model were gradually counterbalanced by an emerging interest in agency, identity and social representation, all elements of social experience which until then had been subsumed by impersonal structures. Of course, one could claim that structuralist approaches did not remain unaltered. On the contrary, they became more subtle and open minded and, at some point, at least theoretically, even criticised their own theoretical origins which pitted agency and structure as exact opposites. Sewell, for example, attempted to reconcile structure and agency claiming that society – and history by extension – can only be grasped in relation to multiple and dynamic structures which are in close interaction with multiple forms of human agency.[16] Sewell's work provides a new and flexible perspective of structure and structuration, far removed from older and much more static views of structure common in the social sciences. However, at the same time this work was, in my view, an exception. In addition, it became also evident that the "social" should not be conceived as self-evident. As Patrick Joyce suggested, both social science and social theory considered the "social" as an immovable background, as a "thing", whose materiality and, therefore, its distinction with culture was taken for granted.[17] Social history inherited a long dualist legacy which sharply distinguished the social and the cultural, the material and the immaterial, structure and agency, in order to explain historical phenomena in terms of deep underlying causes rather than "superficial" elements.

The major criticism of the structural model of social history appeared during the 80s when a growing number of historians took the "linguistic turn", the "cultural turn", or the "discursive turn", all infamously ambivalent terms describing a new sensitivity towards language, discourse, representation, identity and the symbolic/semiotic.[18] Needless to say that the semantics of these terms differ slightly, but for the purposes of this article I will use them indiscriminately. I do not suggest that these turns, which for many belong to the constellation of theories branded postmodernist, represent a decisive and complete break with previous approaches. Certainly there are discontinuities with preceding forms of social history but there are also various overlapping fields of sensitivity, particularly with issues regarding subalterity and history "from below". But even if my view is wrong, even if discontinuities between the "new" and the "old" are strong, I think that we are today beyond the point where a discussion of this kind is useful. I simply rest on the important assumption that the cultural turn successfully challenged major categories of modern social analysis and forced historians to rethink their ways of practicing and thinking about history. This major turn must not be seen as a fashionable trend which prioritises cultural over social understanding but rather as a way of transcending dichotomies inherent in the epistemological core of social history in the first place.

The cultural turn in history met with varying degrees of acceptance, indifference and refusal within academia, the social sciences in particular. Some believe that the methodological eclecticism and the celebration of difference which they associate with the cultural turn are serious problems

directly affecting the possibility of coherent historical analysis. To many, this new critical idiom seemed disheartening if not totally chaotic because, as they argued, it destabilised meaning and all certainty of historical explanation. Since the 80s, reactions against the cultural turn have been strong and the intensity and bitterness of the intellectual exchanges between the ardent followers of the now "old" social history and their critics who took this turn have not yet receded.[19] Of course, reactions against the cultural turn are not uniform and critics like Richard Evans, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Lynn Hunt, Joyce Appleby, Victoria Bonnell and Bryan Palmer, among others, cannot be lumped together.[20] Some of them, for example Hunt and Bonnell, felt that the cultural turn erased all references to social context and destabilised standards of judgment completely.[21] Evans complained that the cultural turn abandoned scientific history and attacked the rigorous investigation of primary sources and objectivity, thus transforming history into a kind of literature.[22] Palmer used the metaphor of a "descent" (into hell?) to signify the reification of language, the rejection of materialism and the abandonment of many useful concepts such as class struggle, exploitation and revolution, a process that he associated with the cultural turn.[23] Although the epistemological and political views of these critics differ, it seems fair to suggest that they all defend the idea of historical objectivity[24] which was directly questioned by the cultural turn. I do not intend here to enter the rough terrain of discussions or polemics which have accompanied this turn since it emerged. In a short paper such as this, is impossible to condense the various and sometimes contradictory forms of criticism or defence of the cultural turn and its major offshoot in the field of history, new cultural history. I will simply indicate that it might not be arbitrary to suggest that the indifference, if not the outright hostility, which many, though not all, "mainstream" social historians showed towards the cultural turn seems to stem from an older tradition in social theory which distrusted language because its metaphoric slippages and opacity destabilised referentiality and the representation of the "real".[25] The alternative was to take for granted that words mean what they say, because otherwise, it was argued, one will be left in the chaos of differential meanings and lose any prospect of certainty. For many historians, language was and is still very much considered a transparent medium of expression whose descriptions are to be judged as true or untrue in terms of an extralinguistic and nondiscursive historical reality which particular authoritative interpretations have raised to the status of the final criterion of truth. Most historical works simply repress the connotative nature of language. As Joan Scott put it, there is a strong paradox in the fact that historical interpretations create meaningful historical realities – in a sense they "produce" the past – at the same time that their legitimacy rests on the mimesis of a reality supposedly existing outside the text.[26] This was a definite epistemological choice that exiled language from the field of interpretation, considering it strictly a descriptive medium. Particularly in qualitative history, a specific subfield of practice related mostly with *Annalistes* social history, the opacity and metaphoric nature of language was erased through the conversion of supposedly unintended traces of the past (prices, taxes, deaths, births, etc) into series of numbers which allowed the comparison of similar things over long periods of time.[27]

