Some Reflections on the New History

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When this subject, the new history, was first proposed to me, I thought I understood what it meant. I am no longer so sure. The varieties of new history have proliferated so rapidly, the rhetoric and rationale have become so bold, and the entire discipline has gone so far beyond the old “new history” that one is tempted to speak of the “new new history.”

Twenty years ago, one of the great masters of the new history, Le Roy Ladurie, could confidently pronounce, “Tomorrow’s historian will have to be able to programme a computer in order to survive”: “History that is not quantifiable cannot claim to be scientific.”¹ Six years after issuing those dicta, two years after reprinting them, and, ironically, four years before they appeared in an English edition, Le Roy Ladurie published another work that is as remote from that kind of quantitative, scientific history as is imaginable. His Montaillou was immediately acclaimed the classic of mentalité history.

And so it has been with other varieties of the new history. While one school of neo-Marxists is rewriting the old Marxist history in the light of a “humanistic” Marx, another school is revising the revisionists by reaffirming a rigorously deterministic and materialistic Marx.² One group of social historians insists that the essence of the historical enterprise lies in elucidating “Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons,”³ while another insists that the true reality of history can be found only in the small, intimate details of “everyday life.” Annaïstes who once confidently asserted the primacy of “long term” forces in history—demography, geography, ecology—have had to mute their claims in deference not only to their colleagues of the mentalité school but also to those who have rediscovered the importance of “mere” political events.⁴ Social historians devoted to the study of the working class are being criticized by feminist

² In England, the quarrel is between E. P. Thompson and Perry Anderson; on the Continent, between the disciples of Habermas and those of Althusser.
³ This is the title of a book by Charles Tilly (New York, 1984).
historians for being insufficiently attentive to gender.\footnote{For instance, Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York, 1988), chaps. 3 and 4.} And now we are witnessing the emergence of the newest of the new histories, deconstructionism, which threatens to deconstruct much of the new history together with the old. (It has been said that when ideas die in France, they are reborn in America; one might add that when they are past their prime in other disciplines, they are belatedly adopted by historians.)

Like Hegel's "moments of history," these schools of history do not succeed each other in a tidy fashion. There is a limit, after all, to how often and how quickly historians can "retool" themselves (as one put it to me). Thus the older coexists, more or less uneasily, with the newer. Occasionally, an older new historian, dissatisfied with the state of his discipline, makes a conciliatory gesture toward the old history, such as calling for a "revival of narrative."\footnote{Lawrence Stone, The Past and the Present (London, 1981), 74 and following.} But that much-quoted pronouncement is less significant than it sounds. For the kind of narrative that is proposed—the "narration of a single event," as exemplified in Le Roy Ladurie's Montaillou—is nothing like narrative history in the traditional sense, which is not confined to a single event but rather connects in a narrative sequence a series of events over a significant span of time. (Fernand Braudel's Mediterranean has also been assimilated into the genre of narrative history; but this makes the concept so inclusive as to be meaningless.)\footnote{Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, 1984), 224–25, 230. This "new" form of narrative, as applied to Ladurie or Natalie Davis, is sometimes referred to by the deconstructionists as "narrativist."}

If the call for a revival of narrative is more rhetorical than substantive, it does testify to a widespread recognition on the part of new historians that their discipline lacks form and structure. This is the refrain that runs through a recent volume of essays by social historians, with one after another complaining of the absence of any synthesizing or unifying theme, the diversity and disparity of subjects and methods, the gap between macrohistory and microhistory. One contributor sums up this sense of malaise by suggesting that the challenge confronting the social historian is "putting more history into social history."\footnote{William B. Taylor, "Between Global Process and Local Knowledge: An Inquiry into Early Latin American Social History, 1500–1900," in Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History, ed. Olivier Zunz (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), 121. One is reminded of Pieter Geyl's comment about Toynbee: "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas l'histoire." (Quoted by Walter A. McDougall, "'Mais ce n'est pas l'histoire!': Some thoughts on Toynbee, McNeill, and the Rest of Us," Journal of Modern History, 58 [March 1986]: 26.)}

