Social History as Lived and Written

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There are many practitioners of the "new social history" in the United States, but few theorists or philosophers. No manifesto marked its advent, and no single handbook or work of scholarship decisively shaped its development. A few prescient observers—William O. Aydelotte, Lee Benson, Jesse Lemisch, and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., among others—have provided the new movement with some form and direction, but theoretical writings have been less important than substantive works of historical analysis. Instruction has been by example, not by precept. Between 1961 and 1965 a number of European and American scholars published seminal works of social history, and graduate students and established academics in the United States quickly utilized the new insights and innovations in their own research. The results are diverse and uneven, in part because of the decentralized institutional structure of American historical scholarship. Two trends are, however, readily apparent: (1) causal precision in the methods of quantitative research and (2) analytic expertise in the theories of the social sciences.

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Precision and expertise for what? What is the "new social history"? The use of statistics? The adoption of concepts and the modes of argument of the social sciences? Are either of these approaches compatible with the traditional chronological emphasis of the discipline and with its venerable rhetorical mode of presentation? Beginning in the eighteenth century, Leo Braudy has suggested, "both novelists and historians sought to form time, to discover plot, and to give compelling and convincing narrative shape to the facts of human life." This admiration for a chronological form of presentation and a literary prose style and close attention to the values and motives of individual actors have come to constitute the dominant historiographical tradition in the United States. Most treatments of the American past, according to C. Vann Woodward, are "narrative, largely nonanalytical" accounts that are judged by the profession "according to old fashioned canons and values: thoroughness of research, objectivity of view, and clarity of logic, together with the lucidity and grace of the writing."

Few of the new social historians have categorically rejected these standards, but their own work represents a fundamental reorientation of many of the traditional concerns of the discipline. Those historians with mathematical or logical skills—the "cliometricians"—have defined counterfactual propositions or hypotheses that can be tested and have then subjected historical data to elaborate statistical analyses. The research of these social science historians has thrown new light on patterns of congressional voting, the social correlates of political identity, and many aspects of economic development. Other scholars have eschewed quantitative methods and have instead embraced the analytic approaches of contemporary social theorists. This interdisciplinary emphasis has been equally enlightening. Historians of the family have greatly expanded the dimensions and importance of their subject by exploiting theories derived from anthropology, demography, psychology, rural sociology, and labor economics. Scholars of urban history have likewise benefited from sociological approaches to stratification, geographical perspectives on building patterns, and architectural conceptions of urban esthetics. While receptive to these statistical and theoretical techniques, another group of social historians has pursued a different goal: the resuscitation of the critical democratic scholarship of the Progressive era. By focusing on the lives of the vast majority of the American people, these authors have viewed the discipline "from the bottom up," exploring—indeed, in

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2 For a survey of some of this literature, see Van Beck Hall, "A Fond Farewell to Henry Adams: Ideas on Relating Political History to Social Change during the Early National Period," in James Kirby Martin, ed., The Human Dimensions of Nation Making: Essays on Colonial and Revolutionary America (Madison, Wis., 1975), 323-71. For continuing discussions of method by these historians, see the Historical Methods Newsletter (1968-) and Social Science History (1976-).

3 See, in particular, the articles and reviews published in the Journal of Interdisciplinary History (1970-). For some examples of this approach, see Tamara K. Hareven, ed., Family and Kin in Urban Communities, 1790-1930 (New York, 1977); Thomas Bender, Toward an Urban Vision: Ideals and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America (Lexington, Ky., 1975); and David Ward, Cities and Immigrants: A Geography of Change in Nineteenth-Century America (New York, 1971).
many cases, discovering—the historical behavior and consciousness of immigrant workers, blacks, Native Americans, and women. The multiplicity of aims and methods is clearly evident. The “new social history” in the United States does not resemble a coherent subdiscipline but rather a congeries of groups—cliometricians, interdisciplinary social theorists, and critically minded social democrats—with often complementary and sometimes contradictory approaches to historical scholarship. The diversity of substantive interests is less striking than the sharp lines of methodological cleavage. Is a historical statement “true” only if it meets the test of rigorous statistical proof? Can the determination of individual motivation be attempted without an explicitly stated and internally consistent psychological theory? Does the behavior of a social group that has left no written documents provide adequate evidence of its values and goals? These questions have profound interpretive significance, for they address the legitimacy of various modes of argument and the admissibility of different types of evidence. Many of the new social historians begin from contradictory epistemological premises, accept divergent standards of proof, and argue creatively only with those who share their assumptions—as the confused controversy over the character of black consciousness under slavery amply demonstrates. The alternative is not an agreed-upon epistemological prolegomenon (for that is a chimera) but rather an ongoing debate among American social historians that confronts these issues in a direct manner and a search for a philosophy of historical analysis that combines methodology, social theory, and political ideology.

This essay addresses these issues in four ways. First, an explication of two modes of European scholarship—the French Annales and the English Marxists—demonstrates the feasibility of coherent intellectual systems of historical inquiry. Second, this two-part discussion begins the task of defining the prime features of social history and sets the stage for the third section of the paper: an investigation of the epistemological assumptions of most historians born in the United States. The weaknesses of the American tradition of pragmatic analysis are stressed in some detail, but the emphasis falls finally upon the great strength of this approach—a phenomenological perspective that depicts the historical experience “as it was actually lived” by men and women in the past. Fourth, the argument concludes with a discussion of various modes of historical discourse and the presentation of an “action model,” a rhetorical strategy and methodological synthesis designed to reconcile the divergent social scientific, interdisciplinary, and ideological tendencies of the “new social history” written in the United States during the past two decades.

“Social history is not a part of history,” the British scholar Harold J. Perkin has argued, but “all history from the social point of view.” Eric J. Hobsbawm

has concurred because the "societal aspects of man's being cannot be separated from other aspects of his being," social history consists of the holistic analysis of "specific units of people living together and definable in sociological terms." These definitions are instructive but limited, at least when viewed from across the English Channel. They focus, according to Richard T. Vann, on human aggregations, "churches, sects, social classes, village communities, and . . . the family" rather than on the geographic or environmental regions that form the "central subjects" of the Annales school of French historians.7 Consider, for example, Fernand Braudel's minute attention to the seasonal rhythms of the Mediterranean world of the sixteenth century. All of the peace treaties dated from the winter months; conversely, "with summer's coming, war sprang to life in all its forms: land warfare, galley warfare, pirate attacks at sea, and brigand raids in the countryside." These regularities were clearly understood by contemporaries and often figured prominently in people's behavior. "The banks of Naples," Braudel pointed out, "regularly in winter months invested their clients' money in government bonds whereas in summer they used it to buy up the many agricultural products of the kingdom, a profitable speculation." Such patterns of existence were pervasive; they impinged, however unequally, upon all of the social groups in the region.

This stress on the prime structural features of social, technological, and cultural life within a specific geographic environment defines the approach of Braudel and of other Annales. Indeed, their geographic and structuralist approach represents a distinct intellectual system, a conception of history that is at once a method, a subject matter, and an interpretation. "What is the philosophy of the Annales school?" Hugh R. Trevor-Roper asked in 1972. He isolated three interrelated elements. First, there was the use of quantification, "to reduce the area of incomprehension by rigorous statistical analyses." Second, the Annales sought "to grasp the totality" and "the vital cohesion of any historical period" by delineating all of its structures. Finally, these French historians inclined toward a "social determinism," a belief that "history is at least partially determined by forces which are external to men." As Braudel himself noted, the structures of history ("chains of small facts indefinitely repeated") live on "for so long that they become stable elements for an indefinite number of generations; they incumber history, they impede and thus control its flow."5

This intricate web of method, theory, and philosophy gives intellectual coherence to French social history, and a distinctive interpretive position emerges as a result of the definitions given to three terms: quantification, totality, and struct-

