

Glorious Confusion: Historiography from the 1960s to the End of the Millennium

Viewed in retrospect, the decade of the 1960s appears both as the high point of a certain kind of confidence about the prospects for historical scholarship and as the moment when new historical questions and new methodological approaches began to challenge the unity of the discipline. In the United States and Western Europe, academic historians lived in societies that were investing unprecedented resources in higher education, and they largely shared a consensus about the proper methods for historical research. Universities were growing rapidly to accommodate the rising number of students, a reflection of the “baby boom” that had taken off after the end of World War II, and the employment prospects for would-be historians had never been better. The newly independent countries in the former colonial world seemed eager to adopt Western models of scholarly inquiry, including those of historical research. Historians living in the countries in the Communist bloc operated under different conditions, constrained to make their findings conform to a rigid Marxist orthodoxy, but the contrast between their situation and the greater freedom of scholars in the West only seemed to underline the possibilities for the latter.

The Challenges of the 1960s

To be sure, historians in the 1960s were aware that they still lived in a world beset with problems. The tensions of the Cold War reached a peak during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, when a nuclear

conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was narrowly averted. When France recognized the independence of Algeria in 1962, after nearly all the other European colonies in Africa and Asia had become self-governing nations, the era of colonialism seemed to have ended, but the growing civil rights movement in the United States and the increasingly repressive apartheid policies of the white government in South Africa were reminders that racial equality was still a distant goal. By the mid-1960s, protests against the American military intervention in Vietnam had spread to college campuses in many countries. In their dress and behavior, the students who filled their overwhelmingly male history professors' classrooms signaled that they were increasingly willing to challenge their teachers' certainties about how the world worked. In France in May 1968, the largest student protest movement in history brought universities across the country to a standstill and set off a national strike wave that nearly toppled the government. In China, the "Cultural Revolution" unleashed in 1966 by radical followers of Mao Zedong targeted the "Four Olds," including anything reflective of the country's prerevolutionary past, and threatened the very notion that history had any value.

Some members of the historical profession were ready to show that the discipline could reshape itself to meet demands for a new understanding of the past. The works of the British Marxist historians, such as E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* and Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959), became cult classics, inspiring interest in labor movements and popular revolts in many different historical contexts. In the United States, C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955) and the publications of a new generation of "revisionist" historians of slavery and the Reconstruction era, such as Kenneth Stampp, provided historical ammunition for supporters of the civil rights crusade. The re-publication in 1963 of C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, a pioneering account of the Haitian uprising of the 1790s, gave historians interested in Third World liberation movements a powerful model. But the unrest of the 1960s created a demand for a "new history" that went beyond the boundaries of these earlier versions of radical scholarship. Recovering the reality of the lives of the poor and the oppressed seemed to require not only a new perspective but also new methods. The urgency of the causes with which many students of history now came to identify challenged the values of objectivity that had come to dominate the profession after 1945.

Even the traditional methods of pedagogy handed down from Ranke now came under criticism as devices for stifling subversive questions and maintaining traditional structures of authority. On many campuses, history students in the 1960s demanded courses that were “relevant” because they spoke directly to the concerns of their own lives: classes on the history of Vietnam, to explain the origins of the war there, courses on the history of radical movements in the past, on the history of blacks and other minorities in the United States, and on Africa and Latin America. Sometimes, students put together their own classes and pressured universities to grant credit for them; in other places, sympathetic professors worked with students to open up the curriculum, as Natalie Zemon Davis and Jill Ker Conway did when they offered a pioneering course on women’s history at the University of Toronto in 1971. At Berkeley, the intellectual historian Carl Schorske combined his large lecture class with student-led “satellite seminars” that offered students a choice of perspectives on the material, challenging the idea that there was only one correct way to interpret his subject; at Princeton, Martin Duberman co-taught a seminar with a psychoanalyst in hopes that students would learn to recognize the unconscious motives for their reactions to the material they were studying. In Britain, the veteran Marxist historian Raphael Samuel took the discipline off campus, founding the History Workshop in 1967, bringing together students, academics, and workers, many of them trade unionists, with the aim of generating a “people’s history.” Older professors often objected that such experiments devalued the authority that came from having studied a body of knowledge and learned time-tested methods, and many of the more radical attempts to change traditional patterns of history teaching petered out as the movements of the 1960s dissipated in the harsher economic climate of the 1970s. Nevertheless, the innovations of the period did result in a permanent diversification of history curricula and, often, in the institutionalization of student evaluations of courses and student representation on departmental committees.

Although the student radicalism of the 1960s soon faded, the highly vocal challenges to historical norms that exploded in the 1960s opened a new era in historiography, one in which we are still living and that shows no signs of coming to a close. Not all professional historians welcomed these challenges: in 1970, David Hackett Fischer published a manifesto, *Historians’ Fallacies*, in which he argued that much of the argumentation in the historical works of the period did not stand up to

serious examination. Although Fischer's book is still assigned in many historiography courses, it did little to reduce the enthusiasm for new approaches to the subject. One of the surest signs of the ferment in history that started in these years was the multiplicity of new scholarly journals created to publish work in new fields or using new approaches. These included the *Journal of African History* and *History and Theory*, the first journal devoted exclusively to historiography, in 1960, the *Journal of Social History* in 1967, and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* in 1969. To some historians, the heated debates and the repeated rise of new perspectives and fields of interest that have characterized this period are signs that the discipline is alive and well, able to respond to new questions and even to help show how society needs to evolve. What looks like healthy diversity to some historians, however, strikes others as anarchistic cacophony, in which scholarly standards have been abandoned and any hope of determining the truth about the past has disappeared. Optimists cite the new attention given to groups largely excluded from earlier historical narratives, such as women and racial and ethnic minorities; pessimists warn that the redefining of history has provided openings for those who would deny that the Holocaust ever occurred or who would impose an oppressive "political correctness" on scholars and teachers. In some ways, these debates can be read as renewals of older controversies; one can imagine Herodotus taking the side of today's optimists and Thucydides warning against the hazards of innovation. In other ways, however, the issues that divide historians today really are new and require new responses.

Searching for a New History

In the 1960s and early 1970s, radical historians such as Jesse Lemisch, a scholar of the American revolutionary period, called for a history "from the bottom up" that would concentrate on "the powerless, the inarticulate, the poor."¹ The radicals drew inspiration from the Marxist tradition and from the Progressive school of American history, which had been overshadowed by the "consensus" interpretation for several decades. Few fields were more thoroughly transformed by the drive to recover the experience of marginalized groups than that of the history of slavery in the United States. A new generation of historians, both black and white, many of them inspired by the "Black Power" movement that was challenging more moderate civil rights leaders such as Martin

Luther King, turned to nontraditional sources, such as the words of the spirituals sung by slaves and oral interviews with survivors of slavery that had been compiled in the 1930s but generally neglected by scholars, to show that blacks had never accepted the hegemony of their masters and had developed a meaningful culture of their own. Books such as Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1973) summed up this new research and demonstrated "the beauty and power of the human spirit under conditions of extreme oppression," as Genovese put it.² The intense interest in African American history resulted in the creation of courses on the subject at campuses across the country, although there were often heated disputes about whether the subject should be taught as part of the history curriculum or in interdisciplinary programs devoted to black or African American studies and about whether white scholars such as Genovese were capable of understanding the experience of blacks.

Attempts to create a "new social history" more attentive to the experience of the lower classes often went together with efforts to link history more closely with the "hard" social sciences of economics, sociology, and demography, as the Annales school historians of France had advocated. Many scholars saw particular promise for historical research in the use of quantitative data, which would give the discipline a more scientific character. Individual members of the lower classes in the past rarely left much documentation about their lives, but by accumulating information on hundreds or thousands of people, historians could construct a group portrait that would offer insights into their experiences. The development of computing technology, which began to be accessible to historians during these years, made it possible to analyze large amounts of quantitative data that would have been difficult to handle in earlier times.