Certainly there is no point insisting that the cultural turn is uniform; on the contrary, any such claim would undermine its critical thrust against all totalising discourses. Perhaps one of the major issues is how older distinctions, such as the "social" and the "cultural", which were at the core of social history, could be reworked from cultural turn perspectives. As was the case with the "social", the "cultural" is also far from self-evident as it takes various meanings.[28] According to Patrick

Joyce, there are cases where the cultural is ontologised in cultural history, just as the social was in social history, with the cost that the "cultural" has become separated from the material and the social.[29] One should also take into consideration the fact that the cultural turn seems to have come as a loan to the study of history. As Eley has pointed out, the gradual passage to approaches that emphasised culture and language did not emerge within the practice of history but came about under the influence of other disciplines, most notably social anthropology and literary theory.[30] The linguistic form used by many practitioners of cultural history is another point of consideration. The cultural turn required a new form of language because it could not be cast in the available idioms of the social sciences or the humanities, something which proved no easy task. Although this was not unprecedented – new approaches always fashion their own vocabulary and grammar in order to give coherence to their subject matter – the cultural turn has often faced ironical reactions from different quarters castigating its linguistic pretensions.

The picture sketched above presents the complexity of the cultural turn and serves as a warning that dismissing or trivialising the challenges this turn brought to the practice of history is naïve, to say the least. In my view, the cultural turn in history did not lead to a kind of new orthodoxy, although in some cases the high enthusiasm for it may have suggested that it had. This turn stands out more as a challenge to the epistemological and methodological certainties commonly found in the practice of history and historiography and less as a clear-cut and consistent research agenda. I am not suggesting that writing history in this new mode is impossible, as some have claimed, but it seems to me that current conditions in the practice of history rather justify new kinds of osmosis than the search for a new orthodoxy, which in any case would be contrary to the suggestions of most cultural or sociocultural historians.

All considered, the fact that the cultural turn gained ground within the historical profession begs explanation. There is no consensus as to the extent of its ascendance and influence, and probably there will never be. But it is rather certain that this turn cannot be understood in academic terms alone and must be discussed in relation to the broader framework. Opinions on this issue differ. Some, like William Sewell, believe that the shift from social to cultural history and the linguistic turn correspond to a major shift from Fordist capitalism to neoliberal capitalism and the new regime of "flexibility". This shift decreased the faith in solid and determining social structures and made plausible the idea that even the sphere of the economy was culturally constituted. The cultural turn was one of the alternative responses to the flexibility of social and labour relations associated with recent systemic transformations, although within the new conjuncture, Sewell seems to suggest, the cultural turn lost its critical edge, which was valid against the deterministic forms of social history of the Fordist era but less so in the present times of globalised capitalism.[31]

Gabrielle Spiegel situates the development of the cultural turn and of poststructuralism in general in the generation which matured in the 60s and 70s. Poststructuralism represents, she believes, a displaced response to the Holocaust, the war and disillusionment with Enlightenment principles. Within this particular situation, many lost all confidence in language to signify anything beyond itself. Foucault's genealogies, Derrida's deconstruction and Lyotard's postmodernism articulated the sense of loss, absence and fragmentation brought by these major, sublime events. Spiegel refuses to reduce shifts in historiography, particularly the "dematerialisation of history", to systemic chang-

es, but she is willing to accept that shifts in the economy and society in America made room for new sensitivities which, in turn, explain the implantation of poststructuralism in American academia.[32]