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ture. The use of statistical methods by the *Annales* historians, Georg G. Iggers has suggested, proceeds from their attempt to comprehend the past in causal terms. This positivist approach reflects the influence of Emile Durkheim on Marc Bloch, one of the founders of the *Annales* school. Following the great social theorist, Bloch assumed that "society manifested itself in concrete forms which could be observed from the outside very much like the phenomena of nature."*10* Because of Bloch's profoundly historical orientation, however, this social scientific premise did not result in a search for statistical regularities or general historical laws. The prime concern of the early *Annales* was the unique character of past civilizations, and during the 1930s and 1940s most of the historians influenced by Bloch—and by Lucien Febvre—concentrated on a close examination of literary documents. Their goal was the discovery of the intellectual and psychological climate of an age, the mentalité of individuals and social groups. Only in the 1950s did quantification and heavy reliance on economic documents begin to take precedence, and by then the emphasis on traditional types of historical questions was well established. As a result, statistical expertise did not become an end in itself, the technical fetish that has distorted the focus of the work of some American cliometricians. Rather, the *Annales* subordinated the quantitative mode to their historical perspective, examining various aspects of the past in their own terms: the trade of Seville in the sixteenth century, the cycles of life, death, and subsistence in Beauvais between 1600 and 1730, the movement of agricultural prices on the eve of the French Revolution. *11*

If the later *Annales* successfully integrated chronology and quantification, they were unable to solve the problem of focus. The research of the early French social historians—of Bloch, Febvre, and their contemporaries—was innovative in its choice of subjects and wide in analytic scope. As J. H. Hexter has suggested, much of their scholarship fell under the rubric of histoire problématique. It demonstrated the "integral relationships among all facets of human existence," but did so within the comprehensible boundaries of a traditional monograph; the broad approach was balanced by a precise focus. Then, with the publication of Braudel's monumental treatise on *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* in 1949, both the scale of the analysis and its philosophical underpinnings changed dramatically. Braudel's appetite for the past (in "its largest lineaments and its most intimate details") was gargantuan. And he translated this personal vision into a method, "a new kind of history, total history."*12* All aspects of life—from climate to topography to architecture, from popular culture to capitalist values to high art—were sketched in to create a comprehensive multidimensional Cubist portrait of the society. The superfluity of detail and the multiplicity of perspectives inhibit easy interpretation. The inherent diffuseness of *histoire totale* is apparent even to its advocates. "The more

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aspects you study," Theodore Zeldin has observed with respect to his own ma-
ssive history of modern France, "the more specialization there is, and the more
life becomes a mass of 'factors' and 'influences' with no unifying theme." 
Method shades imperceptibly into philosophy. The past consists of a chaotic
mass of facts and details, Zeldin concluded, "a vast number of permutations, the
divisions between men cutting across each other."13

Braudel did not embrace this stark empiricist position but instead sought pat-
tern and meaning in the historical record itself. The positivist heritage of the
early Annalistes was undoubtedly an important reason for this choice but so, too,
was the growing importance of structuralist modes of analysis in French in-
tellectual life. Ferdinand de Saussure, the influential early twentieth-century
philologist, demonstrated the crucial difference between langue, the basic system
of grammatical rules and conventions, and parole, the ordinary act of speech that
unconsciously (but unfailingly) embodies these norms. Subsequently, the emi-
nent anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed a similar analytic distinction
between "social relations," the data of the empirical reality of human life, and
"social structure," the "models which are built up after it." For de Saussure and
Lévi-Strauss the task of the scholar was to decode reality, to penetrate beneath
the complex surface of human existence to its basic structures.14 Braudel pro-
ceeded to apply this analytic framework to the history of the vast Mediterrane-
nian world. Amid the diversity and sheer human chaos of his massive subject
the new dean of the Annales school isolated three distinct structures or "concep-
tions of time." The first and most basic was geographic or environmental time,
"those local, permanent, unchanging and much repeated features which are the
'constants' of Mediterranean history." These enduring patterns of settlement,
subsistence, and social relations were overlaid during the early modern period
by a "long duration" of specific institutions. Some of these formal organizations
and patterns (tax systems, technology, the incidence of disease and famine)
"barely moved in any significant way, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth cen-
tury"; but there were also a number of medium-term trends or cycles in eco-
nomic and social life, "conjunctures" such as the price inflation of the sixteenth
century and fluctuations in the rate of demographic change. Finally, Braudel
turned to the conception of time that gave prime attention to "the short term,
the individual, and the event," the political acts and diplomatic maneuvers that
were the subjects of traditional history. The last third of The Mediterranean and the
Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II renders in great detail the political
struggles, dynastic wars, and personalities that dominated the historical surface
of the era. By delineating these three different structures of human life and ac-
tivity, the great French historian hoped to make manifest their relationships: "to

13 Zeldin, "Social History and Total History," Journal of Social History, 10 (1976) 243-44, 244.
14 Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brook Grundfest Schoepf, 1 (New York,
1963): 279, chap. 13 passim. Also see de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, ed. Charles Bally and Albert
Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York, 1966); and Howard Gardner, The Quest for Mind: Piaget, Lévi-
acquaint the reader with their coexistence, the conflicts, and contradictions, and the richness of experience they hold.  

This impressive intellectual scheme contains two significant flaws. Although the concept of time-related structures assists historians in ordering the disparate data of social life, the simple three-fold classification is reductive. The categories cannot encompass the diversity and complexity of reality. As Braudel himself has now acknowledged, there are “many measures of time...each of them attached to a particular history.” If this revision obviates one major criticism and significantly increases the analytic precision of the structuralist approach, it also accentuates the second major methodological weakness. The *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* does not demonstrate how the historian might link the various levels of reality, to tie “the durable phenomena of history with those that involve rapid change.” The long chapter on the battle of Lepanto, for instance, takes the form of a traditional political and military narrative; Braudel has not directly specified how its causes or outcome were affected by the social and economic patterns minutely examined in the preceding four hundred pages. The three dimensions of existence—geographic, social, and political—are not interrelated but simply stand beside the other, “each...itself an essay in general explanation.”

This failure to specify causal relationships is neither accidental nor peculiar to Braudel’s scholarship; rather, it proceeds directly from the method. To interpret the world in structuralist terms is to contest the philosophical primacy of nineteenth-century notions of unilineal causation. The understanding of an event depends less on a comprehension of its antecedents than on an understanding of its position or function within an existing system. Structuralists adopt a “holistic” perspective, stressing the internal relationships among elements of a self-contained institution or world view. Thus, the controversial French intellectual Michel Foucault has rejected a “history” of ideas—in Arthur O. Lovejoy’s sense of chronological transmission and essential continuity—in favor of an “archeology” of knowledge. For Foucault the past consists of separate strata or “epistemes,” each with its own internally consistent paradigmatic vision. Certain concepts may be inherited from the past, but their significance is radically transformed by the new context of meaning; the study of antecedents gives way to an analysis of relationships. Although Foucault’s dismissal of the intrinsic value of the discipline of history is extreme, it reveals the tension between a structuralist form of presentation and a chronological depiction of a causal sequence. A graphic illustration of the implications of the structuralist approach appears in the organization of Robert Mandrou’s stimulating *Introduction to Modern France*.


1500–1640. Although Mandrou conceded that "the precariousness of material life or chronic malnutrition cannot be understood without reference to techniques of agricultural production, or to the system by which land revenues were distributed" and admitted "the great degree of artificiality" in relegating these topics to different parts of his book, he ultimately chooses to present his material in this causally unrelated manner. Like many other Annalistes Mandrou is primarily interested in the pattern of existence. Seen in this context, Braudel's failure to link "event, conjuncture, and structure" is less an interpretive weakness than a distinctive feature of a national mode of intellectual discourse.