The flourishing of statistically based demographic history, the study of the movement of population in the past, demonstrates both the important contributions made by what came to be known as "cliometrics" and the reasons why most historians eventually turned away from this approach. Studying such basic features of life in the past as life expectancy, birth rates, and the impact of disease was clearly one way of probing the experience of ordinary people in the past. For recent centuries, census data were available from many countries. In France, a "third generation" of Annales school historians, such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, abandoned Fernand Braudel's broad approach and

undertook intensive regional studies using sources like church records of baptisms, marriages, and burials to answer questions about how long people lived, how many children married couples had, and what the leading causes of death were in earlier centuries. The study of demography lent itself to a social science approach and even linked history to the natural science of biology. The heyday of historical demography coincided with the introduction of the first birth control pills in the mid-1960s and the intense interest in the threat of overpopulation generated by Paul Ehrlich's best-selling book, *The Population Bomb* (1968), developments that made the question of population trends in the past appear vital to understanding major present-day issues.

The historical research on demography initially produced impressive results. When earlier historians had touched on these topics, they had relied on evidence from literary texts, assuming, for instance, that when Shakespeare made his ill-fated lovers Romeo and Juliet young teenagers, he was reflecting the reality of the world around him. The statistics produced by demographic historians convincingly demonstrated, however, that the average age of marriage for ordinary people in the Europe of Shakespeare's day was actually much higher: most peasant couples were in their mid-twenties when they married and began having children. Although no methods of artificial birth control existed in this period, population levels remained stable because of the high rate of infant mortality and the fact that the interval between births for most married women turned out to be much longer than had been assumed. Correlations of data about deaths with figures for prices for staple foods, particularly grain, left no doubt about the connection between famine years and peaks in mortality. From the patterns that emerged from this painstakingly acquired statistical data emerged a new picture of the harshness of ordinary people's lives in the early modern period, one that contrasted strongly with a vision of the period derived from documents about rulers, artists, and religious reformers. The insights produced by statistically based demographic history were not confined to the study of early modern Europe. In the United States, Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* argued that blacks had been able to form family units even under slavery and that the breakdown of the family in impoverished urban ghettos was a recent development, not the inevitable consequence of slavery.

Studies of historical demography proved the value of cliometrics, but they also demonstrated some of its shortcomings. Even scholars

who had initially turned to quantification to elucidate the experience of the masses often became frustrated that their own methods reduced the people they wanted to study to a collection of numbers. Noting the high death rate for small children in seventeenth-century France, Annales school historian Pierre Goubert wrote that it was nevertheless impossible to tell from the data whether parents mourned deeply for their losses or protected themselves from grief by avoiding emotional attachment to their babies. Quantitative history also required a tremendous commitment of effort and, frequently, money, to piece together data from sources that were often not, in themselves, especially interesting to work with. Presenting the results of such research also posed problems: most readers did not have the patience to wade through detailed discussions of the problems of source interpretation that beset cliometricians, whereas other specialists in the field were quick to pounce on arcane methodological shortcomings.

The reputation of the cliometric approach in general was shaken by the highly publicized controversy set off in 1974 when two economic historians, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, published a quantitative study of American slavery, *Time on the Cross*, which one reviewer called “probably the largest and most costly enterprise in historical scholarship ever undertaken.” The work’s conclusions, which suggested that physical punishment of slaves was relatively infrequent and that slave laborers had embraced the value of hard work propagated by their masters, were almost unanimously rejected by scholars in the field. Other cliometricians denounced the authors’ reliance on what they claimed was flimsy evidence, underlining the fact that statistics about the past are often based on small and possibly unrepresentative samples of data; nonquantitative historians of slavery insisted that numbers could not measure the traumatic effect of the whippings and other cruelties that slaves suffered. The attacks on *Time on the Cross* shook historians’ faith even in other examples of quantitative history that did not have the same flaws.³

New Paradigms for History

In 1984, Lynn Hunt, a young American historian, published a book, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, that illustrates how approaches to history were transformed as a result of the so-called linguistic and cultural turns that swept the humanities and social sciences

in the decade after the publication of *Time on the Cross*. It is not unusual for historians to alter their approach over the course of their career, but Hunt's book is an unusual instance of a historian letting readers watch her change methodological gears in "real time." As Hunt explained to her readers, she had begun the book in the 1970s, planning to use the tools of cliometric quantitative social science to study which population groups and which regions of France most enthusiastically embraced the new ideas of the Revolution and which resisted them. The chapters in the second half of her book, which were actually written before those in the first half, were classic examples of social science history, filled with statistics on the social status of local officials in French cities and voting patterns in elections and making reference to scholarly literature in disciplines such as political science and geography. In the course of writing the book, however, Hunt herself became converted to a different historical approach. The chapters that became the first half of her book abandoned quantification and turned instead to analysis of the language and rhetoric employed by revolutionary activists, the visual symbols they created, and even the clothing they wore. In these chapters, Hunt drew inspiration from scholarship in literature, art history, and anthropology, and readers could sense her excitement about the new insights their viewpoints allowed her to formulate. The question, as Hunt herself admitted, was whether the two halves of the book fit together or whether they represented two incompatible ways of trying to understand the past.

The new approaches Hunt adopted in the course of writing her book were evidence of a "paradigm shift" that affected both history and academia in general. A historian—the historian of science Thomas Kuhn—coined the phrase paradigm shift in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which appeared in 1962 but only achieved its full impact some years later. Kuhn's work challenged the fundamental notion that scientific knowledge increased gradually but steadily over time, through the accumulation of new data. Instead, Kuhn argued, the history of science reflected a succession of entirely different models about how the universe worked, and shifts such as that from Isaac Newton's picture of a stable universe to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity were not responses to more accurate information, but rather reflections of sudden and somewhat inexplicable changes in ways in which scientists formulated problems. In Kuhn's view, new theories did not necessarily prevail because they were "truer" than those they replaced, but because

they were adopted by a majority of the professionals in a given discipline. Translated into historiographical terms, Kuhn's theory of paradigms suggested that knowledge about the past was not a matter of the steady perfection of research methods and the piling up of ever more information. Instead, new ways of thinking about the past resulted from changes in historians' notions of how individuals and societies worked, and there might not be any single criterion by which historical truth could be defined.

Lynn Hunt's book was evidence of the paradigm shift that came to be called "the linguistic turn," which posited that the understanding of language was the key to the comprehension of human experience. The linguistic turn was closely associated with the rise of what came to be called "the new cultural history." The new cultural historians were inspired by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who wrote in 1973 that the study of human societies is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." Geertz's approach was linked to the linguistic turn by his definition of "the culture of a people" as "an ensemble of texts . . . which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong."⁴ Among other things, the linguistic and cultural turns raised major questions about the relevance of the boundaries between academic disciplines. At the same time, the humanities and social sciences were profoundly affected by other challenges to long-held assumptions. One was the rise of feminism, which questioned basic assumptions about gender relations. Another fundamental challenge came from scholars who questioned whether intellectual frameworks originally developed in Western societies could comprehend the experience of peoples from other parts of the globe. Advocates of a "postcolonial" approach denounced the "Eurocentrism" of scholarship that treated the culture of Europe and the United States, including its approach to the study of the past, as a model to which other parts of the world needed to conform.

