Explaining Historical Change; or, The Lost History of Causes

PARTICIPANTS:

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To date, the journal has published seven “AHR Conversations,” each on a subject of interest to a wide range of historians: “On Transnational History” (2006), “Religious Identities and Violence” (2007), “Environmental Historians and Environmental Crisis” (2008), “Historians and the Study of Material Culture” (2009), “Historical Perspectives on the Circulation of Information” (2010), “The Historical Study of Emotions” (2012), and “How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History” (2013). For each the process has been the same: the Editor convenes a group of scholars with an interest in the topic who, via e-mail over the course of several months, conduct a conversation, which is then lightly edited and footnoted, finally appearing in a subsequent issue. The goal has been to provide readers with a wide-ranging consideration of a topic at a high level of expertise, in which the participants are recruited across several fields and periods. It is the sort of publishing project that this journal is uniquely positioned to undertake.

This year’s topic, “Explaining Historical Change; or, The Lost History of Causes,” explores something that for many people, both academic historians and common readers alike, hardly needs exploring. After all, if history is nothing else, it is the accounting of change in the past, of transformations over time, of historical development, of momentous shifts, or of decisive turning points in history. People look to historians to explain how the present emerged from the past, what caused important events, why things turned out one way and not another. Or at least these are some of the common assumptions about our discipline. Historians are deemed to be authorities on the past, or at any rate on that part of the past that has generated a legible record; and implicit in this charge is to do more than produce something on the order of a chronology—not just to provide a mere account of the past as a series of events or developments, but to explain the relationship between them. History is not just “one damn thing after another”; it is the meaningful connection between those damn things.

Of course, explaining change over time has never described the entire scope of what historians do. In the eighteenth century, Edward Gibbons’s *Decline*
and Fall of the Roman Empire (1781–1789) assumed this goal with monumental thoroughness. But another canonical work of history from the same period, Voltaire’s *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751), while it did provide a chronological account of the reign, aimed, more memorably (in Voltaire’s own words), “to set before posterity not only the portrait of one man’s actions but that of the spirit of mankind in general, in the most enlightened of ages.” If not precisely in the manner of Voltaire, much very good history today is produced precisely as a kind of “portrait” of a past time and place, with little concern for the pace and trajectory of time’s arrow. From its very beginnings, then, the discipline of history never exclusively took change or historical development as its prime subject; and, arguably, the task of searching for causes in any rigorous sense of the term came relatively recently, in the wake of the rise of the social sciences.

So if this conversation begins with an assumption of a “problem”—that many of today’s historians have eschewed the rigorous explanation of historical change, once a hallmark of historical analysis in recent times—this is not to assert that other modes of mastering the past are somehow less legitimate. To be sure, when scholars take up the cause of explaining the origins and bases of present-day problems such as climate change, persistent social inequality, political instability, and the like, they perforce find themselves engaged in a diachronic approach to tracking those developments. But when they do, they also find themselves confronting many of the challenges and objections raised in this conversation, some reflecting the sorts of theoretical and methodological concerns produced by the various “turns” of the last couple of decades, others rooted in the discussants’ particular fields, theoretical perspectives, and methodological insights.

This conversation was conducted by the outgoing Editor of the *AHR*, Robert Schneider, who introduced this feature to the journal. Joining him here are Emmanuel Akyeampong, a scholar of modern Africa at Harvard University; Caroline Arni of the University of Basel, who works in the history of science and gender history and is interested in connecting history with anthropological and sociological perspectives; Pamela Kyle Crossley, a historian of modern China at Dartmouth College; Mark Hewitson of University College London, whose work is on modern Europe as well as historical methodology; and Bill Sewell, a political scientist and historian at the University of Chicago.