The structuralist method accounts as well for the sense of "determinism" that Trevor-Roper has detected in Annales history. Long-term patterns of stable relationships under the Ancien Régime are described by the French social historians both as empirical regularities and as reified constraints on human choice and action. "Man's whole life is restricted by an upper limit," Braudel declared at one point, a boundary which is "always difficult to reach and still more difficult to cross." This profoundly tragic view of man as "trapped in his former achievements for generations on end" has deeply influenced the outlook of other scholars. Pierre Goubert has written of the eternal cycle of famine and death in the pre-industrial world, while Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie has emphasized both the limiting effects of climate on agricultural production and the prevalence of backward mentalités, the "invisible spiritual frontiers which constrained economic growth." The decisive role of consciousness has been fully developed by Mandrou, who has presented the history of France between 1500 and 1640 in terms of the "basic forces for solidarity," the constraining intellectual and institutional environment that "closely circumscribed everyday human activities within a web of tradition." Whether geographic, biological, or cultural, the structures of the Annaliste imprison the individual "within a destiny in which he himself has little hand." History reveals a record of forced accommodations, for every choice is made within the terms inherited from the past. As Braudel has concluded, "All efforts against the prevailing tide of history ... are doomed to failure."10

The various French aspects of histoire totale—its tragic sense of existence, its emphasis on stability and continuity, and its diffuse structuralist treatment of causality—restrict its appeal and its range. The scholarly weight of the Annaliste remains anchored in the realities of the pre-industrial world, in the lives of human beings who "move within the strict confines of a physical space, obey impulses, and submit to barely visible forces of tradition." By contrast, many Anglo-American social historians are concerned with processes of change and conflict, with the political and economic revolutions of the post-1750 era. As


Richard Mowery Andrews has astutely pointed out, the dominant philosophical assumptions of English Marxists and American liberals alike "have been voluntarist—postulated on the notion that human will, moral and pragmatic, determines social and political realities." Yet to stress regularity and structure is not necessarily to endorse a predictive determinism or to negate the existence of variation, contradiction, and conflict. Any "total" view of society will demonstrate the multiplicity of relationships and the diversity of cultural patterns. Choice takes place in the interstices of this social matrix, in a fashion suggested by the English structural anthropologist Frederick George Bailey. He has regarded the "structure" of the social environment "not so much as made up of relationships which are obligatory upon the various actors, but rather as imposing some kind of limit on possible action, while leaving within these limits an area of discretion and choice, which the actors can manipulate in order to achieve their ends. Whatever the philosophic force of this apologia, the pessimistic bias of the Annales school cannot be ignored. Men and women act out their lives within the confines of a rigid system, and these structures of existence are often the real subjects of analysis—statistically plotted and totally explicated in a distinctly French rationalist tradition. 

Contemporary Marxist scholarship, like that of the French structuralists, begins from a positivist premise. "The subject matter of history," declared the French Marxist Pierre Vilar, "is structured and accessible to thought, is scientifically penetrable like any other sort of reality." As for the Annales, this epistemological position represents merely a single facet of a complex intellectual system. To adopt a Marxist perspective toward history is to acknowledge the essential validity of Marx's critique of the development of capitalism. This entails four propositions. The first analytic principle states that the productive system is of crucial importance in the life of a society, and the second asserts that the social relations of production are manifest in class divisions. The third Marxist axiom posits change and contradiction as fundamental features of social reality and explains historical change in terms of the dialectical process first specified by Hegel. The final proposition insists that capitalist social relations alienate men and women from both their labor and their inherent selves. This moral supposition justifies the methodology and defines its task. The Marxist scholar

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30 Bailey, Tribe, Class, and Nation: A Study of Political Activity and Political Change in Highland Orissa (Manchester, 1960), 11-12. As H. Stuart Hughes has suggested, "Some such conviction of the inevitable limitations on human freedom—whether by physical circumstances or through emotional conditioning—has become the unstated major premise of contemporary social science," Hughes, Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930 (New York, 1958), 4.
must achieve a critical, theoretical understanding of the historical development of productive systems, class divisions, and the process of change so that the present social order can be comprehended and then transformed. 22

Many American social historians categorically reject a Marxist theoretical approach while finding much to praise in the writings of such leading Marxists as Eugene D. Genovese, Christopher Hill, Eric J. Hobsbawm, and Edward P. Thompson. This paradox stems in part from the mistaken identification of Marxism with doctrinaire scholarship and a "vulgar materialist" approach to historical interpretation. Yet these Marxist authors differ significantly with respect to analytic emphasis and causal explanation. And, as their American readers have clearly recognized, the arguments of these scholars are not reductive in the least; their interpretations are based on a mass of empirical evidence and demonstrate a mastery of the extant primary documents. 23 Indeed, with respect to the charge of economic determinism, the antagonists have switched sides. Contemporary Marxists have accused the "new economic historians"—liberal American academics whose quantitative methods and causal reasoning have often assumed the primacy of economic motivation and market forces—of reductive scholarship, a criticism echoed by many non-Marxist writers. 24 Given this blurring of old ideological lines, it is necessary to explore the dimensions of recent Marxist historiography and to comprehend its approach to the historical process.

In an interesting explication of "Base and Superstructure" in Marxist theory, Raymond Williams has re-examined the traditional categories of Marxist analysis. He began by pointing out the limiting effects of "the language of determination and even more of determinism" that Marx inherited from theological arguments regarding free will. This heritage, Williams has suggested, accounts for the notions of "prefiguration, prediction, or control" in some of Marx's writings. Williams then advanced a concept of causal explanation derived from social experience rather than from religious or philosophical ratiocination, of forces or institutions "setting limits, exerting pressures" on human action. 25 He has also reassessed other terms. To speak of a cultural or ideational superstructure that "reflects" an economic or material base is to succumb to the anachronistic philosophic concepts and linguistic usages of the nineteenth century. "What is wrong with all questions about the relation of 'subjectivity' to the world," the Polish-born philosopher Leszek Kolakowski has argued in a related discussion of the etiology of knowledge, "is that we are not able to express them or answer


them except with the help of spatial symbols, while we know that what matters are not topological relations.24 "Expressions like 'in the consciousness' . . .," Kola-
kowski concluded, "hinge necessarily on this spatial language, and they cannot get at the literal form."25

Recognizing these conceptual difficulties, Williams has proposed two solutions. The first alternative (and, in a philosophic sense, the more radical) renounces nineteenth-century notions of unilinear causality because of their inherent tendency to depict ideas as epiphenomena of social reality and substitutes a "theory of social totality." This holistic approach replaces the "formula of base and superstructure" with the "more active idea of a field of mutually if also unevenly determining forces." Thus, Williams has argued that

we have to revalue "determination" toward the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure, and away from a predicted, prefigured and controlled content. We have to revalue "superstructure" toward a related range of cultural practices, and away from a reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content. And, crucially, we have to revalue "the base" away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and toward the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process.27

This theoretical position has been elaborated, in various forms, by other Marxists. Antonio Gramsci has proposed "the notion of 'historic bloc,' in which the material forces are the content and ideologies the form—merely an analytical distinction since material forces would be historically inconceivable without form . . ." As Martin Jay has explained with great precision, similar "analogical" solutions to the problem of the sociology of knowledge were devised by non-Marxists such as Karl Mannheim and the neo-Hegelian Marxists of the early Frankfurt School. This "totalistic view of cognition" implicitly underlies Williams's second, and more specific, alternative. The historian can retain the concepts of base and superstructure but focus on the point at which they intersect in people's lives. Through the process of "mediation," historical actors give cultural significance to their material existence; their condition constantly forces them to resolve the inherent contradictions between present circumstances and received wisdom.28

Ironically enough in view of its widespread identification with economic determinism, Marxist historiography invariably addresses this complex relationship between life and thought—the cognitive aspects of social action. Marxist scholars have stressed the "role of consciousness as an active factor in social

24 Kola-kowski, Husset and the Search for Centiude (New Haven, 1975), 80-81. Following Henri Bergson, Kola-kowski has argued that these difficulties constitute "a lasting feature of language itself"; ibid., 81. For a similar analysis of Durkheim's conceptual and linguistic problems, see Hughes, Consciousness and Society, 383.
change” and have been in the forefront of the broader movement that Lawrence Stone described as “a new, more sophisticated, and subtle attempt to link intellectual history with a social matrix.” The distinct Marxist contribution to this literature consists in the exploration of the values and political consciousness of various oppressed social groups: black slaves in the United States, primitive rebels in marginal economic regions of modern Europe, merchant seamen during the American War for Independence, millennial revolutionaries in seventeenth-century England, and the pre-industrial European crowd.29