What was at stake for historians in this shift in the academic atmosphere was dramatized in Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, which appeared in 1973 and generated controversy as heated as that which surrounded *Time on the Cross*, published only a few months later. White intransigently announced that "I will consider the historical work as what it most manifestly is—that is to say, a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes

in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*.” Drawing heavily on the literary theorist Norbert Frye, White analyzed many of the major historians and historically minded philosophers of the nineteenth century, including Hegel, von Ranke, Tocqueville, Michelet, Marx, and Burckhardt, to bolster his argument that historical works are not transparent reflections of the facts about the past but are instead literary texts, not easily distinguishable from fiction, and that the way in which historians “emplot” their stories—as comedies, tragedies, romances, or examples of irony—reflects their own presuppositions rather than being dictated by the evidence they rely on. Historians disagree with one another, White concluded, not because some of them have done a better job of gathering the data: “When it is a matter of choosing among these alternative visions of history, the only grounds for preferring one over another are *moral* or *aesthetic* ones.”⁵

White’s insistence on the discrepancy between historical documentation and historical narrative and his insistence on calling historical narratives “fictions” struck most of his colleagues as extreme and even dangerous. Even one favorably inclined reviewer commented that White’s theory “may be construed to be the most damaging undertaking ever performed by a historian on his profession.”⁶ Nevertheless, *Metahistory* has had an impact even on historians who have not read it. White’s emphasis on the literary character of historical narrative and his insistence that historians represent events rather than simply letting the facts speak for themselves has made members of the discipline more self-conscious about how they use language and shape their accounts. In one way or another, the issues raised in *Metahistory* still remain central to major debates about the nature of historical knowledge. Self-proclaimed disciples such as Keith Jenkins and Frank Ankersmit continue to elaborate on White’s ideas. Others, such as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, acknowledge that White has inspired them to attempt to define the nature of history in ways more concordant with mainstream historical practice. In his *Time and Narrative* (1984), Ricoeur proposed a theoretical basis for distinguishing between fictional and historical narratives by insisting that the latter must be based on “traces” or evidence that can be dated, that historical narratives must be able to be fitted into a common temporal framework in such a way that they can be coordinated with one another to build a comprehensive picture of the human past, and that historians’ narratives must acknowledge the “chain of generations,” or in other words, that they need to realize that

human beings have seen the world differently depending on the time in which they have lived.⁷ Ricoeur's work suggests a way in which some of White's insights can be incorporated into history without dissolving the distinction between history and fiction.

White and Ricoeur directed attention to the linguistic nature of historical narratives and their status as cultural constructs, but both of them focused on a strictly historiographical issue: the nature of the texts created by historians. In his influential 1979 essay, *The Post-Modern Condition*, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard added an additional dimension to the critique of traditional forms of history-writing with his contention that cultural and economic changes in the world had made it impossible to cast history in the form of a "grand narrative," in which all developments were fitted into a coherent overall framework. Examples of such grand narratives, including the Enlightenment claim that history reflected an evolution toward higher levels of civilization, nationalist stories of the inevitable rise of particular states, and the Marxist vision of history culminating in the triumph of an emancipated proletarian class, were no longer persuasive, Lyotard insisted. "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation," he wrote.⁸ In this "postmodern" era, historians would have to find new ways to justify their arguments and the value of their discipline.

The French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault offered an exceptionally influential demonstration of how these new ideas about the influence of language and the bankruptcy of grand narratives could be applied to the understanding of the past in general. In one of his early works, *Madness and Civilization* (1961), Foucault argued that the phenomenon of insanity was fundamentally defined or constructed by the language used to describe certain kinds of behavior. In the Middle Ages, he claimed, individuals who would later be classified as mentally ill were instead regarded as religious visionaries. Like Kuhn, Foucault argued that changes in frameworks of discourse were not the result of gradual evolution; indeed, Foucault's failure to address the question of what causes such shifts is one of the main points on which historians have criticized him. Nevertheless, Foucault's notion of discourse as the mechanism by which members of any society are shaped or "disciplined," to use a term from the title of his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), has had far-reaching impact on historians.

Foucault's concept of discourse was only one of his many contributions to historians' thinking. Equally influential has been his analysis of the ways in which power relations structure every level of human interaction. For Foucault, politics is not just exercised by governments and leaders; it also exists in the form of a "micropolitics" or "biopolitics" at the level of everyday life, involving control of the behavior of human bodies. Foucault's analysis thus challenged the separation between social history, long defined as "history with the politics left out," and political history. Historians themselves are engaged in the exercise of power, Foucault argued. Claims to knowledge, including the knowledge that historians claim to possess by virtue of their research, are claims to power and authority, he insisted, and even the structure of the historian's "archive" or selection of sources is the result of an exercise of the power to decide what counts as evidence and what is excluded. Foucault thus challenged historians to be much more self-conscious about the implications of their work. His final project, left unfinished at his death in 1984, was a multivolume *History of Sexuality*, in which he argued that the discourses that created categories of gender identification were not fixed but had differed widely over the course of history and that they functioned to shape identities. Foucault's work was fundamental in encouraging attention to the history of gender relations.

The impact of authors such as Lyotard and Foucault has often led critics to see the historical discipline's linguistic and cultural turn as a product of the abstruse postmodernist theory that was a French specialty in the 1970s, but notions of the structuring importance of language were also put forward around the same time by several prominent historical scholars from other countries, such as J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner in the English-speaking world and Reinhart Koselleck in Germany. Pocock's study of the language of "civic republicanism" as it moved from Renaissance Italy to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and then to North America has shaped several decades of research on the origins of American political thought and institutions, and Skinner's insistence that texts such as the writings of the political theorists Thomas Hobbes and John Locke can only be understood by situating them in the context of the debates of their own time has transformed the history of early modern political and religious thought. Koselleck promoted *Begriffsgeschichte*, the systematic study of the changing meaning of key concepts in philosophy and political and social theory. His observation, for example, that the eighteenth century saw a

shift from references to “histories” in the plural to the notion of a single “history” involving all of mankind led him to argue that that period saw a fundamental shift in the way in which people understood the relationship between the past, the present, and the future.⁹ Pocock, Skinner, and Koselleck did much to help the subdiscipline of intellectual history, which had suffered in the 1960s because of its association with the study of “elite” thinkers, adapt to a new historical climate created by the linguistic turn, which rejected the notion of the “great mind.”

Michel Foucault’s work was initially welcomed by many French scholars associated with the celebrated *Annales* school originally founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. Bloch and Febvre had anticipated important aspects of the “cultural turn,” such as the adoption of insights from anthropology, in Bloch’s study of beliefs about kings’ magical healing powers, and the emphasis on language, in Febvre’s book on the emergence of atheism in early modern Europe, but under the leadership of their successor Fernand Braudel and the school’s “third generation” of younger scholars, the *Annales* tradition had come to be identified with heavy reliance on quantitative data and an emphasis on long-term historical processes. Nevertheless, *Annales* historians had often talked of cultural phenomena as a “third level” of historical reality, connected to a basic foundation defined by demographic and economic conditions and an intermediate stratum of social institutions. By the 1970s, however, the third level was coming to take precedence over the others, as the school’s third generation began to free themselves from Braudel’s emphasis on social and economic structures and to pay more attention to the notion of “mentalities” associated with Braudel’s rival, Robert Mandrou. The medieval historian Georges Duby’s widely read study of the historical memory of the battle of Bouvines, published in France in 1973, was devoted to precisely the kind of short-term military and political event that Braudel had dismissed as irrelevant “smoke” concealing more fundamental structural realities. Another leading *Annales* scholar, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, caused a similar sensation in 1975 when he turned away from his earlier, heavily quantitative work and wrote a dramatic study of heresy in a medieval village, *Montaillou*. Both books were seen as acts of defiance against Braudel’s social science-oriented approach.

Annales school historians who converted to what they called “the history of mentalities” found an ally in the unconventional Philippe Ariès, an independent scholar who called himself “a Sunday historian”

because he had written his historical works in his spare time while pursuing a nonacademic career. Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood*, a pioneering essay on the changing treatment of children over the course of history, had originally appeared in 1960, but only attracted scholarly attention a decade later. Based on visual and literary sources rather than demographic statistics, the book, together with Ariès's subsequent publications on attitudes toward death, showed how imaginative historians could attempt to reconstruct the psychological realities of everyday life, rather than limiting themselves to measuring quantitative trends. Ariès's appointment to a teaching position at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in 1977 marked the full acceptance of the "history of mentalities" there. He became the principal inspiration for the multi-volume *History of Everyday Life*, a five-volume collaborative work that appeared in the mid-1980s, featuring essays on almost every aspect of ordinary life, including food, clothing, and family relations. The history of everyday life extended the Annales school's impulse to elevate the personal sphere of life in which all human beings participate over the more elitist concerns of politics and intellectual activity to its ultimate limit.