Eley, in his turn, suggests that the political transitions of the last four decades exerted pressures on the way historians thought about their practices. The dispiriting political experiences of the 80s and 90s combined with the crisis of class models of explanation and social causality influenced social history and precipitated the cultural turn. He claims that the cultural turn does not represent a kind of apolitical history but a new configuration between politics and history which is different to the one found in materialist metanarratives of the past. In this framework, older totalising discourses have been supplanted by new historical sensitivities which place much more emphasis on fragmentation and pluralism.[33]

It is certain that a correlation exists between the practice of history and broader economic and cultural changes; yet, it would be inappropriate simply to collapse the cultural turn into broader changes. I believe that today the practice of history faces both political and epistemological dilemmas which cannot be ignored.

The purpose of questioning older "paradigms" of social history is not only about building new historical narrations but also about crucial cognitive issues which, until recently, were considered self-evident. The cultural turn represented a form of postessentialist *problématique* which a large audience within academia, dissatisfied with the line of social causality dominant in social history, particularly the various forms of economic reductionism, found promising. By exposing the discursive and therefore the culturally and historically constituted conventions which made categories like class, gender, ethnicity, nation or experience self-evident departures for historical analysis, the linguistic turn appealed to many historians disappointed with the reductionism of social history and looking for new guidelines in their research and readings. The appeal was even stronger for those working to bring to the fore the voices of previously unrepresented subaltern classes and practices. Of course, some approaches of social history, particularly those of a Marxist orientation, were not indifferent to this issue. The history of the labouring classes and class conflict involved issues of agency and social action, though it fell short of considering the processes by which subaltern individuality was constructed. If agency and experience are not self-evident categories, the need arises to rethink them again in ways that take the manner in which the subaltern represents herself in the world seriously.[34] Of course, this kind of interest is double edged, because however commendable it is to bring to the fore the stories of those whom power excluded from history, it should not lead to the rehabilitation of the willing subject, or to new forms of essentialism. Be that as it may, one cannot do this without reconsidering language and referentiality which, as Manuel Cabrera insists, is not about referents but about rules of signification.[35] The point is that language could not be taken anymore as a neutral and transparent medium or an expression of an extra- or nonlinguistic reality but as an active factor in the making of the "real". Under this theoretical perspective, crucial issues of historical interest like memory, selfhood, community and difference, but also categories like class, generation and gender, can be fruitfully rethought and reworked.

The linguistic turn in (social) history did not simply stem from a deeper critique or resentment towards the structuralist paradigm. It is true, as Eley claims, that the loss of confidence in class mod-

els of social change diminished the explanatory power of social history and of the class-oriented model in particular. But this alone cannot explain the shift to cultural history and the linguistic turn, at least not adequately. I would agree that this turn fits with the rising new sensibilities introduced to the field of history, and social history in particular, under the influence of a postmodern, fluid and global social and cultural environment which acknowledged multiplicity and diversity. Within this environment, conflicting and contingent dynamics emerged and new claims and expectations were brought to the fore by new social movements. Long-term processes, such as the globalisation of capital, emigration, the making of supranational organisations such as the European Union, but also the emergence of global issues like global warming and pollution, the resurgence of nationalism and neofascism and the diffusion of new technologies, condensed time and space on an unprecedented scale and changed horizons of expectation.

Understandably, all these changes brought about serious challenges to existing social and cultural identities and destabilised all sense of certainty. Rethinking identities in this emerging global framework proved difficult, demanding and contradictory, but in any case it required, in my mind, a turn to history and historicity. No doubt, global capitalism is a major force of change today, and most of the time for the worse. If our condition of existence is uncertainty, if all kinds of certainty of space and position become displaced and decentred, then the "old" languages of modernity are inadequate and new idioms, concepts and mental equipment are required. Displacement as major feature of the new postmodern condition applies not only to movements of displaced people searching for new homelands to replace "lost" ones, but to all sorts of displacement from previous certainties and the forms of agency they instigated.