*AHR Editor*: In recent years, it has been observed by many who are interested in the nature of historical scholarship that a range of questions that once were central to our profession have lost their prominence. One way to characterize these questions is to recall that not long ago it was common for historians to think about “cause” as an element of historical analysis. Thus, books, articles, and well-known debates on the causes of the French Revolution or World War I, or on the decline of feudalism or the rise of capitalism, or on the factors contributing to the Protestant Reformation or the “New” Imperialism—all implied a confidence that focused analysis could yield answers that would explain large-scale historical transformations. It has been a long time since mainstream historians have thought in terms of “causes” or causality—perhaps for good reasons—but along with this there has been a move away from a more general attempt to analyze change, and to specify those factors
and conditions responsible for significant transformations and developments. There are a whole host of explanations for this historiographical shift: the decline of Marxism and the discrediting of modernization theory or developmental models; the rise of cultural history and the so-called linguistic turn; the waning of treatments of the longue durée; a suspicion of master narratives, especially as originating in Western visions of history; a turn toward “thick” description and microhistory as fruitful modes of historical scholarship; and the emergence of transnational and global history, whose scope and scale seem to render a certain kind of analysis quite difficult. And there are surely others reasons as well.

It is clearly insufficient merely to list these factors, as if an inventory could take the place of analysis. So one of the first questions I would like you to address is what you see as the relevant developments among historians of the last several years that most persuasively explain why there has been a move away from explaining historical change. In other words, I would like each of you to indulge in something on the order of a mini historiographical survey with this question in mind, and from the perspective of your own position and field. But even before this, I would like you to address the proposition or assumption that governs this introduction, for I don’t want to presume that it’s a universally accepted diagnosis. How do you see the problem? Do you indeed see it as a “problem”? 

Mark Hewitson: Discussion of causes is still common in many historical fields of study, but it has become rare over the last thirty years in works of historical theory, notwithstanding occasional chapters on causation in a small minority of treatises and handbooks. The combination of criticism of the very notion of causality on the part of some poststructuralist scholars and indifference on the part of many others has arguably left practicing historians with relatively little guidance in their quest for and their ordering, linkage, and delimitation of individuals’ reasons, motives, assumptions and interests, communicative and other forms of interaction, discursive frameworks and aporias, institutional constraints and empowerments, and wider economic and environmental conditions. Even historians who discuss causes openly or seek to provide causal explanations of events often do so with little reference to a theoretical literature. Christopher Clark’s distinction between “how” questions and “why” questions about the outbreak of World War I, for instance, has been welcomed by other scholars as “a brilliant and intellectually bracing model for the writing of history,” yet he makes no explicit allusion to longstanding distinctions within the philosophy of history between interpretation, description, and explanation, with which his own analytical starting point is at variance. For their part, self-proclaimed narrative

2 I have written about this at greater length in Mark Hewitson, History and Causality (Basingstoke, 2014), Introduction and chaps. 1–4.
historians such as Simon Schama have long argued for the restriction and subversion of “explanations about cause and effect,” which necessarily have a “make-do” character. Instead, they have recommended a return “to the form of nineteenth-century chronicles, allowing different issues and interests to shape the flow of the story as they arise, year after year, month after month.” It is difficult to discern what role causal analysis plays in such narrative accounts, which supposedly correspond—in the phenomenologist philosopher David Carr’s opinion—“to ways in which historical actors construct events.”

There have been many injunctions for historians to address “big questions,” with Jo Guldi and David Armitage’s History Manifesto the latest one, but there is little agreement about how we might devise “new methodologies for surveying social change on the aggregate level” and how we might handle “big data as a historic series of events.” Guldi and Armitage themselves seem to alternate between “mak[ing] sense of causal questions” and “tell[ing] persuasive stories over time.” The big questions that they outline, concerning climate change and growing inequality within late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century capitalism, have been formulated by other disciplines, adding to a confusion of terms and tasks. In the former case of climate change, they contend that the “skills of working back and forth between past and future, discerning multiple sources of causality and ranking them, examining them from different perspectives and experiences to offer the fullest possible account of how the catastrophe came to be and therefore what is owed to whom,” is the kind of thinking characteristic of history. Yet many historians will rightly be wary of conflating past and future, moral responsibility, contemporary judgment, and causal explanation. More importantly, the challenge of connecting changes in the natural environment and the physical “causes” associated with them, about which governments have collected big data, and social interactions and human decisions, about which evidence is incomplete and which are difficult to code, is a daunting one that is perhaps obscured by Guldi and Armitage’s tendency to treat “data” generically.