The history of everyday life was closely linked to a new genre that developed out of the movement to cultural history and came to be known as "microhistory." Microhistory, a genre developed originally by a group of scholars from Italy, such as Carlo Ginzburg, whose study of a sixteenth-century village miller who became a self-taught religious heretic, *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), was defined by a concentration on specific incidents, narrowly limited in time and space, and usually involving otherwise unknown minor figures. Microhistorians use these small-scale stories to construct a kind of "total history" different from the grand tableaux of social historians such as Fernand Braudel, bringing together the different aspects of their subjects' lives to show how a single incident can illuminate much broader aspects of the culture and society of the past. Microhistory has also allowed historians to argue for the agency of ordinary people, rather than seeing them as prisoners of the large social structures that had figured in the work of Fernand Braudel. In Ginzburg's hands, for example, the trial of the heretical sixteenth-century Italian miller Menocchio became the basis for discussions of the structure of village society, the spread of atheistic and materialistic ideas about the universe, the impact of printing, and concepts of justice and social order. Skilled microhistorians are able to

present their stories in ways that appeal to general audiences as well as to specialists and students; microhistory, as in Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1976), the story of a peasant woman's life with an imposter who claimed to be her long-lost husband showed, has some of the attractions of the novel. Davis even collaborated with two French filmmakers to produce a film of the same name that successfully attracted commercial audiences and remains a classic of historical reenactment on the screen.

The successes of the new cultural history were striking, especially in contrast to the intellectual difficulties that beset some rival approaches to the study of the past during the 1970s and 1980s. The Marxist approach to history, which had enjoyed a striking revival in the 1960s, encountered mounting criticism as the radical protest movements of that era dissipated. The publication, in 1974, of the exiled Russian novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn's devastating exposé of the horrors of the Soviet prison system, *The Gulag Archipelago*, discredited the regime established by the 1917 Russian Revolution and, by implication, the ideological system associated with it. A school of "revisionist" historians in France, led by the ex-Communist François Furet, undermined the long-held argument that the French Revolution of 1789 had been a "bourgeois" revolution, the result of changes in the country's economic and social structure. In Britain, Gareth Stedman Jones challenged the premises of E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* in the name of the new perspectives generated by the "linguistic turn." Whereas Thompson had insisted that there was an objectively identifiable "working class," Stedman Jones contended that "class" was a linguistic construct, not a measurable reality.

The optimistic "modernization thesis" that underlay many social science-oriented studies of the history of economic development written in the 1960s and early 1970s, such as David Landes's *The Unbound Prometheus* (1969), came under fire from critics such as André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, who argued that development in the West came at the expense of the systematic exploitation and "underdevelopment" of the "peripheral" non-Western world. In place of the grand narrative of economic progress that had underlain much of the work in that field, pioneering environmental historians such as William Cronon offered analyses of that highlighted the damaging ecological consequences of economic exploitation. At the end of his history of early settlement in New England, Cronon concluded that, from the start of

American history, “ecological abundance and economic prodigality went hand in hand: the people of plenty were a people of waste.” Although he warned against a facile countercultural assumption that the Indians had lived in harmony with their natural environment, the critical point of his conclusion was clear.¹⁰

As the new cultural history established its hegemony in the 1980s, it was subjected to criticism in its own right. Noting that thinkers such as Geertz and Foucault were better at describing patterns of meaning than at explaining historical change, some historians complained that the adoption of a cultural perspective meant abandoning historical scholarship’s most distinctive feature, its emphasis on the causes of change. Political historians warned that the cultural turn was leading historians to neglect the impact of governments, leaders, and ideologies; in a widely read review of Lynn Hunt’s book on the political culture of the French Revolution, Robert Darnton, a historian himself sympathetic in some ways to the new historical approach, asked how a book on the subject could say virtually nothing about figures such as Mirabeau and Robespierre or topics such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Reign of Terror. “Is this what the Revolution was all about? None of the revolutionaries would have recognized it,” Darnton complained.¹¹ Other historians noted that an excessive emphasis on the power of discourse to shape human lives could wind up generating a vision of history just as impersonal as the structural social history that some of the cultural historians were revolting against.

Women’s History and the History of Gender Relations

The rise of linguistic and cultural history coincided chronologically with a dramatic increase in interest in the history of women and the subject of gender relations. Many pioneering women’s historians had been influenced by reading the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, a classic analysis of the situation of women originally published in 1949, and young historians in America often drew inspiration from Betty Friedan’s best-selling *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a challenge to the notion that women’s place was only in the home. More than a reaction to the ideas of a few writers, however, the growth of women’s history was a collective process, carried out by participants in the feminist movement that began to develop in the radical atmosphere of the 1960s. The developing interest in the study of women in the past was

directly linked to a concern about the status of women in the present and especially to demands that women be given greater access to jobs in the academy and that women students be protected from harassment and sexual exploitation by professors. The rise of women's history thus affected not only the content of historical studies, but also the substance of historians' careers and the nature of interactions between students and teachers. Historians of women found resources in many of the new developments in historiography that were occurring at the same time as the women's history movement was taking off. Whereas women had traditionally been excluded from positions of power and therefore rarely appeared in works of political history, for example, they could more easily be featured in studies of cultural history and the history of everyday life. The techniques of microhistory could often be employed to highlight women's agency in past eras, as Natalie Davis's interpretation of the life of Bertrande de Rols, the wife of Martin Guerre, demonstrated.

The development of women's history from the 1960s to the 1980s was part of what is now commonly labeled the "second wave" of feminism, going beyond the "first wave" of the movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that had concentrated on the political issue of women's suffrage and on obtaining access to higher education for women, but without seriously challenging the nature of institutions or the content of curricula, including those in history. Now, historians began insisting not only that women had the same right to study and teach history as men, but also that the definition of history had to be rethought in light of women's experiences, that "herstory" needed to be added to "history." Adopting the term popularized by Thomas Kuhn, one of the movement's leaders, Gerda Lerner, wrote that "Women's history asks for a paradigm shift."¹² What this meant was exemplified in the work of Joan Kelly-Gadol, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and many other scholars. Kelly-Gadol asked, "Did women have a Renaissance?" and concluded that although the Italian Renaissance had been a liberating experience for many elite men of the time, "women as a group . . . experienced a contraction of social and personal options."¹³ She suggested that similar questions could be asked about the consequences of other supposedly progressive events in world history, such as the French Revolution. Using the language of "separate spheres," Smith-Rosenberg sought to go beyond demonstrating women had been oppressed by patriarchal social systems and ideologies by showing that there were

areas where women had been able to exercise agency in their lives. Her investigation of the bonds of friendship among nineteenth-century American women became a model for historical scholarship in many other areas.¹⁴

The sense of exploring virtually unknown territory was exhilarating for many of the scholars who helped develop the field of women's history. "Oh, the excitement of that decade among professors and students, as we sought primary sources in rare book libraries and archives and exchanged bibliographies and syllabi across North America," Natalie Zemon Davis later recalled.¹⁵ Starting in 1973, the Berkshire Conference of Women's Historians provided a periodic opportunity for women scholars to meet and share ideas and experiences. Together with intellectual excitement, however, women in history experienced considerable frustration and often outright anger as they pushed to expand their career opportunities and gain recognition within the profession. When she served on a committee investigating the treatment of women at Harvard, the medieval historian Carolyn Bynum "received hate mail, even threats, and at one point had to seek police protection."¹⁶ Women historians in the United States formed a Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession in 1969. In response to the group's demands, the American Historical Association appointed a committee headed by a prominent woman historian, Willie Lee Rose, whose report, issued in 1970, documented the underrepresentation of women on the faculties of leading universities and within the organization itself and called for attention to issues such as child care that created obstacles for women who wanted to pursue academic careers.