I believe that, in the field of social history, many historians were influenced by these developments and tried to react to these new sensibilities rethinking gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and class, and their dynamic relationships. But it is difficult if not impossible now to build a new grand narrative which could accommodate everything in a common texture. Issues such as the above-mentioned do not fit some sort of totality but should be seen as fields of difference, fields which produce difference, and, thus, they cannot serve or be subordinated to a total, universal narrative. Therefore, the claims and expectations which one could have today from social history are not similar to those of the 60s and 70s. The scientific optimism and the search for totality that dominated the research agendas during those fascinating times are now misplaced. The collapse of grand narratives and the distrust in objectivity can now be situated within the power/knowledge nexus and associated with the certainty that knowledge and ideology are not as distinct as we once believed.

Next to the need to study gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, etc, as distinct but overlapping fields where difference is produced, the advent of epistemological questions about the politics and nature of historical knowledge created a new intellectual and cognitive environment which could not be dissociated from what is commonly known as identity politics. I understand identity politics as a specific sphere only partly overlapping with official politics, being at the same time unstable and internally differentiated. Closely associated with subject positions regarding sexuality, gender, ethnicity or forms of cultural hybridity, identity politics do not easily correspond to already available and acceptable forms of practice or concepts of community and solidarity found in the dominant political or unionist discourse of the right or left. The tension between identity politics and pre-existing

networks of political mobilisation is put in sharp relief in and through language. Is it possible to define the experiences of displaced persons/groups, of groups of unorganised workers of particular ethnic backgrounds or of groups of "nonconventional' sexual orientation with the kind of language used in ordinary political discourse? Does the appeal of universality still stand for all those who live on the margin or relate their existence to local or particularistic identities? And what are we to do with the tide of resurgent nationalisms which are once again claiming primordial and rigid identities to oppose the inroads of "cosmopolitanism" and globalisation? Is it enough to proclaim them obsolete or simply reduce them to the shifts of global capital? I believe that we live in a world of constant change, a world with many uncoordinated centres which cannot be easily reduced to one supracentre which foresees, plans and decides everything. Global capital is simply a metaphor to signify a multitude of changes which restructure experience and expectation and fuel uncertainty and displacement. But a return to a previous state of certainty is impossible, if this certainty ever existed. Identity politics are part of our new global condition and the only way to understand them is to take them seriously.

Reactions towards identity politics, particularly from the left, had much in common with the reactions against the cultural turn, often to the point where these two phenomena appeared to be identical. In both cases, criticism indicates the lack of substantial politics which lead to various confusing particularisms or "culturalisms" at the expense of the big picture. Hobsbawm was quite critical and claimed that identity politics were not in position to serve the universal ideals of socialism and the left because, as he put it in an article, "identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only".[36] Written some time before the Labour Party under Tony Blair won the 1997 elections, the article did not address historians in particular but the general public. According to Hobsbawm, issues of difference pertinent to identity politics are simply redundant or of marginal interest. We all live with a set of different identities which shift and change, but one of these may take the lead and dominate our being and political affiliation in times of uncertainty. Identity politics are therefore a kind of anachronism which exists only because situations of uncertainty still survive. Putting class apart, other forms of difference seem to obscure real politics if not history itself. On another occasion, Hobsbawm discussed the relation of identity politics and history, taking issue with local and particular historical memories. He claimed that local memories, however important for local identities, are usually at odds with the professional standards of history, a subtle way of calling them wrong. "Rhetorical constructions" in the field of local memory simply confuse fact and fiction, the local and the global, and their only function is the celebration of the local.[37] Hobsbawm is not alone in this. Arif Dirlik moves in a parallel direction when he claims that the proliferation of identities and histories could be liberating to the extent that they reveal hitherto suppressed voices, but they come at the cost of unleashing resurgent culturalisms, which draw rigid boundaries around imagined selves and communities.[38] The proliferation of histories has put forward different truth claims which deny any possibility of coherent narrativisation. The question is not whether histories can be true or objective but, distinct as they claim to be, "whether they may be containable to something called history". Therefore, Dirlik concludes, this situation does not end up in alternative futures but in an opaque and uncertain future for all. A similar argument is put forward by Manu Goswami, in her review of Eley's *A Crooked Line*. Goswami insisted that – compared with the historical materialism that served future-oriented narratives, gave meaning to the historical present, reconstituted social totality and impelled the struggles of dominated groups –

the turn to cultural history, and obviously the cultural turn, was burdened with pessimism and the conviction that systemic critique and social transformation are impossible.[39]