This new methodological and interpretive perspective has transformed our understanding of the process of social conflict during the transition to capitalism in early modern Europe and America. To take one prominent example, E. P. Thompson has demonstrated the existence of a definite set of social values among many participants in the food riots that swept across eighteenth-century England, a conception of a “moral economy” that informed their actions. “Being hungry,” Thompson has asked, “what do people do? How is their behavior modified by custom, culture, and reason?” His careful examination of “the complexities of motive, behavior, and function” prompted him to reject a narrow materialist interpretation of these uprisings as “a direct, spasmotic, irrational response to hunger.” Instead, he has argued that these actions of the crowd were purposeful attempts to preserve the traditional notion of a “just price” in an age of agricultural transition, bakers and grain merchants were often forced by public pressure to sell their goods at the “usual” price, rather than at a level determined by the market forces of supply and demand. If a Marxist perspective informs Thompson’s account and enables him to see that these riots represented a conflict between long-standing social values and the imperatives of a new system of political economy, the interpretation is very much his own. The struggle between the landless working classes and the capitalists who controlled the supply of food, he suggested, was fought out partially in cultural terms, as a conflict between opposed conceptions of the ideal social order. “To say that it was ‘cultural’ is not to say that it was immaterial, too fragile for analysis, insubstantial,” Thompson argued, conducting an implicit dialogue with more materialist-oriented Marxist scholars like Louis Althusser on the one hand and with idealist symbolic anthropologists on the other. Rather, to say that the conflict was “cultural” is to analyze the different modes of production in terms of the consciousness of the historical actors themselves—as “images of power and authority, the popular mentalities” of hegemony and resistance.30

29 Ingers, New Directions in European Historiography, 152, and Stone, as recorded in “Dialogues: New Trends in History,” Daedalus, 98 (1969): 95. Also see Rude, The Crowd in History, 151–172. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the Crowd in Eighteenth-Century England,” Past & Present, no. 90 (1977): 77–97, 135–56, and “Patrician Society, Plebian Culture,” Journal of Social History, 7 (1974): 381. To ascertain the distinctiveness of Thompson’s position, it is necessary only to compare the formulation of the French Marxist Louis Althusser—“in its religious, ethical, legal, and political forms, etc., ideology is an objective reality, the ideological struggle is an organic part of the class struggle”—with that of Antonio Gramsci—“revolutionary thought does not see time as a factor of progress. . . . To pass through one stage and advance to another, it is enough that the first stage be realized in thought.” Yet Gramsci’s position is less idealist than the semiotic definition of culture advanced by the American symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “man is an
Manifest in Thompson's superb treatment of the behavior and values of the eighteenth-century English crowd is a distinct and coherent intellectual position. His theoretical understanding constantly informs his analysis and prompts him to examine certain types of social relationships: property, class, and power. Yet, like other contemporary Marxist scholars, Thompson has accepted the historical integrity of his data; they need not conform to a simple schema. "The general theory of historical materialism," Eric Hobsbawm has indicated, "requires only that there should be a succession of modes of production, though not necessarily any particular modes, and perhaps not in any particular predetermined order." Such formulations admit the complexity of a given historical situation while advancing two interpretive principles. The first proposition states that "the analytic base of any historical inquiry ... must be the process of social production." This position should not be confused with narrow materialism. "There is no excuse for identifying the economic origins of a social class with the developing nature of that class," Eugene Genovese has explained, for "every social class ... [is] the product of a configuration of economic interests, a semi-autonomous culture, and a particular world outlook." All aspects of life form parts of a Marxist approach, but the disparate patterns of existence are subordinated to the basic configuration, "the way the given society maintains and transforms itself—its manner of social reproduction."

An investigation of the modes of production necessarily involves a second major analytic concern: the isolation of the dominant system of relations within the society. There are many structures of belief and behavior, as the Annalistes correctly insist, but some are more important than others. "Historians," Hobsbawm declared, "will be tempted—and in my view rightly—to pick on one particular relation or relational complex ... , and to group the rest of the treatment around it—for example Bloch's 'relations of interdependence' in his Feudal Society." As Hobsbawm's choice of illustration suggests, the quest for a central relational complex does not constitute a distinctively Marxist perspective but becomes so only when combined with an emphasis on the process of social production, the hierarchical arrangement of the structures of life and the distribution of authority within the society, and "the existence of internal contradictions within systems, of which class conflict is merely a special case."

This concern with power and change clearly differentiates the Marxist analytic framework from that of the later Annalistes, with its static assumptions,

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causal diffuseness, and apolitical stance. Marxists not only specify economic and cultural structures but also relate them to one another and demonstrate patterns of confrontation among them. Most Marxists also restrict the scope of their research to an issue with a defined focus (the device of histoire probléme), in part because they wish to emphasize the personal dimensions of historical experience. Many Marxist scholars approach their material with a moral perspective derived from the Romantic critique of capitalism and from the early, "humanistic" writings of Marx. This social philosophy portrays men and women as alienated from their inherent natures by forces that they cannot always control and depicts them as struggling valiantly, if often unsuccessfully, against the impact of historical developments that threaten their autonomy and their traditional way of life. However sober and realistic the analysis, the ideological message is optimistic: the world can be transformed by purposeful action. This precept applies to the present as well as the past, and imposes a duty upon the historian. Marxist scholarship seeks to transcend the often sterile limits of scientific "objectivity," to infuse historical writing itself with values, and to discuss the morality as well as the actuality of past events. As Thompson has argued, the historian must first determine the "values actually held by those who lived" through an epoch of the past and then must make "some judgment of value upon the whole process." Manifest in Thompson's work and in that of many other Marxist scholars is a critical methodology and a moral purpose that American social historians might well emulate.

The reluctance of historians born and trained in the United States to accept the analytic systems formulated by Marxists, Annalistes, and other European social theorists proceeds in part from the very different historical experiences of the various groups of intellectuals. "Braudel's post-voluntarist and post-imperial vision," Richard Andrews has pointed out, reflects the influence of "a culture that has finally assimilated the failure of its imperial ambitions and its positivistic optimism." Whatever the nagging political doubts and philosophical uncertainties characteristic of American academe, this profound sense of the restricted limits of human endeavor is largely absent; as C. Vann Woodward has indicated, only southern-born Americans have personally participated in the common European experience of decades of intractable social conflicts and of crushing military defeat. If the relative national success of the United States inhibits its intellectuals from adopting the tragic vision of the Annalistes, then the absence of a viable working-class socialist movement has discouraged the development of a strong Marxist historiographic tradition. The predominance of bourgeois parties and values in twentieth-century American politics, Eugene Genovese has

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suggested, encouraged politically minded academics to neglect "class forces and the process of capitalist development in favor of...the glorification of the Jefferson-Jackson-Roosevelt liberal tradition..." 325

These political realities found expression in intense ideological debates, especially during the period of the Cold War. The military confrontation between the socialist states and the capitalist nations produced an analogous conflict within the American historical profession. The validity of Marxism as an intellectual system was the crucial point at issue in this academic debate. "The way social change in fact took place is something we may find out by using our framework," J. H. Hexter proclaimed some two decades ago in a candid polemical attack on Marxist historiography; "it is not and ought not be something to be found in the framework." 326 Whatever its political motivation, Hexter's argument effectively rebutted reductionist scholarship in general and a "vulgar materialist" economic approach in particular; but contemporary Marxism is largely immune from such intellectual shortcomings. Of greater importance here is the legitimacy of Hexter's implied "empiricist" alternative to the Marxist framework. Serious epistemological questions immediately arise. Most American-born historians have silently imbibed a pragmatic philosophical perspective from their culture. They accept the primacy of sense perception and attempt to establish the "facts" in a "spirit of neutral, passive detachment." Their approach assumes a correspondence theory of truth; the relations among the empirical data are thought to be as real and as immediately apparent to the historian as the facts themselves. These are dubious propositions. As the philosopher of science Carl Hempel has pointed out, broad agreement exists among mid-twentieth-century philosophers that even "scientific hypotheses and theories are not derived from observed facts, but invented to account for them." 327 Thus, there is no ontological certainty that the external world corresponds to the models created by the scientist—or by the historian. Hexter's empiricist framework is, therefore, just as much of an intellectual invention as that proposed by a Marxist or, for that matter, the structuralist frames of reference preferred by de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Braudel or the paradigmatic formulas of Michel Foucault and Thomas Kuhn. Any model that is "used" has certain assumptions about the nature of reality embodied "in" it.