Thanks to pressure from the women's movement and, in the United States, legislation against hiring discrimination, career opportunities for women in universities have expanded greatly since the early 1970s. The consequences of the rise of feminism for the understanding of history are harder to define. Despite calls like Joan Kelly-Gadol's in the 1970s to reconsider fundamental issues such as the periodization of history in light of women's experiences, traditional labels such as "the Renaissance" and "the age of revolution" have continued to structure historical discussions, and women's history often remains a "supplement," to be added to historical narratives essentially shaped by other considerations. In her *The Gender of History* (1998), Bonnie Smith protested that the study of historiography itself continued to marginalize

women and ignore the contribution they had made to the study of the past. “The historian of historiography, which is virtually all male, seldom shares the stage with a woman.”¹⁷ As the impact of the feminist movement has grown, it has also become more diffuse. Women historians never subscribed to a single point of view, and some, like the French historian Michelle Perrot, objected from the start to the notion of women’s history as a separate branch of scholarship, fearing that it might become “a new ghetto in which women would close themselves off” and that the movement might generate a “feminist science” that would be as dogmatic and politicized as the “proletarian science” imposed on historians in Communist countries during the Soviet period.¹⁸ Women’s historians themselves critiqued the emphasis on an unchanging model of “patriarchy” that they often found in the work of feminist theorists from other disciplines. By making it seem that the situation of women had been essentially the same in all times and places, the concept of patriarchy disregarded the notion of historical change and ignored the basic insight of history, they warned.

From an early date, some scholars interested in women’s history had insisted that any investigation of the importance of sexual identity in the past had to take into account not only women but also men and the relations between the sexes. Michel Foucault’s last major work, his unfinished *History of Sexuality*, provided a framework for exploration of these issues, and Joan Scott underlined the significance of this insight in an influential article published in 1986, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” Gender identities, Foucault and Scott argued, are not a simple matter of biology but are culturally constructed, and these constructions affect men as much as women. These theoretical perspectives helped stimulate new research on the history of masculinity and the history of homosexuality, a subject brought into the limelight by the devastating AIDS epidemic that began in the early 1980s and claimed the life of Foucault himself. By the 1980s, a third wave was transforming feminism itself, raising questions about whether the placing of all women in a single category privileged the experience of middle-class white women and obscured the differences between women of different races, ethnic groups, social strata, and sexual orientations. Historians of lesbianism, for instance, sometimes complained that they were marginalized both by other women’s historians and by the male scholars who dominated the fields of gay and queer studies. Even if the expansion of women’s history into the domains of gender,

masculinity, and the study of sexual minorities means that scholarship had moved a long way from the original concerns of the pioneering women's historians of the 1970s, however, there is no doubt that the new perspectives first generated by the interest in women's history have profoundly changed the historical profession and the content of scholarship.

Contesting Eurocentrism

A third challenge to established ways of thinking about history, linked in some ways to the linguistic turn and other developments of the 1970s, was the increasing demand for a way of thinking about the past that did not take the experience of Europe and the United States as the model for the rest of the world. The literary critic Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, described European views of "Eastern" cultures, including academic historical scholarship, as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." Said drew on Foucault's notion that claims to knowledge about a subject are a way of establishing power relations to associate "Orientalist" research with European imperialism and colonialism. Particularly important for historians was Said's assertion that Orientalism had denied non-European societies any real history of their own, positing instead that changes in them were "mere responses to the West."¹⁹ The notion of non-European societies as static and unchanging until they were acted on by outside forces was a way of implying that the only proper focus of history was the development of European civilization. In *Islands of History* (1985), another work that has been influential in making historians more conscious of non-Western historical perspectives, the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins used his research on the island peoples of the Pacific to argue that "different cultural orders have their own modes of historical action, consciousness, and determination—their own historical practice."²⁰ Questioning European perspectives on the non-European past required a recognition that other peoples might have their own ways of experiencing the flow of time itself and that their ways of representing the past could be as valid as those developed in the West.

Said's sweeping indictment of Orientalism, which focused primarily on nineteenth-century authors and in which serious scholarship about non-European societies was conflated with literary representations

and pro-imperialist propaganda, has not gone unchallenged. Said has been criticized for “adopting the approach that he himself had condemned” by lumping together a vast variety of scholarship on Asia, written at different times and from different perspectives.²¹ His critics have argued that many European scholars had developed a genuine appreciation for the languages, the art, and the culture of the societies they studied and had made valuable contributions to their understanding. Historians of Latin America and Africa have questioned whether Said’s approach, often extended to the entire non-European world, actually applies to the study of those regions. Sahlins, too, has been criticized, with some scholars contending that his claim that indigenous people had their own modes of historical thought amounted to saying that they were fundamentally irrational. Nevertheless, the debates opened by *Orientalism* and *Islands of History* have raised issues that cannot easily be dismissed. At the time when Said’s book was published, the American historian William McNeill’s 1963 volume, *The Rise of the West*, was regarded as perhaps the best synthesis available on modern world history. The book’s very title seemed to exemplify the phenomenon Said was addressing; as a recent historian of writing about world history has put it, “McNeill assumed a cause-and-effect relationship between European history and world history and built it into his chronology.”²² Even efforts to highlight the exploitative nature of Europe’s impact on the rest of the world, such as the economic historian Immanuel Wallerstein’s *The Modern World-System* (1974), still defined Europe as a “core” whose development created a “periphery” in other parts of the world.

One issue raised by the effort to redress the imbalance between history centered around the West and the experience of the rest of the world involved the question of sources. Some non-Western cultures, such as China, had long written traditions of their own and even extensive historiographies, but others, such as sub-Saharan Africa, did not; in addition, the annals of some civilizations, such as that of India, largely excluded their own lower classes. African historians were pioneers in developing the use of oral history: many societies there had passed down stories about their own past that, as scholars like Jan Vansina showed, could be mined for information, provided that one understood how these narratives had been reshaped as they were retold. In one of the most extensive efforts to evaluate oral history testimony from a nonliterate culture, Richard Price has argued that the oral

narratives handed down by members of the Saramaka people of Surinam, descendants of black slaves who successfully revolted against whites in the 1700s, reflect a distinctive vision of their history, which he has been able to compare with European settlers' written records from the period. In *Alabi's World*, one of several books he has devoted to the subject, Price prints excerpts from these competing historical accounts in different typefaces to encourage readers to compare their differing perspectives, while demonstrating that they do refer to the same set of events.²³ In India, the Subaltern Studies Group, which developed in the early 1980s, acknowledged the sparsity of written sources dealing with the majority of that country's population in the past and the necessity of relying on documents generated by ruling elites and the British colonial administration, while paying particular attention to the "silences" about the poor and about women that they contained. The study of subaltern experience "could not just be the Indian version of the 'history from below' approach," Gyan Prakash insisted, since even that was a Western construct. "It had to conceive the subaltern differently and write different histories."²⁴ Often, the Subaltern Studies scholars argued, it was what was not mentioned in the documents that provided the only available clues to the life of the poor and the marginalized. Through its insistence on foregrounding the difficulties in recovering the voices of such groups, the Subaltern Studies group has had a major influence on historians throughout the world.

An important contribution to the debate about the relationship between European and non-Western history is Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000). Chakrabarty, originally a member of the Subaltern Studies group, argued that historicist thinking, as it had developed in nineteenth-century Europe through the contributions of historians such as Ranke, "enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century . . . Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and the spreading outside it." In addition to making Europe look like the origin of all the important historical developments that define modernity, the acceptance of European methods of historical inquiry as normative justified an "asymmetric ignorance" about the past: historians writing about any other part of the world are obliged to refer to models of historical research developed to deal with the European past, but historians of Europe and the United

States are not expected to pay any attention to the work of historians from other parts of the world. Chakrabarty did not maintain, however, that non-Western historians should simply reject the heritage of Western historiography. Instead, historians had to recognize the impact of Western modes of historical thought as a reality and to use its own methods to “write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it.”²⁵ Despite criticism that he does not go far enough in recognizing the role of capitalism and the national state in imposing European influence on the rest of the world, Chakrabarty’s book has become fundamental to discussions of the relationship between Western and non-Western history.²⁶

The History of Memory

Women’s and gender history and the challenge to “Eurocentrism” were historical movements with obvious political implications. The political significance of the history of memory, another of the historiographical consequences of the turn to cultural or interpretive history during the 1970s and 1980s, was less obvious until this new approach became caught up in the noisy “history wars” that exploded in the later 1980s and continued through the following decade. The idea that there is such a thing as a collective memory, shared by the members of a given society, and that this memory alters over time—in other words, that it has its own history—had been put forward in 1925 by a French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, but his work had little impact at the time. Rediscovered in the early 1980s, Halbwachs’s ideas became a major inspiration for historians’ growing interest in the subject of memory. A pioneer in the field was the literature scholar Paul Fussell, who used the literature written in Britain about World War I to argue that the way in which that traumatic conflict was remembered had shaped the forms of “political and social cognition in our time” or, in other words, that the memory of the war had to be understood as a historical force in its own right.²⁷