I was first made aware of this problem, the problem of putting more history into social history, several years ago when I heard a historian describe the study he was working on: an "in-depth analysis" as he put it, of the life and work of the inhabitants of a New England town in the late eighteenth century. He explained that his colleagues were doing comparable studies of other towns and that their collective effort would constitute a "total history" of that time and place. I asked him what bearing that total history would have on what I, admittedly not an expert in American history, regard as the most momentous event of that time and place (indeed, one of the most momentous events in all of modern
history)—the founding of the United States. He replied that from his subjects and sources he could not “get to” that event, but he assured me that it was not as important as I took it to be, that what was important was the ordinary life of ordinary people. When I wrote about this episode, adding my own observation that even ordinary people (perhaps most of all, ordinary people) had been profoundly affected in the most ordinary aspects of their lives by the founding of this republic, I was rebuked for taking so elitist a view of history.9

My essay on this subject was written only five years ago. Since then, more and more social historians have acknowledged that something is missing from social history, that more history has to be put into social history. Marxists have pointed out that the preoccupation with daily life obscures the importance of class interests and the class struggle.10 A Latin American historian complains about the insufficient attention paid to the role of the state in establishing the economic and social hegemony of the ruling class.11 An American social historian reports that his colleagues “downplay” the Civil War: in spite of their sophistication about the nature of conflict in general, this crucial conflict “still eludes social historians.”12 An eminent Analiste, reviewing the many volumes of that influential journal, is struck by the virtual absence of any discussion of the major event in French history, the French Revolution.13 And an English social historian remarks upon the apparent inability of the Analiste school to deal with “the great formative political events in a country’s history”—the Risorgimento, for example, as well as the French Revolution.14 (It is interesting that the bicentenary of the French Revolution has inspired a revival of interest in political affairs on the part of historians who once spurned them as “mere events.”)

One recent exercise in self-criticism deserves special attention, if only because it comes from an eminent new historian. In his presidential address to the American Historical Association two years ago, Carl Degler described the “splintering,” “fragmenting,” and “disarray” that have afflicted American history and have become a common complaint in the profession.15 As a result of the

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12 Zunz, Reliving the Past, 76.
13 Furet, In the Workshop of History, 11.

This loss of coherence is a common complaint in other disciplines, and for much the same reasons, because they are all trying to be all things to all factions. Recently, within only a few weeks, one read that anthropology was suffering from “grave inner uncertainties, amounting almost to a sort of epistemological hypochondria”; a report on the annual conference of sociology headlined “Sociology Braches Out But Is Left in Splinters”; and an account of a convention of archaeologists treated to the latest version of “critical archaeology”—“guerrilla archaeology.” Times Literary Supplement (August
enormous expansion of social history, the subjects of that history—blacks, women, Chicanos, American Indians, immigrants, families, cities—are all "clamoring for inclusion in a historical framework that once had no place for them." Unable to integrate them into anything that might be called "the history of the United States," we find ourselves with a history that is "disjointed and incoherent," that lacks "central themes or a framework," and that does not try to answer any "significant questions" of the kind raised by previous historians. To rectify this situation, to encompass all these new subjects and at the same time restore some coherence to American history, Degler proposed that American historians focus upon the theme of "national identity" and address the question: "What does it mean to be an American, that is, a citizen of the United States?"16

That proposal may be more agreeable to an old historian than to a new one. The ideas of nationality and citizenship have been criticized by the new history precisely because they presume a unity that is thought to be spurious, because they impose a political identity upon nonpolitical entities (notably race, gender, and class), and because they perpetuate the "hegemony" of the established political elite over all the groups suppressed and oppressed by the old history—women, blacks, Chicanos, etc. It is difficult, moreover, to see how the subjects of the new history can be accommodated in any single framework, let alone a national and political one. For what they are all "clamoring for" is not a place on the periphery of history—that they always had—but at the center, and not intermittently but permanently. What they are all seeking is to be "mainstreamed" into American history, to be made, as Degler has said of women's history, an "integral part" of history.17 But how can all these groups, each cherishing its uniqueness and its claim to sovereign attention, be mainstreamed into a single, coherent, integrated history?

And how can they all agree on any significant question, much less a common answer? If no subject is more important than any other, how can any question be more significant than any other? Who is to say, the new historian may object, that the question of what it means to be a citizen of the United States is more central to the historical enterprise than what it means to be a woman in the United States, or a black in the United States—or, perhaps, a homosexual or a homeless person? Who is to say that "national identity" is more important than race, gender, or class—or, for that matter, that class is more important than gender? A recent review in the Times Literary Supplement criticized a book on British social history because "the discussion of sexual matters and gender differences tends to

26–September 1, 1988); New York Times (August 30, 1988); Washington Times (September 15, 1988).


take second place to class and income differentials.”