Yet important differences do exist between the pragmatic empiricist position endorsed by Hexter and the epistemological assumptions underlying the European intellectual traditions of Marxism and structuralism. The latter are rationalist philosophies; they elevate the power of human reason and exalt its critical

function, while contesting the primacy of mere facts. Hence, Lévi-Strauss has attacked the "empirical and naturalistic" procedures of the eminent English anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and has disputed his ability to understand the "social structure" of a community from an examination of its pattern of social relationships. "The term 'social structure,'" Lévi-Strauss asserted, "has nothing to do with empirical reality but with models which are built up after it." Similar rationalist postulates form the philosophical foundations of Marxism. As Stuart Hall has pointed out, Marx rejected a correspondence theory of truth; for, "if things were synonymous with their surface appearances, there would be no need for science." Thus, when American-born historians raise the "facts" to a position of ultimate authority, they assume a distinct epistemological position—an empiricist approach based on three interrelated propositions: that human reason has limited power to understand the world; that models or frameworks can comprehend only the immediate data to which they apply; and that there are no fundamental patterns or structures of human life. These premises lead directly to the conclusion that each historical case has to be treated on its own, as a unique constellation of specific conditions or events. The most general result that can be obtained is an "hypothesis," but this must be "tested" with respect to each new case. The "facts" remain supreme.

This inbred pragmatic American approach to historical reality is gradually being eroded by the subtle pressures exerted by various theoretical systems. The "functionalist" social theory of Talcott Parsons, for example, has deeply influenced the thinking of many social historians in the United States. Parsons' scholarship embodies an anti-empiricist bias, for it assumes the existence of systematic relations in the world of social reality. The social systems specified by Parsons possess three general properties and propensities: "the interdependence of parts or variables...in the relationship among the components...[, and] a tendency to self-maintenance, which is generally expressed in the concept of equilibrium." The psychoanalytic principles originally elaborated by Sigmund Freud and increasingly employed by American academics likewise stress the importance of fundamental patterns in human life and the ability of the disciplined mind to comprehend them. There are many schools of psychoanalytic thought, but each posits a relationship between childhood experience and adult action that is not immediately apparent from naive empirical observation. The trained psychoanalyst maintains the validity of the general theoretical system—while attempting to understand its unique manifestation in the particular case—even in the face of the patient's explicit denial of the suggested linkages between present behavior and the emotional trials of early childhood. The Annalists and the Marxists use their social theories in a similar fashion—to probe behind the surface of events to achieve a more convincing explanation of reality than that afforded by an empiricist approach. In the end, each mode of analysis stands or falls by the degree to which it meets the test of the "reality rule," a more con-

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vincing Hexter guideline: "the best and most likely story that can be sustained by the relevant extrinsic evidence."\textsuperscript{39} This criterion cannot be satisfied simply by ascertaining the "facts," for the point at issue is the explanatory scheme that penetrates to the heart of their reality. This problem demands discussion and debate; it cannot be resolved by the a priori exclusion of Marxism or any other rationalist social theory.

Although the pragmatic tradition has narrowed the critical scope and interpretive range of American historical analysis, it has produced a number of significant methodological approaches to the study of the past. In particular, this empiricist perspective has encouraged the careful examination of the personal experiences of historical actors—their values, goals, and behavior. This focus on the details of existence and people's perception of them constitutes a crucial aspect of the discipline of social history, for it is within the inchoate world of everyday life—the matrix of half-seen and imperfectly grasped objective structures—that men and women seek to interpret reality and to affect it. How do historical actors comprehend the flux of daily existence? How can the observer reconstruct their subjective world-views? These questions move us on to new terrain. The shape of the objective contours of the cultural landscape—its structures, productive modes, and hierarchies of power—diminish in importance. The subjective dimensions of human experience take precedence. Given the complexity of the social world, how do individuals formulate and then seek to attain their goals?

"Most men are philosophers," the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci once suggested, "in as much as they operate on the practical level and in their practice (in the controlling pattern of their conduct) have a conception of the world, a philosophy that is implicit."\textsuperscript{37} This perceptive remark to the contrary, the systematic examination of the significance of the ordinary behavior of individuals has its strongest theoretical roots not in Marxism but in American pragmatic philosophy. "The meaning of an intellectual conception," Charles S. Peirce insisted, resides in the "practical consequences [that] might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception." The pragmatism of Peirce and of William James embodied a phenomenological theory of human knowledge; as subsequently developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, this epistemology takes as its point of departure the "pure phenomena" of the individual's act of "perceiving, judging, experiencing, and willing." This cognitive approach to human reality finds contemporary expression in the ethnographic methods and goals of many American anthropologists. Two of the central tasks of anthropology, Clifford Geertz has asserted, are the comprehension of the "subjective" mental worlds of the members of a social group and the elucidation of the "system of ideas... immanent in every overt process of human action."\textsuperscript{40} A similar phenome-
nological perspective informs the historical scholarship of Herbert G. Gutman. Gutman’s perceptive and sympathetic studies of American workers and of Afro-Americans are presented, in nearly overwhelming detail, through first-person accounts. Quotations from a myriad of documentary sources—diaries, letters, songs, sermons, speeches, and newspapers—tell the story from the inside, from the perspective of the historical actors. Although he provides a coherent picture of the objective realities of class positions and social authority, Gutman’s primary concern is not with structures of power but with the inherent value of the lives of the people who inhabit them. His main goal remains the depiction of the traditions, experiences, and struggles of those who inhabited the past—their own conception of the world in which they lived.  

The study of “collective mentality” by the important French social historian Robert Mandrou reflects somewhat similar analytic principles. Mandrou’s methodology involves both a close examination of written documents that reflect the actors’ conceptions of reality and a careful assessment of the cultural and psychological impact of the objective structures of existence: What states of mind and of feeling, for instance, might appear in a society with a high rate of mortality and a low level of agricultural production? How might these be molded or distorted by the theological doctrines propagated by the dominant religious institutions of the culture? Mandrou’s hypotheses are stimulating, in part because of their precise formulation, for he has separated “the elements prevailing throughout French society” during the sixteenth century (hypersensitivity of temperament, social aggressiveness, and a feeling of impotence in relation to the natural world) from the “differential mental structures” of distinct groups; “each social class—as also each profession or even religious group—had its characteristic outlook.”  

These attempts by cognitive anthropologists and phenomenologically inclined historians to comprehend the consciousness of individuals and social groups are replete with difficulty. One French critic points to the “disconcerting ease” with which historians of mentalité move from an analysis of social behavior to the depiction of the ideas or the mental states that behavior is alleged to indicate. These problems are particularly acute with respect to those nonelite members of the population who left few written records. Even the availability of first-hand accounts does not resolve the problem of interpretation, for the historian (unlike the anthropologist) cannot verify a hypothesis by talking to living informants. The “thick description” of a culturally significant episode—the intensive method of presentation that Geertz prescribed for anthropologists and that Gutman intuitively employed—obviates some of these criticisms. Still, im-

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portant conceptual problems confront the historian who wishes to present a phenomenological portrait of a complex nontribal society. Nonlocal or specialized institutions (such as a banking system) often cannot be depicted subjectively, because their scope extends beyond the experience of most individuals in a society. This deficiency can be offset, at least in part, by the anthropological technique of using different informants or documentary sources to construct a comprehensive picture of the social world. No individual or group sees the cultural landscape as a whole, but a mosaiclike tableau can be pieced together from the various perspectives.

The innovative scholarship of Clifford Geertz is instructive in this regard. In his *Social History of an Indonesian Town*, Geertz constructed a “cultural paradigm,” a symbolic structure that encompasses “the main conceptual categories in terms of which the inhabitants of the Modjokuto of 1952-1954 themselves perceived their society—of the principles of social grouping they used, the manner in which they regarded those principles to be interrelated, and the qualitative characteristics in terms of which they assigned concrete individuals to particular groupings.” According to Geertz, his description represented a “realistic classification of the primary blocks of the regional social system” and embodied Javanese perceptions. The symbolic model was “phenomenologically real . . . despite the fact that no single Modjokutan could present it . . . as a system.” Such cultural paradigms, though created by the anthropologist, are recognized as substantially correct by various members of the society—at least insofar as these models accord with their own experience. By clarifying the prime features of a complex reality, these symbolic syntheses broaden the interpretive scope of a phenomenological approach. The distanced, composite conceptions of the social analyst are very different from those of any single actor, but the vantage point is much the same. The society is presented from the inside, as subjective experience.