The French historian Pierre Nora turned the history of memory into a historiographical industry by organizing a massive collective project, *Les lieux de mémoire* (“Sites of memory”), whose seven volumes began to appear in 1982. The history of memory, Nora argued, emerged because the changes associated with modernization had torn apart the

connection between French society and its living sense of collective memory. At the same time, he claimed, historians had lost their confidence in their ability to reconstruct the past as it truly had been. "History in general has begun to question its own conceptual and material resources, its production processes and social means of distribution, its origins and tradition; it has thus entered the historiographic age, consummating its divorce from memory—which in turn has become a possible object of history," Nora announced.²⁸ By "sites of memory," Nora and his collaborators meant all the various cultural objects that evoked collective memory and helped build French identity. Sites of memory could be physical objects, such as the palace of Versailles and the Eiffel Tower, but they could also be rituals, ranging from the celebration of Bastille Day to the Tour de France bicycle race, or texts, such as the fondly remembered school textbook *Le Tour de France par deux enfants*, from which several generations had learned their national history and geography. "Memory sites" could also be symbols, such as the tricolor French flag, and mental concepts, such as the French division of political movements into categories of "left" and "right." The elasticity—some critics called it the vagueness—of the concept of "memory sites" has undoubtedly been part of its attraction.

Most of the contributions to *Les Lieux de mémoire* were clearly exercises in cultural history, but Nora provided the nearly two hundred individual articles with an overall framework that isolated monographs in that genre often lacked. Indeed, one criticism of his project was that it amounted to a disguised return to the kind of nation-centered history that the founders of the French *Annales* school had so strongly criticized. Although the contents of the collection were quite varied, the definition of "French" was traditional: gender issues were barely mentioned, and the French overseas empire was virtually excluded, eliminating reference to such troublesome issues at the country's role in the Atlantic slave trade and the era of European colonialism. Despite the Nora project's exclusive focus on France, however, its demonstration of the possibilities of the "history of memory" had great impact on historians elsewhere. The terms in which Nora had cast the conflict between social memory and academic history helped make sense of controversies such as the history wars that developed in other countries toward the end of the twentieth century. More generally, as the British historian Jay Winter, one of the most important contributors to the history of memory, has argued, the history of memory helped

provide critical perspective on the “memory boom” that seemed to be sweeping the world in general, marked by the growing interest in history museums, tours of historic sites, historical theme parks, and other forms of cultural consumption.

Awareness of the growing interest in historical memory has not been limited to professional historical scholars. The growth of the history of memory has coincided with increased attention to the testimony of witnesses and victims of historical events, whose personal stories are often accorded more attention than the work of professional historians. This phenomenon has been especially apparent in the field of Holocaust studies, where the first-person accounts of survivors such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi have had more impact in creating a collective memory than any of the works of trained historians. It was also raised by the widely publicized hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in South Africa in 1995, after the end of the apartheid regime, to establish the truth about what had happened during the struggle against the racist apartheid regime there. The highly emotional testimony given to the Commission had tremendous impact, but many important historical questions about the South African past were left aside in a process that concentrated on the experiences of individual victims and perpetrators. Such privileging of witness testimony has not always been happily accepted by historians: while acknowledging the attraction of the idea of giving history “back to its real authors,” one Holocaust scholar has written of a “tension between the witness and the historian, . . . and, indeed, even a struggle for power.”²⁹ Witnesses’ authority to speak about the past is based on what they remember having experienced; they are often reluctant to concede that individual memory can be fallible or confused. Historians, on the other hand, are usually writing about events they did not experience, and they are accustomed to comparing evidence and preferring documentation created at the time rather than formulated later. It is, however, difficult for them to confront trauma survivors and tell them that their recollections are inaccurate.

The increased interest in memory and witness testimony did make historians more receptive to the value of oral history. Initially seen as valuable only when other forms of documentation were unavailable, as in the case of precolonial African history, oral history, in the form of interviews, now came to be employed as evidence even in writing about events for which copious printed sources existed. One of the

most important practitioners of interviewing for historical purposes was Studs Terkel, a sometime actor and broadcaster with a gift for getting people to talk about their experiences. His most influential volume, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two*, appeared in 1985 and won the Pulitzer Prize. The way in which Terkel drew out of his subjects' words a composite depiction of a conflict that Americans had understood as brutal but morally necessary influenced even the work of academic historians; the title of the book serves to characterize what has become the prevailing interpretation of how the country saw the war. The Italian historian Alessandro Portelli provided oral history with a theoretical framework, arguing that interviews provided information about subjects' emotional experiences rather than just factual data. "The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge," Portelli argued. "Therefore, there are no 'false' oral sources . . . 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true,' and . . . this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts."³⁰

Historian Jay Winter's own work, like that of the memory-history pioneer Paul Fussell, has centered on the memory of World War I, one of the major topics that has attracted historians of memory. "It is not just the injuries of war, but its drama, its earthquake-like character, which has fueled the memory boom," Winter has written.³¹ Because of the strong public interest in past wars, historians studying how they are remembered have had the opportunity to communicate their research, not only in print, but also in ways that reach broader audiences. Winter himself has written about his role in helping to design a major museum dedicated to the World War I, the Historial at Péronne, France, in which he and his colleagues consciously tried to incorporate the multiple perspectives of the new cultural history and to represent the war in a way that would engage visitors without glorifying the horrors of the conflict. He also participated in making a television documentary on the subject that was shown in both the United States and Britain.

The many forms of ordinary people's involvement in keeping the memory of the Civil War alive in the United States are vividly chronicled in the journalist Tony Horwitz's entertaining *Confederates in the Attic*, a popular bestseller that is often assigned in college classes. Among other things, Horwitz's book is an object lesson in the differences between the research techniques of members of his profession and those of academic historians.³² At the beginning of his story, Horwitz joins a

band of Civil War reenactors, who try to experience a “period rush,” the feeling of actually living what soldiers of the era went through, by wearing authentic uniforms and eating the indigestible food of the time, so that they can duplicate “soldierly misery.”³³ He interviews Civil War fanatics, sometimes downing beers with them, probes the motives of those who put stars-and-bars flag decals on their cars and trucks, and notes with dismay the wide gap between what white and black Americans remember about the conflict. Professional historians might question how representative Horwitz’s interviewees are of broader views on the subject and wonder whether he has not chosen to highlight the most colorful characters he encountered. By putting himself in the middle of the action, he has certainly taken to an extreme the counsel of some postmodernist historians to emphasize the subjective nature of his conclusions. Although much of the book is written in a serious tone, its frequent humorous passages are a reminder of an important element of human experience that is usually missing from what is accepted as history.