There is, after all, only one first place. In the democratic ethos of the new history, no subject, no theme, no question wants to take second place to any other. At the very least, each regards itself as equal to every other. If some turn out to be more equal than others, it is certainly not nationality or citizenship that enjoys that favored status in the new history.

All historians, new and old, have something new to worry about—not only the fragmentation of history but the deconstruction of history—and not only on the part of avowed deconstructionists but on the part of social historians who unwittingly contribute to the same result.

In literary criticism, deconstruction means the liberation of the text from all the constraints that have traditionally given it meaning, starting with the intentions of the author—the “authorial voice,” as is said. The author, according to this view, speaks with no more authority than the reader or the critic. To the extent to which the author (putative author, one might say) is presumed to exercise any authority over the text, that authority is “authoritarian.” (The play on words is deliberate, and deliberately pejorative; that illicit authority has been described as “tyrannical,” “reactionary,” “imperialistic,” “fascistic.”) The deconstructionist also liberates the text from the tyranny of what is called “context”—the context of events, ideas, conventions, which informed the text not only for the author but for contemporary readers. “Nothing outside the text,” Jacques Derrida has proclaimed. And the text itself is said to be “indeterminate” because language does not reflect or correspond to reality; there is no correspondence between language and fact, between words and things. Indeed, there are no facts apart from language—which is why “facts,” in deconstructionist discourse, normally appears in quotation marks. Moreover, language itself is “duplicitous,” “cryptic”; it has to be “decoded” before it can convey any meaning. And since there is no single correct code, no reading of the text, no interpretation, has any more authority than any other. Thus interpretation is as “indeterminate” as the text itself.

On the face of it, such a doctrine would seem to be eminently unhistorical. Historians have always quarreled about the meaning and interpretation of facts and, indeed, about the facts themselves. But they have rarely disputed the reality of the historical past. Philosophers of history have sometimes done this; R. G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott have come perilously close to it. But historians, working historians, have traditionally assumed some correspondence between interpretation and fact, between language and reality. They are painfully aware of the imperfection of that correspondence—a past that always eludes them, a reality that is never fully revealed to them, a gap between the past as contemporaries experienced and understood it and as the historian tries to recreate and represent it. But they have also been acutely aware of the need to

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18 *Times Literary Supplement* (July 1–7, 1988): 736. See also Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* (New York 1988), xv. Joan Wallach Scott also denies the “parity” of the terms in the “class, race, gender” trinity, suggesting that race and gender are more primary than class (*Gender and the Politics of History*, 30.)
try to close that gap as much as possible, to recapture as much of the past as possible, and to reproduce it as faithfully as possible. These “possibles” have given historians a good deal of latitude, but they have also constricted them a good deal. Today, more and more historians (and not only deconstructionists) are feeling liberated from those constraints and are making the past far more indeterminate, more elusive, less real than it has ever been—thus permitting themselves to be as creative, innovative, and inventive as possible in interpreting the past. These have become the new “possibles” of history: the possibilities suggested by the historian’s imagination and sensibility rather than by the contemporary experience.

In the deconstructionist lexicon (and one hears this now in historical discourse that is not consciously deconstructionist), the “texts” of history are not only the documents of the past, they are the events and facts that are presumed to be as indeterminate as the documents themselves. One historian, celebrating the “process of imaginative creation” that is essential to the “historical imagination,” warns young historians not to become “fact fetishists” like some of their elders. It is in this spirit that “facts” appears in quotation marks, and “facticity,” once a pretentious variation on “factuality,” becomes a pejorative word, signifying an excessive concern with facts. There is no fixed reality in the past, we are told; the whole of the past is indeterminate, including what would seem to be the most obvious matter of fact. “The simplest fact—a dated event—relies on what is for some historians a belief and for others a convenient fiction: the decisive significance of the birth of Christ in establishing a chronology in terms of a ‘before’ and ‘after.’” A less sophisticated historian is tempted to point out that the issue is not what some historians happen to believe but what contemporaries believed, and that the “convenient fiction” of a date is a fiction only if it does not correspond to the contemporary experience. If a historian—a Jewish historian, let us say—reporting upon the meeting of the American Historical Association where this paper was delivered, were to date it as 5749, we would surely regard that as evidence of a grave deficiency of historical sense, to say nothing of common sense.