Geertz devised a cultural paradigm that was “phenomenologically real” to more than a single individual to avoid the dangers inherent in phenomenology: its subjective emphasis and idealist assumptions. In a less symbolic manner Pierre Bourdieu resolved similar epistemological problems in a fine study of the marriage strategies of the peasants of Béarn, a remote area of the Pyrenees. On the basis of careful documentary research and extensive questioning, the French anthropologist argued that these land-owning families have always acted purposefully “to safeguard the essential at all times” and that their main goals were culturally defined as the maintenance of the family line on an economically viable landed estate. Like the concept of “moral economy” held by the eigh-

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teenth-century English laborers whom Thompson studied, these commitments to the lineage and the patrimony reflected long-standing values, "the whole system of predispositions inculcated by the material circumstances of life and by family upbringing." Parents undertook a "concerted effort at indoctrination and cultural reproduction" so that the children might understand that "the land belongs to the eldest son and that the eldest son belongs to the land." To those born into this rural culture, the principle of primogeniture was experienced as an orally transmitted value and as a visually perceived occurrence. By precept and by example each adult generation taught its successor that the land inherits its heir.

If the objectives were clear, the process by which they were realized was not. Each peasant family was locked in a situation that it could affect but not control. Parents confronted the vagaries of fertility and mortality; they could not ensure that the first- or second-born child would be male, would survive the diseases of childhood, or would have the requisite physical strength and financial cunning to manage the property. Nor could they determine the level of prices for their agricultural products or the regional demand for wage labor. Most important of all, the parents could not affect the availability of suitable marriage partners for their children. Yet all of these factors (as well as their own health) influenced their ability to achieve their goals. Because reality was so complex and unpredictable, these peasants had no recourse to fixed or immutable rules of conduct—to a blind implementation of legal rules or cultural norms governing the inheritance of property. Were they therefore completely at the mercy of the accidents of fertility and translocal historical forces? Were their lives bereft of personal control and cultural direction?

The implications of Bourdieu's answers to these questions transcend the substantive points at issue, for his analysis demonstrates the existence of purposeful action within the bounds of rigid cultural structures. The decisions made by the peasants of Béarn, Bourdieu has suggested, indicate that they had a "system of schemes" for achieving their goals amid the contingencies of the world. Their marriage priorities were crucial in this respect. Their strategies were not explicitly or coherently articulated, but they can be seen upon close inspection to have been "rooted in a small number of implicit principles": the primacy, most importantly, of men over women and of the eldest over all younger siblings. Thus, younger sons were often discouraged from marrying so that their labor could be utilized on the family holding. A family overburdened with daughters usually attempted to marry them off to less affluent partners, in order to minimize the amount of the dowry (adot). Conversely, parents contemplated a socially "upward" marriage for the eldest son but consummated it only under certain circumstances—the arrival of a high-status bride sometimes threatened the "principle of male pre-eminence" within the household and endangered the standing

of the male lineage in the community. The advantageous marriage of a son also increased the risk of subsequent disaster, since the dowry had to be repaid in full if the husband died before an heir was born. Given the wide variety of circumstances and considerations, it is impossible for the outside observer to predict how a given family would act on a particular occasion. Yet the decisions of these rural cultivators had an internal logic when seen in relation to “the entire matrimonial history of the family.” Seen from the inside—from a phenomenological perspective—their strategies were “the product of habitus, meaning the practical mastery of a small number of implicit principles that have spawned an infinite number of practices.”

This conceptualization constitutes an important contribution to the definition of the process of social persistence and social change. For Bourdieu, 

habit

us means an action-oriented world-view that furnishes “the basis for the casuistic thinking required to safeguard the essential at all times.” It comprises both the productive mode of this French rural culture and the flexible and contradiction-ridden process by which it has been perpetuated and altered. Since the peasant’s 

mendalit\" has been “the product of the very structures” it has tended to reproduce, it has embodied elements of stasis and tradition. A dynamic, creative aspect has also been present, for the hard-pressed cultivator has continually had to resolve the tensions created by changing social and economic circumstances. Like the young, nineteenth-century rural women studied by Louise A. Tilly and Joan Scott (girls who took jobs in urban and industrial settings in order to continue to contribute to the traditional “family economy”), Bourdieu’s peasants were neither prisoners of the past nor masters of the contemporary environment. Rather, they have behaved as active agents seeking by one means or another to cope with an emergent reality. Their goals have been at least partially manifested in their rules of behavior, their pragmatic “system of schemes.” This matrix of strategies has constituted their “implicit philosophy” in Gramsci’s sense of the term. The peasants’ world-view has been at once their conception of life and the system of social and productive relationships that have sustained it, a Wel	

lanschauung anchored in reality and phenomenologically real to the actors.

For American social historians, Bourdieu’s conceptualization of human agency and social process represents an attractive synthesis of the dominant pragmatic and voluntarist tradition of their native culture and the rationalist European intellectual systems of structuralism and Marxism. The limiting structures of the inherited past—its settled institutions, habitual practices, and constricting ideologies—form an integral part of the analytic framework, but these structures do not predominate. Equal importance is accorded to the con-

47 Ibid., 119, 141. Compare Bourdieu’s argument with that advanced by the intellectual historian J. G. A. Pocock. “Every society possesses a philosophy of history—a set of ideas about what happens, what can be known and done… which is intimately a part of its consciousness and functioning… The concepts which we form from, and feed back into, tradition have the capacity to modify the content and character of the tradition conceptualized…,” Pocock, Politics, Language, and Time: Essays in Political Thought and History (New York, 1975), 233, 235.
licts inherent in the modes of social reproduction and the dialectical process by which they are resolved. Finally, these objective structures and conflicts are subordinated to the subjective experiences of the historical actors; their "life-worlds" stand in the foreground. Bourdieus phenomenological approach demonstrates the ability of men and women to shape their own lives, however narrow and restrictive the bounds of the cultural environment. This stress on human agency among modest tillers of the soil should have an especial appeal to historians in the United States. In a society formally committed to the democratic ideals of liberty and equality, the ultimate test of a historical method must be its capacity to depict the experiences of all members of the culture and to comprehend the ability of all individuals in the culture to make their own history.49

What type of literary presentation is implied by a methodology that seeks to determine the objective structures of existence, to define the hierarchical relations among them, and to depict the experiences of historical actors from a phenomenological perspective? Both the mode of argument in a work of history and its prose style affect the substantive content and thereby influence its intellectual or emotional impression on the reader. Carl Schorske has called attention to "the impact of a book's mental structure..., its grammar—the way it gives plausibility to the empirical materials and the tightness of its articulation." Like any other form of written endeavor, a social history must attain the appropriate synthesis of substance, argument, and style. The rhetoric of a work of scholarship, for example, often reflects the methodological preferences of the author. "A social structure can be described without any reference whatsoever to particular individuals and without the use of specific cases," F. G. Bailey has noted in this regard, and "a description of this kind, if well done, makes a strong appeal to the intellect; it is elegant, sparing in detail, rounded and complete, and has a sharp, tidy, thoroughly 'scientific' exactness." Bailey's objection to this "work of logic" proceeds less from esthetic than from interpretive principles; such neat and self-contained models of social equilibrium cannot easily explain "the dynamic aspects of social life: growth, conflict and transformation."50 An equally serious criticism relates to the reductive features of such an account. By systematically excluding the ambiguities of individual existence, it fails to convey the full emotional complexity of the historical situation. What is the value of a social history that primarily demonstrates the conceptual skills of the author and eliminates the contradictions inherent in the lives of the actors—many of which can be depicted only by a more biographical form of presentation?