Critiques such as these mentioned above are not only unfair but they miss the point almost completely. First of all, there is no strict correlation between the cultural turn in history and identity politics. The cultural turn, though nothing near being a coherent project yet, acknowledges pluralism and multiplicity as a working hypothesis but is far removed from all kinds of fundamentalism or essentialism. On the other hand, identity politics are not uniform and could end up in different agendas and claims of identity. Some in particular did use forms of rhetoric which bind identities to nature or other kinds of essentialist discourse. Although this choice could be seen as an empowering strategy of the dispossessed or of those who feel threatened,[40] it could create impressions of authenticity or primordiality. This rhetoric should not be confused with the cultural turn. On the contrary, the reduction of identities to nature was very well embedded in western modernity and the Enlightenment tradition, first as a weapon against despotism and religion and then as a conceptual schema much used and misused in various contexts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the other hand, identity politics should not be considered as a naïve and static form of politics in the recent wave of globalisation. As Judith Buttler suggested, one should not understand identity politics in terms of factionalisation, where one identity excludes another, but as a field where one identity comes to find its conditions of possibility in another. Identities are relational and difference is the condition that makes identity possible.[41] Therefore, the common belief among historians who adopted the cultural turn that different narratives and identities should not be subordinated to a new grand narrative, or essentialist narratives of smaller scale, does not leave the essentialist presumption found in identity politics beyond criticism.[42] For Hobsbawm, Dirlik, Goswami and many others, there is a point beyond which the deconstruction of venerable analytic categories should not be allowed for both political and cognitive purposes. Otherwise, all possibilities for coherent interpretation and knowledge will be lost. Here one could be left with the strong suspicion that the only venerable category that deserves this honour is class, as the "rest" – gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, etc – hardly could go through the threshold of "serious" analytic categories, far less pass the gates of meaningful social experiences. But in this way, we simply repeat the certainties of scientific fundamentalism and sidestep all issues inherent in the project of total history as well as the politics of difference which exist in the practice of history.

On the face of all that, one may wonder whether a return to social history as it was practiced is desirable. This may sound like an exaggeration or even provocation given the number of historians who are faithful to the project of social history and very reluctant to accept the values of the cultural turn. But I believe that the question stands in the sense that, for better or worse, we all have experienced a major shift in the practice of history, a shift which, as Thomas Osborne has suggested, must be seen as an advance and not a threat to social history.[43] Within the current decentred field of historical practice, some trends are attempting to bring back aspects of social history. The material turn for example provides a fresh look at a number of issues, most prominently materiality and the human/nonhuman distinction. Rather than insisting on the return of the material, this turn problematises supposedly self-evident distinctions like the material and the cultural and probes the intricate relations between the material and power.[44] But if the material turn is to rework the concept of the social, it must implicate the cultural in one way or the other. How can we reflect on

the material and materiality without taking account the discursive foundation of materiality and the fact that agency is established not only through material acts but also through concepts of materiality? What I want to suggest then is that we cannot rethink the course of social history without considering the deep impress of the cultural on the practice of history. If this hypothesis stands, then the reshaping of social history should take into serious account the discursive and the symbolic and rethink existing notions of "reality" and "truth" in terms of plurality and difference but not totality. I understand that there is no consensus on this issue. Many believe that in times of uncertainty and neoliberalism, such as these we are now living, the return to grand narratives and solid identities is a sound political and ethical choice. In consequence, they seek the return to a form of social history programmatically linked to the prospect of social change while they openly dismiss cultural history and the historians who took this turn, blaming them for naïve eclecticism, culturalism and the failure to say anything of value regarding a future-oriented prospect. I understand the nub of the argument but I object – and here I think I am in agreement here with Eley – that we are not told where to look for this bright future and which future this should be, because this is far from self-evident. Some would argue that this position is nonpolitical, because it avoids direct political implication, but this is not the case. The pluralism of interpretations, identities and narratives may sound banal today but it still has the merit of leaving much room to rethink our practices and categories of thought in relation to a fast-changing world, producing new and contingent fields of difference which challenge our casual models of understanding. If we accept that, then we might also accept the need to rethink the "political" and political implication differently. At the moment, the only alternative is a history in fragments. Is this desirable? Maybe we still need to cover a substantial distance before we rethink again the benefits of grand narratives, but not before we learn to work with pluralism and multiplicity and, as historians, acknowledge the metahistorical foundations of our own convictions and orientations.