The “History Wars”

By the time *Confederates in the Attic* appeared in 1998, the dramatic changes in approaches to history that took place in the 1960s and 1970s had been stirring debates within the profession for several decades. Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession*, the most significant and widely read work on historiography published in the United States in the 1980s, showed that debates about whether historical knowledge could be measured according to an objective standard or whether relativistic perspectives were inevitable in historical scholarship had a long history in the United States, but Novick’s work also reflected a profound concern about the new challenges wrought by the linguistic turn and the rise of feminism and the history of minority groups. The titles of the chapters in his book’s final section—“Objectivity in Crisis,” “The Collapse of Comity,” “Every Group Its Own Historian,” “The Center Does Not Hold,” and “There Was No King In Israel”—conveyed a sense of acute anxiety about the state of the historical profession. By the mid-1980s, Novick concluded, “As a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes, the discipline of history had ceased to exist.”³⁴

A similar sense of crisis enveloped the influential *Annales* school in France. In their eagerness to embrace the new perspectives of cultural history, the critic François Dosse charged in 1987, the *Annalistes* had abandoned any pretense that the study of history had a definable framework. "One detects an ever-stronger odor of decay from a school where everyone takes his own path to salvation, to the point where one can ask what links a history that has become historical anthropology to a quantitative demographic and economic history and a conceptual history," Dosse wrote.³⁵

Whereas academic historians embraced or at least tolerated the new emphasis on the history of neglected groups and the shift from grand narratives to history as a form of cultural interpretation, the general public was slower to accept these new perspectives or in some cases reacted to them with hostility. In France, it is true, adepts of the new cultural history found an unusually warm welcome from the media and ordinary readers. Historians such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, the author of *Montaillou*, Georges Duby, and Philippe Ariès appeared regularly on French television in the 1970s and 1980s and their books became bestsellers. In his memoirs, Duby celebrated their success, writing, "A century after history withdrew from the marketplace and took refuge behind the opacities of erudition, it now showed renewed interest in the literary business and the possibility of reaching a wide audience."³⁶ Pierre Nora's seven-volume *Les Lieux de mémoire*, despite its lack of any overall narrative thread, was another popular success. In other countries, however, public enthusiasm for history often developed in directions quite different from those taken by academic specialists. In Britain, for example, university historians often criticized the enthusiasm for the restoration of aristocratic "stately homes" and the cult of "heritage sites" that attracted visitors by offering a vision of life in the past based on the experience of wealthy elites.

In the United States, public interest in the past was increasingly shaped by the popular media. The bicentennial of the American War of Independence, in 1976, was celebrated with lavish festivals and reenactments that often ignored the more critical views of academic scholars. Two television miniseries first broadcast in the late 1970s, the African American author Alex Haley's "Roots," which reconstructed the life of his own ancestors, from the time of their sales as slaves in Africa to the present, and Gerald Green's fictionalized miniseries, "Holocaust," had particular success in getting large audiences interested in history,

although both were also criticized for reducing large historical movements to dramatic stories about heroic individuals. *Roots* drew far more Americans into the narrative of African American history than any scholarly publication ever had; it also inspired Americans of all ethnicities to take a new interest in their own family histories. Skeptics wondered, however, whether the “griots” Haley found in Ghana, who he claimed had told him stories handed down for generations about his ancestor Kunta Kinte, had not in fact made up tales to please their interviewer. Like “Roots,” “Holocaust” had a real impact on viewers. In the United States, it made the genocide of the Jews in World War II part of the general culture; in Germany, this fictionalized depiction of the Nazi period inspired a public debate about the past that serious works of scholarship had been unable to initiate. The miniseries’ implausible plot led critics to complain that it trivialized its subject, but the interest it generated did much to spur the growth of the academic field of Holocaust studies.

Not all scholars condemned the forms that public interest in history took. In *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, an ambitious analysis of the motives for human interest in the past that he published in 1985, David Lowenthal urged acceptance of the fact that all representations of the past necessarily incorporated their share of distortions. Even physical relics do not provide a direct, unmediated access to the past, Lowenthal warned. If they are to be preserved and displayed, they must be altered by restoration and framed, in signs and captions, in ways that impose present-day meanings on them. Lowenthal was even prepared to express a certain tolerance for commercially motivated reconstructions of the past, such as Disneyland’s talking Abraham Lincoln: “Better a misinformed enjoyment of history than none, a lighthearted dalliance with the past than a wholesale rejection of it.”³⁷ Although academic historians had often been critical of “Roots” and “Holocaust,” many of them were more appreciative of what they saw as serious efforts to use television and film to bring history to a mass audience. The American documentary filmmaker Ken Burns’s ten-hour series, “The Civil War” (1990), whose images were taken largely from photographs made at the time of the conflict, was widely praised, although he was faulted for saying little about the role of African Americans in the war. French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann’s equally lengthy “Shoah,” released in 1986, presented the history of the Holocaust in a different light than the popular television miniseries. Constructed out of interviews with surviving Jewish

victims, German perpetrators, and “bystanders” such as Polish peasants who had witnessed Jews being taken to their deaths, the film significantly influenced the direction of historical research, directing attention to neglected topics such as the role bystanders had played in these events.

Although professional historians sometimes acknowledged positive aspects of these popular versions of the past, they increasingly found themselves embroiled in controversies about how new historiographical approaches were challenging popularly accepted narratives about the past. The history wars that raged so fiercely in Germany and the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as similar controversies that took place in France, focusing on the meaning of the French Revolution; in Australia, where the main issue was the treatment of the fate of the country’s native Aboriginal population by the British colonists who settled there after 1788; and in Israel, where politically engaged scholars took aim at the claim that Arab governments were exclusively responsible for the flight of Palestinian refugees during the country’s war of independence in 1948, all were in one way or another arguments about historical memory. Other enormously consequential debates about how to remember the past marked the post-Communist states that emerged in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The clash between strong public demand for historical narratives painted in broad strokes, with identifiable heroes and villains, and the multiplicity of new perspectives germinating in academia, many of which challenged traditional depictions of the past, set the stage for heated debates, often characterized as episodes in “culture wars” about the interpretation of history. Although the historical cultural wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s in different countries focused on different issues, they shared certain common features. Throughout the Western world, a backlash against the cultural innovations of the 1960s had set in by the end of the 1970s, signaled by the election of the Conservative Margaret Thatcher as prime minister in Britain in 1979 and of the Republican Ronald Reagan as president of the United States in 1980. Both leaders had no patience for the new historiographical fashions they saw as having taken over the universities. “Though not an historian myself, I had a very clear—and I had naively imagined uncontroversial—idea of what history was,” Thatcher wrote in her memoirs. “History is an account of what happened in the past,” and history teaching, she insisted,

was a matter of “memorizing what actually happened.”³⁸ Reagan had less intellectual interest in what academic historians were doing, but he insistently painted a picture of the United States that emphasized only the most optimistic aspects of the past. In the post-Communist world, struggles over historical memory took the form of demands for the opening of archives and for an honest accounting of what had taken place during the decades of Soviet rule. Throughout the world, historians discovered that historiographical controversies, normally the exclusive concern of professionals, could, under certain circumstances, become major political issues.

One of the most explosive of the period’s public historiographical controversies was ignited in 1986, when a conservative West German scholar, Ernst Nolte, set off what came to be called the *Historikerstreit*, “the battle of the historians,” by challenging the notion that the extermination of the Jews carried out by the Nazis was a uniquely terrible crime that resulted from a special flaw rooted in German historical development. Nolte suggested that Hitler had merely followed a precedent set by the Communist regime in the Soviet Union. Opponents of Nolte, including the philosopher Jürgen Habermas and a number of prominent German historians, denounced his position, arguing that it amounted to a whitewash of the German past and an attempt to evade the country’s collective responsibility for the events of the Holocaust. Positions similar to Nolte’s were defended by several prominent historians, however, and they appeared to have the backing of the conservative West German government of the day, whose leader, Helmut Kohl, had triggered public controversy in 1985 when he had persuaded President Reagan to join him in honoring the graves of German soldiers, including members of the SS who had helped carry out killings during the war. The dramatic events following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent unification of West and East Germany diverted public attention from the *Historikerstreit*, but debate about these issues flared up again in 1995, when the Hamburg Institute for Social Research opened a public exhibit devoted to “The Crimes of the *Wehrmacht* from 1941 to 1944,” which documented the extent of the German army’s involvement in the killing of Jews during the war and discredited the myth that the Holocaust had been the exclusive work of the committed Nazis in the SS.

The sudden and unexpected collapse of the Soviet system of satellite states in Eastern Europe in 1989, followed by the breakup of the

Soviet Union itself in 1991, appeared to vindicate Western political conservatives' insistence on the superiority of systems based on individual freedom and capitalist economics. A prominent American political commentator, Francis Fukuyama, boldly announced that this event signaled "the end of history." To be sure, Fukuyama conceded, there would still be changes in human affairs, but the conflicts about fundamental values that had generated the great historical dramas of the past—clashes between civilizations, religious faiths, and rival political ideologies—were over, since the whole planet now recognized that there was no serious alternative to a broadly shared set of principles rooted in the traditions of Western democracy. Implicit in Fukuyama's thesis was the possibility that the discipline of history itself would lose its interest, since it would amount to no more than a set of stories about the bad old days in which human beings had not yet learned how to get along with one another.