This question raises important issues of method and is best approached

49 In following Jesse Lemisch's admonition to "study the conduct and ideology of the people on the bottom" of society and thus to "make the inarticulate speak," it is also crucial to heed his advice to "continue to examine the elite" in order to assess its critical role in the historical process. "The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up," 6.

through a consideration of the epistemological categories devised by Louis O.
Mink. Mink has distinguished three “modes of comprehension” by which the
human mind orders and assimilates the “data of sensation, memory, and imagi-
nation”: the theoretical, the categorial, and the configurational.3) These ab-
stract terms, which Mink derived from the disciplines of mathematics, philoso-
phy, and literature, refer in effect to three distinct approaches to the writing of
social history. These divisions are similar to, but not identical with, the three
paths taken by the practitioners of the “new social history” in the United States.
Some authors employ quantitative techniques, seeking—in Mink’s terms—a
theoretical understanding of human reality. Others instinctively conceptualize
their data, creating categories of social groups and types of historical behavior.
Finally, still other historians rely on a narrative framework as a prime analytic
device, assuming that meaning will emerge from a close description of the
chronological process. Each of these modes of understanding—quantitative,
conceptual, and narrative—has certain strengths and weaknesses that, upon ex-
amination, reveal the necessity of a composite rhetorical mode of presentation,
an “action model,” that offers one means of reconciling the competing organiza-
tional priorities of chronology and analysis. This “action model” also addresses
the relationship between the rhetoric of a work of history and its interpretive as-
sumptions. In a manner similar to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, the “action
model” focuses attention on the importance of human agency even as it depicts
the limiting forms, structures, and geographies of the historical context.
Quantification holds great appeal for many historians working in the Ameri-
can pragmatic tradition because of its resemblance to the empiricism of nine-
teenth-century science. The analysis of empirical data with statistical methods
supposedly produces results that are precise and value free. Neither assumption
is completely warranted. Quantification achieves incontestable interpretive
conclusions only in restricted areas of research—those dealing with established
institutional systems, clearly defined rules of behavior, or a small number of dis-
crete variables. Legislative voting has been analyzed with considerable success
because of its narrow context, while broader studies of the socioeconomic corre-
lates of membership in a political party have been much less convincing. A sec-
ond methodological shortcoming is equally important. Despite its apparently
scientific character, quantification does not necessarily yield an objective view of
human reality. Consider the study of “social mobility,” an area of intense re-
search in the United States during the past fifteen years.5) The quest for home
ownership by working-class immigrant families has not been interpreted, for the
most part, in “traditionalist” terms—as the parents’ attempt to provide security
for themselves during old age or to root the old lineage firmly in the soil of the

32 See, for example, Jackson T. Main, The Social Structure of Revolutionary America (Princeton, 1965); Stephen
1973); and Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City and Edward Pessen, Riches, Class, and
Poverty before the Civil War (Lexington, Mass., 1973), and Pessen, ed., Three Centuries of Social Mobility in America
New World. Rather, the purchase of a house has usually been viewed from a "liberal" perspective, as the achievement of the individual male laborer in his effort to "get ahead." Since both interpretations are consistent with much of the quantitative evidence, the perspective of the author has determined the thrust of the argument, not the evidentiary base.

The inherent demands of the statistical method for numerically comparable data has also distorted the immigrant experience. Quantitative historians have measured "success" according to performance on a uniform scale of economic achievement and not in terms of the cultural values and social priorities of specific ethnic groups. Many Irish laborers, for example, did not "want" to invest their hard-earned dollars in small businesses, the extensive education of their children, or the acquisition of new occupational skills. They "preferred" to support the Roman Catholic Church and to achieve the security of home ownership. A mere statistical comparison of their occupational or economic success with that of the members of other ethnic groups (with different priorities) distorts the significance of their lives. The very features that make the quantitative mode of understanding such a powerful analytic tool—its empiricism, narrow focus, and statistical precision—serve to conceal the phenomenological essence of the life-worlds of European, Asian, and Afro-American migrants to the industrial cities of the United States.53

Aware of these limitations, other American social historians organize their research in a conceptual manner and thus exemplify the second of Mink's formulations. For purposes of presentation, these scholars simplify reality by placing individuals and events that have similar features into a distinct category. This approach encourages a holistic, contextual analysis of social groups. Thus, many historians of colonial American communities study families in generational cohorts. Their investigations admit diversity within a given chronological period but stress the crucial importance of a common historical experience. The range of family behavior (with respect to age at marriage, number of children, and pattern of inheritance) within the same generation appears to be less significant than the differences between successive groups of parents.54 A similar analytic principle underlies Peter Loewenberg's innovative study of the emotional and nutritive deprivations produced by World War I on a generation of German infants, the cohort of young men and women who subsequently came of age during Adolph Hitler's rise to power. Loewenberg's conceptual approach provides great interpretive leverage. Viewing the decisions of young people to support the authoritarian government of the Third Reich from a generational perspective,


he has suggested that these choices had a common psychological origin in the experiences of children during the wartime years. Like the historians of mentality, Loewenberg constructed a conceptual model that attempted to demonstrate a collective psychobiographical pattern where others had seen only accident and variety.

Although this conceptual form of presentation is ideal for the depiction of the composite "mind" of the elite of an age (as the impressive synthetic creations of Perry Miller in The New England Mind and Henry Nash Smith in Virgin Land attest), it does not permit the specification of precise causal relationships or the delineation of unique historical events. These deficiencies proceed directly from the method, for individual cases are subsumed within or subordinated to a controlling conceptual scheme. The historian creates a coherent mosaic from disparate materials, a pointillist technique applicable to social as well as intellectual history. E. P. Thompson's articles on food riots, work-discipline, and plebian culture in eighteenth-century England are cases in point. Thompson has presented a great quantity of evidence drawn from primary documents that suggests the consciousness of the historical actors, but his conceptual approach makes it difficult to trace an actual series of events in a specific locality. Examples of the social conflicts generated by the transition from the traditional system of food distribution to the new political economy of agricultural capitalism are drawn from widely separated regions and from different decades. Thompson has juxtaposed a food riot in Norwich in 1740 with one in Gloucestershire in 1766; the "just price" demanded by a hungry crowd in the Isle of Ely receives articulate justification in an edict propounded by a paternalistic magistrate in Middlesex and an anonymous "Clergyman in the Countryside"; and a passage from The Wealth of Nations defends the proposition that the calculus of the market distributes grain in the most socially efficient manner. Thompson has used a conceptual mode of presentation to isolate the historic groups, economic forces, and cultural values present in England during the extended transition to capitalism, and he has then set them in conflict with one another—collapsing chronological time and ignoring geographical distance for purposes of drama and argument. This adept organization overcomes the inherent limitations of the conceptual mode of comprehension with respect to specificity and causality, but only by a deft sleight of hand. The exact process of capitalist transformation—as it actually occurred in a circumscribed social context, with

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the causal links palpably manifest (and thus "verified") in individual lives—escapes confirmation.

Yet this type of historical account, the presentation of identifiable actors in a distinct spatial-temporal setting, constitutes the most familiar form of historical writing. This narrative tradition falls within Mink's third mode of understanding: the configurational method of "grasping together in a single mental act" various diverse events; and Mink has attempted to demonstrate its explanatory power and its utility in historical analysis. Narratives, he has maintained, "are not imperfect substitutes for more sophisticated forms of explanation and understanding ... the unreflective first steps along the road which leads toward the goal of scientific or philosophical knowledge." The comprehension at which narratives aim represents "a primary act of mind," he has argued; both from history and from fiction "we learn how to tell and to understand complex stories" and "how it is that stories answer questions." For example, great difficulties attend the analysis of the exact "combination of motives, pressures, promises and principles which explain a Senator's vote." To apprehend "the tableau of objects in their concrete particularity as well as in their manifold relations" requires a complex act of mind; all of the diverse contexts and sequences of action must be connected in a convincing manner "by a network of overlapping descriptions." Most events—as psychohistorians often point out—are "over-determined," the product of the convergence of a multiplicity of personal and circumstantial causes; thus, it requires sharp analytic and synthetic skills to construct a convincing "story." To compose a coherent and compelling narrative is to engage in a high-order intellectual activity with stringent standards of excellence.