Although deconstructionism, as a conscious, systematic philosophy, has been most prominent among intellectual historians, the mode of thought it repre-

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19 The traditional view was well put by Eleanor Searle in her presidential address to the Medieval Academy of America in 1986 (“Possible History,” Speculum, 61 [1986]). To the deconstructionist, this is the fallacy of “realistic objectivism” or “essentialism”—reminiscent of Lenin’s attack on “empiricocriticism” or “naive empiricism.”


22 Dominick LaCapra, “Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,” in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), 78.

23 That chronology can be a pitfall has long been recognized by historians. The classic example is George Burr’s exposure, in 1901, of the myth about the end-of-the-world hysteria that supposedly gripped humanity as the year 1900 approached. The moral of this story, as Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff noted, is that historians should have a thorough knowledge of “contemporaneous evidence”—not that they should take a thoroughly relativistic view of all dates and facts. (Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, The Modern Researcher [New York, 1957], 104–06.)
sents, even its distinctive vocabulary, is permeating all aspects of the new history. Historians now freely use such words as “invent,” “imagine,” “create” (not “re-create”), and “construct” (not “reconstruct”) to describe the process of historical interpretation, and then proceed to support some novel interpretation by a series of “possibles,” “might have been,” and “could have been.” Another fashionable word is “decode.” One hears of the need to “decode meaning” in terms of gender so as to elicit the power relationships inherent in social relationships; or “decoding the past” in terms of psychohistory so as to reveal the psychic reality behind events; or “recoding” the entire discipline of history so as to eliminate the “reactionary” effect of narrative history; or even decoding the decoders so as to demystify, for example, Michel Foucault himself. So, too, we are enjoined to “deprive” varieties of “elitist” history—political, diplomatic, intellectual—much as the new literary theorists have “deprived” the literary canon. Like those critics who find comic books as worthy of study and respect as the novels of Dickens, distinguished social historians declare the “history of menarche” to be “equal in importance to the history of monarchy,” or Mickey Mouse “more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt.”

What is being deprived and deconstructed is not only history as traditional historians have understood it but the past as contemporaries knew it. Contemporaries may have thought that their history was shaped by kings and statesmen, politics and diplomacy, constitutions and laws. New historians know better. They know that “high politics” are ephemeral and epiphenomenal, to say nothing of being elitist and sexist. They know that workers who accept the legitimacy of the political order or of the “hegemonic culture” are guilty of “false consciousness.”

24 Joan Scott finds it especially appropriate for feminist history: “A more radical feminist politics (and a more radical feminist history) seems to me to require a more radical epistemology. Precisely because it addresses questions of epistemology, relativizes the status of all knowledge, links knowledge and power, and theorizes these in terms of the operations of difference, I think post-structuralism (or at least some of the approaches generally associated with Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) can offer feminism a powerful analytic perspective” (Scott, Gender, 4).

25 See, for example, the exchange between Robert Finlay and Natalie Zemon Davis on The Return of Martin Guerre, AHR, 93 (June 1988); Hayden White, Review in Times Literary Supplement (January 31, 1986): 109–10.

This usage of “invent” is different from another that has become familiar recently. When Eric Hobsbawm and others, in the book of that title, speak of “the invention of tradition” (ed. by Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Cambridge, 1983), or when Edmund S. Morgan entitles his latest book, Inventing the People (New York, 1988), they are referring to a process of “invention” that took place in the past by contemporaries who were initiating a new concept or practice. In the deconstructionist sense of that word, it is not contemporaries but historians who are doing the “inventing.”

26 Scott, Gender, 45.


See especially chap. 3, “Narrative Summary as a Reactionary Form.”


(or "divided consciousness," or "contradictory consciousness," or a "half-conscious complicity in their own victimization," as recent variants have it).³¹

The new history prides itself on rescuing the downtrodden and illiterate from the "enormous condescension of history."³² In this respect, it has provided a valuable corrective and supplement to the old history. But it is in danger of fostering a new kind of condescension, a condescension toward those contemporaries who left few records of their "consciousness" and are at the mercy of the historian who can "invent," "imagine," "create," or "construct" a consciousness that is suspiciously in accord with the historian's own consciousness. If it is condescending or demeaning to contemporaries to be ignored, it is surely as condescending and demeaning to make them bear witness not to their own experiences but to those of the historian.