NOTES

1 Eric J. Hobsbawm, "From social history to the history of society", *Daedalus* 100/1 (1971), 20–45.

2 Ibid, 25.

3 William Sewell, "Whatever happened to the social in social history", in Joan Wallach Scott and Debra Keates (eds), *Schools of Thought: Twenty-five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001, 210–11.

4 The literature on these issues is quite extensive. On the Annales school, see Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–1989*, London: Polity, 1990; Georg Iggers, *Η ιστοριογραφία τον 20ο αιώνα* [Historiography in the twentieth century], Athens: Nefeli, 1999; Gerard Noiriel, *Τι είναι η σύγχρονη ιστορία;* [What is contemporary history?], Athens: Gutenberg, 2005; Phillip Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992; Lynn Hunt, "French history in the last twenty years: the rise and fall of the Annales paradigm", *Journal of Contemporary History* 21/2 (1986), 209–224; André Burguiére, "The fate of the history of mentalités in the Annales", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24/3 (1982), 424–437; Stuart Clark, "The Annales historians", in Quentin Skinner (ed.), *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 177–198; Roger Chartier, "Intellectual history and the history of mentalites", in Roger Chartier, *Cultural History*, London: Polity, 1988, 19–52.

5 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, vol. I, London:

Fontana, 1975, 21. See also Fernand Braudel, "History and the social sciences", in Fernand Braudel, *On History*, University of Chicago Press, 1980, 25–54; Braudel, "The situation of history in 1950", ibid, 10.

6 Braudel, "History and the social sciences", 31.

7 André Burguiére, "Histoire et structure", *Annales* ESC 3–4 (1971), i–vi.

8 Roland Barthes, "The death of the author", in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, London: Fontana, 1977, 142–148; Michel Foucault, "What is an author?", in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, 113–138.

9 On Marxist historiography, see Geoff Eley, "Marxist historiography", in Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore, *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, London: Arnold 2003, 63–82: Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997; Gregor McLennan, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History*, London: Verso, 1981, 141–170; S.H. Rigby, *Marxism and History: A Critical Introduction*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987; E.P. Thompson. "The poverty of theory", in Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hearst, *Pre-capitalist Modes of Production*, London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1975.

10 See Joan W. Scott, "Women in the making of the English working class", in Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Columbia University Press, 1988, 68–90.

11 E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, London: Merlin, 1978. I understand that the appeal of Thompson's work is today considerable for those Marxist historians who struggle to counter poststructuralist critiques, but it is erroneous to give the impression that Marxist historiography in general somehow overlaps with a one small variety of British Marxism, however appealing this might be.

12 William Sewell, *Logics of History*; William Sewell, "Crooked lines", *American Historical Review* 111/2 (2008), 393–405.

13 Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005, 4–47.

14 Hobsbawm, "From social history to the history of society", 26.

15 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976.

16 William Sewell, "A theory of structure: duality, agency and transformation", *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992), 1–29.

17 Patrick Joyce, "Introduction", in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, London: Routledge, 2000; Patrick Joyce, "What is the social in social history?" *Past & Present* 206 (2010), 213–248.

18 See "The ironics of late modernity", an interview with Hayden White by Angeliki Koufou and Margarita Miliori, in *Historein* 2 (2000), 183–200.