Nonetheless, many social historians remain skeptical of the interpretive range and power of the narrative mode of presentation. Traditional chronological accounts are often restricted in scope to public affairs and to the lives of the elite. Moreover, narrative history is often impressionistic in its use of evidence, theoretically diffuse, and—because of its dependence on literary documents—ill-equipped to grapple with the wide variety of important historical problems amenable to quantitative or conceptual types of analysis. The validity of these criticisms may be readily granted without negating the very real utility of the narrative mode in the writing of social history. This approach directly addresses questions of time, change, and sequence; such chronological concerns, as well as the scholarship of Marxists and the early Annalesists, acknowledge, form crucial aspects of the discipline of history. Narratives also embody a phenomenological perspective, and for that reason have been widely adopted by historians working in the pragmatic tradition. By placing as much (or more) emphasis upon the subjective perceptions of the actors as upon the objective circumstances of existence, narratives underscore the importance of human agency. Finally, histo-

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56 Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," 547, 595-98. For a stimulating defense of the narrative tradition, see Vann, "The Rhetoric of Social History," 221-26.

57 Although some degree of artifice enters into the construction of a narrative—in that the author already knows the outcome of the story and therefore provides a false sense of open-endedness—artifice alone does not
rians who adopt a chronological framework establish a basic congruence between the lives of their subjects and those of their audience. Most readers view the past in the same manner that they comprehend their own existence—not in quantitative or conceptual terms but in terms of a series of overlapping and interwoven narrative life-stories. Narrative history holds great appeal for the lay reader not primarily because of the absence of “jargon” but because its mode of cognition approximates the reality of everyday life.

The task is clear. If American social historians are to reach a wide audience, then they must fashion a rhetorical mode of presentation that reconciles narration and analysis. Impressive advances have already been made in two grandly conceived studies of Afro-American society during the nineteenth century. In The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom Herbert Gutman has demonstrated the evocative power of a phenomenological depiction of the Afro-American experience and, through the pragmatic application of anthropological methods, has interpreted this experience in terms of a wider theoretical framework. Different analytic priorities inform the scholarship of Eugene Genovese. While his Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made also describes the world-views of various groups within the black population, Genovese has subsumed these subjective perspectives within a Marxist structural analysis of southern slave society and a dialectical model of the development of black (and white) consciousness. His rationalist and structural approach stands in marked contrast to the pragmatic and phenomenological assumptions underlying Gutman’s work.69

For a synthesis of these contrasting modes of analysis and their integration with a chronological narrative, less sweeping examples of historical scholarship are more instructive. The fine book by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft, serves as a fine example. Salem Possessed begins with a short narrative account of “What Happened in 1692,” the judicially sanctioned murder of thirteen women and six men for the practice of witchcraft. This moment in American history remains compelling, and the authors have consciously exploited its hold on the public imagination. Like many writers of fiction, they employed the device of the “symbolic moment,” using the “interaction of the two—the ‘ordinary’ history and the extraordinary moment—to understand the epoch which produced them both.”66 Michael Katz has utilized a similar strategy (with respect to less familiar and less dramatic materials) in his stimulating examination of early school reform in nineteenth-century Massachusetts. “This study,” Katz explained, “focuses on small, concrete situations, which it tries to examine thoroughly.” Intuitively adopting the technique of “thick description” advocated by Geertz, Katz isolated key paradigmatic events—such as the rejection, by working-class voters in Beverly, Massachusetts, of a plan for a publicly supported high school—and assessed their wider social

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importance. His technique was "to start with the concrete and through careful analysis to work outward to conclusions of broad cultural significance."

These dramatic devices have important methodological implications. In scholarly terms, the authors of both works have defined a *histoire problème*, a small but crucial event that manifests many of the major social forces and intellectual currents extant in the larger society. The successful emotional depiction and analytical resolution of this limited but nonetheless complex causal puzzle provides an elegant answer to the organizational problem defined by Braudel—a method that would integrate "event, conjuncture, and structure." This conceptual approach can be widely utilized; even those scholars addressing broad, open-ended processes of cultural change can focus parts of their account around particularly instructive episodes.

*Salem Possessed* offers another rhetorical strategy of considerable utility to social historians, for it demonstrates how quantitative data and conceptual models can be presented as a series of interrelated problems or arguments within a chronological and narrative framework. Early in their account Boyer and Nissenbaum posed the question of the geographical relationship between the alleged witches and their accusers. According to the maps drawn by the authors, the houses of the two groups were not distributed in a random fashion across the landscape. Rather, the locations of their residences conformed to a wider sectional and religious division within the community. The alleged witches were tied by propinquity and financial interest to Salem Town, a diversifying commercial seaport, while their accusers lived predominantly in the agricultural region known as Salem Village. As important as the substance of this argument are the explicit terms in which it is made. Throughout *Salem Possessed* Boyer and Nissenbaum have addressed methodological questions in the text itself. The narrative that opens the study is gradually transformed into an intricate exploration of empirical evidence and analytic methods, thus expanding the cognitive skills of the readers while deepening their understanding of the historical context. Although the organization remains chronological in form, based on interwoven stories relating to specific lives and events, a "Collective Profile" illuminates the common features in the lives of the condemned witches and statistical tables chart the correlations among the variables of wealth, church membership, and factional alignment. Yet these structural and statistical analyses (as well as psychobiographies of the leading protagonists and a textual exegesis of the minister's sermons) are consistently subordinated to the two main narrative themes: the transition from subsistence to commercial production in Salem during the late seventeenth century and the chains of causation linking the individuals caught in this economic transformation to the tragic events of 1692.

This astute resolution of the problems involved in combining Mink's three modes of comprehension represents a significant achievement. When Clifford

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"For the geographical analysis, see Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, 33–35, and, for the "Collective Profile," see ibid., 190–201. The book contains seven maps and six tables."
Geertz published his *Social History of an Indonesian Town* in 1965, he suggested that narration and analysis were contradictory rather than complementary. His book, therefore, constituted "an attempt not so much to re-create the past as to discover its sociological character." As Geertz took pains to point out, his account is "not a story and so has neither moral nor plot"; rather, "it is a theoretically controlled analysis of certain processes of social change and contains instead an argument." Both Boyer and Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed* and Katz's *The Irony of Early School Reform* transcend this formulation; for they illustrate the possibility of simultaneously introducing characters, chronology, and a matrix of action on the one hand and diverse analytic methods on the other. In the case of *Salem Possessed*, argument and plot converge—literally and symbolically—in Boyer and Nissenbaum's contention that the witchcraft hangings can ultimately be traced back to a conflict between religious factions "in which a subsistence, peasant-based economy was being subverted by mercantile capitalism." Although the authors fail to demonstrate their argument in a completely convincing fashion (minimizing the autonomy of religious world-views and neglecting to prove that the members of the two church factions employed different modes of production), they have fashioned a powerful organizational method. Their synthesis, like the epistemological formulation by Pierre Bourdieu, represents an important contribution to the theory of the "new social history."

**Indeed, when taken together**, the methodological innovations of Bourdieu and of Boyer and Nissenbaum suggest a composite analytic and rhetorical strategy, an "action model" designed to discover and depict history as it was lived by men and women in the past. The implementation of this model demands, in the first place, the definition of a *histoire probléme*, a focused paradigmatic episode, the resolution of which speaks to the validity of a social theory or to an important question of historical interpretation or cultural significance. The direct specification in the text of moral and methodological problems constitutes a second aspect of this approach, for an avowed goal is the development of the critical and cognitive consciousness of the audience. As Paul Hermadi has argued, the contemporary historian should not pretend "to mirror what really happened" but should "freely admit that he mediates." The responsibility of the scholar is, in fact, "to make us see the past from within and from without at the same time—as evolving drama and as the fixed target of distanced retrospection." A method for achieving this dual objective makes up the third characteristic of the "action model." The quantitative techniques and structural approaches of *Annales*, Marxists, and social scientific historians are used to delineate the objective character of the society and to determine its hierarchial systems.

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65 Geertz, The Social History of an Indonesian Town, 2.
Simultaneously, a narrative, chronological framework of organization facilitates the presentation of the world-views of the actors themselves, a phenomenological perspective drawn from American pragmatic philosophy and cultural anthropology. The “actions” of individuals—their emotions, their values, and their behavior—remain the ultimate point of reference and give the “model” its name. A social history written in terms of these three postulates focuses narrowly but interprets broadly, critically surveys the past with reference to the present, and, most important of all, records the paradoxical and even tragic history of human agency—of “people acting yet acted upon by the structures of their own history.”

68 The quotation is from an essay on American social history written by Michael Frisch; it will appear shortly in History and Theory.