It is one thing, for example, to write women's history, another to write feminist history. Virginia Woolf appreciated the difference when she urged historians to write about women: "At what age did she marry; how many children had she . . . ; had she a room to herself . . . ?" What is rarely quoted is the rest of that passage, in which she warned them against writing that history from a "conscious bias": "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex . . . It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman."³³ It is just this conscious bias that is now proudly avowed by historians who announce that they are writing from a "consciously feminist stance," a "feminist perspective"—a stance and perspective that are those of the historian, not of the subjects of history.³⁴

Race/gender/class—word-processors all over the country must be programmed to print that formula with a single touch of a key. Any part of that trinity involves a considerable revision of the past, but the whole requires nothing less than its deconstruction. The assumption that race, gender, and class are, and always have been, the basic determinants of history deconstructs the past not only as historians have known it but, in many cases, as contemporaries knew it. This is why the concept of "indeterminacy" is so useful. It is only by making the past indeterminate, making it a tabula rasa, that historians can impose upon the past their own determinacy. The historian who accepts that trinity must deprivilege the "authorial voices" of contemporaries who did not do so, who, indeed, did not think in those categories. Those benighted contemporaries, the argument goes, speak with no authority, because they were deluded by the "hegemonic culture" that was itself irredeemably sexist, racist, and elitist. Thus all the past has to be deconstructed and constructed anew.

For some feminist historians, gender alone has that effect. "To place women at the center and make sense of their experiences meant reconceptualizing

³³ Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (1929; rpt. edn., New York, 1945), 39, 86.
³⁴ Joan B. Landes, Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), 1–2; Scott, Gender, 3, 6.
European history so that we could understand what history would be like ‘if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define.’35 Another explains that “the writing of women into history” requires so complete a redefining of historical experience and significance that it implies “not only a new history of women, but also a new history.”36 This is truly “total history”—far more total than anything intended by the social historians who originally used that phrase. It is a total indictment of all of history, in both senses of that word—the past itself and all of previous writing about the past—and an invitation to the total rewriting of history, again in both senses of that word.

All of history, we are told, is political—not in the naïve sense of the Victorian historian who pronounced history to be “past politics” but in the modern sophisticated sense in which history is regarded as “present politics.” And politics is expanded to mean, à la Foucault, power relations in the broadest sense—sexual, personal, racial, social. Thus the past itself, as well as historical writing about the past—and, indeed, any pretense of knowledge or truth about either the past or the present—is seen as a reflection of power relations.37 It is a proposition of breathtaking grandeur and simplicity, so grand and so simple that it defies all empirical proof or disproof.38 It also reduces all historical controversy to ad hominem arguments, since all historians are presumed to be expressing or defending their own positions of power. To this mode of argument, one can respond with a tu quoque retort—or better yet, one may choose not to demean oneself and historical discourse by responding at all.

This view of history recalls John Stuart Mill’s account of the essential difference between the two seminal thinkers, Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Coleridge. Both, he said, could rightly claim to be “great questioners of things established.” But each asked a different question. Bentham asked, “Is it true?” while Coleridge asked, “What is the meaning of it?”

The one [Bentham] took his stand outside the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it: the other [Coleridge] looked at it from within, and endeavoured to see it with the eyes of a believer in it; to discover by what apparent facts it was at first suggested, and by what appearances it has ever since been rendered continually credible—has seemed to a succession of persons, to be a faithful interpretation of their experiences.39

I take this to be the essential distinction between the new history and the old. The new history stands outside the received opinion—the opinion of contemporaries as well as traditional historians—and is prepared to pronounce it simply false. The old history stands within the received opinion, trying to understand it

36 Scott, Gender, 29, quoting Berenice Carroll, ed., Liberating Women’s History (Urbana, Ill., 1976), 89; Scott, 27, on the “rewriting” of history.
38 Foucault is one of the subjects discussed in the aptly named volume, The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 1985).
as contemporaries did, to find out why they believed what they did, why those beliefs seemed to them "credible," a "faithful interpretation of their experiences." The new history has much to teach the old. But this is one lesson the old may teach the new.