Fukuyama's prediction proved to be premature, but the events of 1989 did set off a widespread process of historical revision in societies where Communist governments had rigidly controlled what could be said about the past. Whatever aspect of the past they studied, historians who hoped to make successful careers in these societies had had to adopt a Marxist perspective, taking class struggle as the fundamental explanation for historical change, and, especially if they were dealing with the recent past, they had to endorse the notion that integration into the Soviet empire had been a beneficial event, supported by the "masses" of the local population. After 1989, historians in these countries were suddenly able to write openly about crucial episodes of their national pasts that had been blacked out under Communism, and outside scholars, who had operated under tight restrictions, were suddenly given access to archives that had always been off limits to them. In the former Soviet Union and the newly independent countries that broke away from Russian dominance after 1989, there was unprecedented discussion of controversial historical events. A Russian human rights organization, "Memorial," founded in 1989, which set out to create for the first time a comprehensive archive identifying the victims of Stalin's regime, showed the impact that free historical inquiry could have in a society that had long been deprived of it. One of the disquieting signs of the return to authoritarianism in Russia and other countries that were once part of the Soviet Union in recent years have been government efforts to close down Memorial and similar organizations.

In many cases, archival documents that were opened to scholars after 1989 have now been locked away again.

In the former Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe, historians rehabilitated national pasts that had been condemned as obstacles to social progress during the Soviet period. The history wars in the former Communist countries were not always limited to the refutation of false claims made prior to 1989, however. In some countries, politicians, sometimes aided by nationalist historians, used “visions of past greatness” to rally particular ethnic groups against their neighbors.³⁹ In the former Yugoslavia, where the Communist regime had managed to hold several hostile groups together in a single state, the end of that government unleashed devastating conflicts. Slobodan Milosevic, the president of Serbia, Yugoslavia’s largest component state, made especially virulent use of historical myths, blaming the neighboring Croats for collaborating with the Germans during World War II and unleashing a campaign of terror against Serbia’s Muslim Albanian minority to avenge a defeat at the hands of Muslims in 1389.

The versions of the history wars that broke out in the United States in the first half of the 1990s were noisy but far less dangerous than the debates in the former Communist states. The history wars in the United States often saw academic historians defending a pluralistic approach to the past, inspired by the historiographical innovations that had begun with the new social history of the 1960s and continued with the linguistic and cultural turns of the 1970s and the development of movements such as feminist and non-Western history, against critics, often politically inspired, who insisted on what they called historical objectivity. This was particularly the case with the storm that enveloped a set of proposed “National History Standards,” meant to guide curriculum development in American schools. The effort to develop guidelines dealing with American and world history was part of a larger movement for educational reform, spurred by a 1983 assessment of the country’s schools entitled “A Nation at Risk” that had warned that the United States was falling behind other countries in a wide range of educational areas, including students’ understanding of history. The movement to define goals for history classes initially brought together a broad coalition, including academic historians, schoolteachers, and politicians, including Lynne Cheney, who, in her capacity as director of the government’s National Endowment for the Humanities under President Reagan, provided much of its funding.

Historians who had spent years drafting a proposal that sought to incorporate the new scholarship in the field while accommodating the concerns of dozens of different groups were outraged in 1994 when Cheney suddenly launched a media campaign against their work, claiming that it slighted the positive aspects of American history in the name of "political correctness." Journalists and conservative politicians quickly joined in, and before the controversy ended, the U.S. Senate had voted 99 to 1 for a resolution disavowing the proposed standards and demanding that any future history guidelines show "a decent respect for the contributions of Western civilization."⁴⁰ Although the timing of Cheney's denunciation, shortly before the congressional elections of 1994, suggested a political motivation, the debate about the proposed history standards and in particular the attempt to incorporate a more multicultural perspective into the curriculum had been under way for several years beforehand, and not all the critics of the new history were political conservatives. In 1992, the prominent political historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., long associated with liberal political causes, had published *The Disuniting of America*, warning that emphasis on the oppression of minorities and women might undermine the common values on which the coherence of American society depended. The notion that "cultural literacy" required a shared base of factual knowledge, most of it related to Western civilization, was promoted in a best-selling book by that title written by E. D. Hirsch in 1987 and had a broad appeal.⁴¹

The controversy about the proposed national history standards coincided with an equally passionate and equally politicized controversy about a planned exhibition on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. The preceding years had already seen several other controversial exhibitions at museums that, like the Air and Space Museum, were part of the government-owned Smithsonian Institution, including a show devoted to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and another, "The West as America," that emphasized the violence and exploitation that had accompanied the country's expansion. The proposed Hiroshima exhibit, designed by the museum's professional staff, would have featured a display of the *Enola Gay*, the bomber that had dropped the first atomic bomb, but also artifacts dramatizing the devastation and human suffering caused by its use, and would have documented the debate at the highest levels of the U.S. government and military in

1945 about whether the new weapon should be deployed. Critics alleged that the exhibition amounted to an apology for the use of the atomic bomb and that it was disrespectful to American veterans. Like the historical standards, the *Enola Gay* exhibit became a political football. Faced with threats from congressmen to cut its funding, the Smithsonian abandoned the original plans for the exhibition and instead simply put a part of the famous plane's fuselage on display, with a minimum of commentary, and the museum's director resigned.

The controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibition was clearly a defeat for those who thought the American public, or at least its political leaders, were ready to accept the new approaches to the past that had become generally accepted among academic scholars since the 1960s. The outcome of the "war" over the national history standards was less clear cut. In the long run, as the leaders of the history standards task force wrote in an account of the effort that they published under the militant title *History on Trial*, the political firestorm of 1994 did not prevent the gradual adoption of many of the changes in textbooks and curricula they had recommended. The solid factual evidence of the importance of minorities and women in the American past, the obvious changes in the world that required more attention to the histories of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and the impact of a generation of new approaches to history in colleges and universities could not be ignored.

History wars in the 1990s did not always pit academic historians against politically motivated critics. Controversies about "Afrocentrism" saw mainline university scholars squaring off against opponents who were often also academics, but who claimed to speak for an oppressed subaltern group. "Afrocentric" scholars, often inspired by the work of the Senegalese author Cheikh Anta Diop (1923–1986), denounced what they saw as the historical profession's unjustified neglect of the contributions black Africans had made to world civilization. The publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* in 1987 inspired furious controversy. Bernal—who, as it happened, was white—argued that the intellectual achievements of classical Greece were inspired, for the most part, by the earlier civilization of Egypt, and that ancient Egypt should be seen as an African culture. Although most academic scholars agreed that a reexamination of Africa's role in world history was long overdue, many of them accused Bernal of exaggerating and distorting the evidence to make his case. The title of classicist Mary Lefkowitz's polemical response,

Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History, exemplifies the tone of the debate. On the other side, self-identified spokesmen for Afrocentrism, such as Molefi Kete Asante, denounced “all European ideologies from dialectical materialism to postmodernism” as efforts to “protect the ruthless Eurocentric idea of white triumphalism and hegemony.”⁴² As the editors of a volume about the teaching of history in the United States have written “the passion of such debates suggests that the cultural meaning of knowledge, including knowledge about history, reaches deep into the social psychological life of American society.”⁴³ The history wars of the last decades of the twentieth century often left scholars feeling beleaguered and misunderstood, but these conflicts did demonstrate how much the past still matters in our culture.

Notes

1. Jesse Lemisch, “Towards a Democratic History,” (1967) and “The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up,” in Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 29.
2. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1973), xvi.
3. Thomas L. Haskell, “The True and Tragical History of *Time on the Cross*,” *New York Review of Books* 22 (Oct. 2, 1975), 38.
4. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5; Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” *Daedalus* vol. 134, no. 4 (Fall 2009), 86 (orig. 1972).
5. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 2, 433.
6. Andrew Ezergailis, review of *Metahistory*, *Clio*, 5, no. 2 (1976), 240.
7. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1986).
8. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Beoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1985 (orig. 1979)), 37.