19 I am referring here to some of the exchanges between historians regarding the cultural turn and its implications, all in *International Labour and Working-Class History* 32 (1987): Joan W. Scott, "On language, gender and working class history", 1–13; Bryan Palmers, "Response to Joan Scott", 14–23; Christine Stansell, "Response to Joan Scott", 24–29; Joan W. Scott, "A reply to criticism", 39–45. And also Lawrence Stone, "History and post-modernism", *Past & Present* 131 (1991), 217–218; Patrick Joyce and Catriona Kelly, "History and post-modernism", *Past & Present* 133 (1991), 204–213; Lawrence Stone and Gabrielle Spiegel, "History and postmodernism", *Past & Present* 135 (1992), 189–208, Patrick Joyce, "The return of history: postmodernism and the politics of academic history in Britain", *Past & Present* 158 (1998), 207–235; James Vernon, "Who's afraid of the linguistic turn? the politics of social history and its discontents", *Social History* 19 (1994), 81–97; Nicholas Kirk, "History, languages, ideas and

post-modernism: a materialist view", *Social History* 19 (1994) 21–41; Patrick Joyce, "The end of social history?", *Social History* 20 (1995), 73–93; Also the following articles from *Cultural and Social History* 1 (2004): Peter Mandler, "The problem with cultural history", 94–117; Carol Watts, "Thinking about the X factor, or, what's the cultural history of cultural history?", 217–224; Carla Hesse, "The new empiricism", 201–207, Colin Jones, "Peter Mandler's 'Problem with Cultural History', or, is playtime over", 209–215, Patrick Joyce, "The return of history: postmodernism and academic history in Britain", *Past & Present* 158 (1998), 207–235. See also Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, and Elizabeth Clark's *History, Theory, Text, Historians and the Linguistic Turn*, Harvard: Harvard University Press 2004.

20 Richard Evans, *In Defence of History*, London: Granta, 1997; Joyce Oldham Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret C. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, New York: Norton, 1995; Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990; Bonnell and Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn*; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004.

21 Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 9–10.

22 Evans, *In Defence*.

23 Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*.

24 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

25 Paul de Man, *Η επιστημολογία της μεταφοράς* [The Epistemology of Metaphor], Athens: Agra, 1990.

26 Joan W. Scott, "After history?", in Scott and Keates (eds), *Schools of Thought*, 86.

27 François Furet, "De l'histoire-récit à l'histoire-problème", in François Furet, *L'atelier de l'histoire*, Paris: Flamarion, 73–90. For a critique of qualitative epistemology, see Mary Poovey, *The History of Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997.

28 William Sewell expressed his dissatisfaction with those anthropologists who attacked the concept of culture to the point of disabling it completely. See William Sewell. "The concept of culture(s)", in Bonnell and Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 35–61.

29 Joyce, "What is the social in social history?" 220–221.

30 Eley, *A Crooked Line. On the influence of anthropology* on the *Annales* in France, see Burguiére, "The fate of the history of mentalités in the Annales".

31 William Sewell, "The political unconscious of social and cultural history", in William Sewell, *The Logics of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 56–61.

32 Gabriel M. Spiegel, "Revising the past/revisiting the present: How change happens in historiography", *History and Theory* 46/4 (2007), 1–19.

33 Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 187–188.

34 On this issue, see Joan W. Scott, "The evidence of experience", *Critical Inquiry* 14/4 (1991), 773–797.

35 Miguel A. Cabrera, *Postsocial History: An Introduction*, New York, Lexington, 2005, 44.

36 Eric Hobsbawm, "Identity politics and the left", *New Left Review* 217 (1996), 38–47.

37 Eric Hobsbawm, "Identity history is not enough", in Hobsbawm, *On History*, 266–277.

38 Arif Dirlik, "Whither history?", in Arif Dirlik, Vinay Bahl and Peter Gran (eds), *History After the Three Worlds: Post-Eurocentric Historiographies*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, 247–248.

39 Manu Goswami, "Remembering the future", *American Historical Review* 111/2 (2008), 417–424, here 420.

40 James Clifford, "Taking identity politics seriously: the contradictory, stony ground...", in Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg and Angela McRobbie (eds), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, London: Verso, 2000, 94–112.

41 Judith Butler, "Merely cultural", *Social Text* 52–53 (1997), 265–277, 269.

42 See, for example, Joan W. Scott, "Multiculturalism and the politics of identity", in John Rajchman, *The Identity in Question*, London: Routledge, 1995, 3–14.

43 Thomas Osborne, "History, theory, disciplinarity", in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, London: Routledge, 2000, 175.

44 Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce (eds), *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, London: Routledge, 2010.