In the latter case of capital formation and inequality of income, raised by the French economist Thomas Piketty and taken up by other social scientists and policymakers, historians face the same problem of linking statistical correlations of market transactions and monetized interventions, for which accurate data is available, with other types of decision-making and interaction, for which it is not, in order to answer the question of why inequality has occurred as it has. They have not been helped by the marginalization of economic history and especially econometric analysis (“clio-metrics”) within the discipline, a process reinforced by a movement from social toward cultural history and by a movement within economics—in the English-speaking world—away from history and macro-economics toward micro-economics. The more

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7 Jo Guldi and David Armitage, The History Manifesto (Cambridge, 2014), 111.
8 Ibid., 103.
9 Ibid., 64.
fundamental difficulty for many historians derives from a theoretical neglect of “why” questions, explanation and causality, leading to unacknowledged differences of opinion about their meaning and their relationship to narrative, description, and the selection of evidence. In these circumstances, to expect historians to “explain where things came from” and “examine the precise evidence of the short past and the broader picture of big data and the longue durée” using their training “in comparing discrete sets of incompatible data, quantitative and qualitative,” seems ambitious, if laudable. At the very least, it will require further clarification of how we explain why things come about or are “caused.”

I agree with the contention that the analysis of causation, although persisting in many different guises, has become rarer over recent decades in the discipline of history as a whole. The wider context of the shift, some elements of which have been more transient or contingent (the end of the Cold War, for instance) than others (a focus on globalization or on communicative actions in the midst of an ongoing digital revolution), has proved hard to separate from debates about methods and theories. The same can be said, of course, about recent emphasis on environmental history, global governance, and inequality (after the crash of 2008), which seems to be prompting scholars to reconsider non-discursive actions, natural conditions, quantitative data, and the unexpected consequences of actions. Controversies about postmodernism and the linguistic turn were always the affair of a minority, concentrated in particular departments, subfields, and countries (especially the United States), as could be expected. Ethan Kleinberg is surely right to suggest that very few historians have attempted to carry out a complete program of Derridean textual deconstruction, but a larger number of historical theorists have made variants of the program (or anti-program) central to their work, and many practicing historians have been affected by a much broader change of focus issuing from a series of connected “turns” (postcolonialism and the cultural turn, in particular). The traditional role of intellectual historians as historical theorists, given their proximity to the disciplines of philosophy and literary criticism, prefigured and reinforced the proclivity toward various kinds of “textualism” from the 1960s onward. Anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins have also been influential, concentrating on semiotics and cultural events (Sahlins) or “reading” human interactions as “codes” (Geertz).

The upshot has been a preoccupation with language, symbolism, discourses, genres, reception, translation, emplotment, hybridity, communication, miscommunication, and genealogy, and uncertainty about—or neglect of—their connections to other types of action and contexts of action over time. One of the key questions, which Miguel Cabrera articulated more than a decade ago, is whether “social conditions only become structural and start to operate as a causal factor of practice once they have reached some kind of meaningful existence, and not merely because of

their material existence.”15 Other related questions that remain unanswered concern the reciprocal dynamics of institutions, social groups, and shifting sets of conditions, insofar as they do not simply coincide with discourse, and the relevance of routine, “practical consciousness,” and unarticulated “stocks of knowledge.” As the British sociologist Anthony Giddens has pointed out, these questions extend beyond the possibility that some actions are not meaningful to a suspicion that human agents, although they “know what they are doing on the level of discursive consciousness under some description,” may be “quite unfamiliar [with the meaning of their actions] under other descriptions, and they may know little of the ramified consequences of the activities in which they engage.”16 This suspicion, in turn, leads to a broader question about the methodological implications of unexpected consequences of human decisions and interactions. Why have significant changes—whether intended or unexpected—occurred in human societies, and how should we study them? These questions are not entirely discursive or linguistic, and as a consequence, they require a reassessment of causality.

**Caroline Arni:** I would indeed like to begin by critically interrogating the premises of the question, that is, the diagnosis that “large-scale historical transformations” and the quest for “causality” have “lost prominence” in the discipline. In establishing the question of “why there has been a move away from explaining historical change” this way, implicit assumptions are made and things are drawn together—both gestures merit a closer look. First, change is identified with large-scale transformation, and explaining with identifying causes. Second, change (understood as large-scale transformation) is framed as necessitating that causes be explained; otherwise (I extrapolate), it might not be understandable: large-scale transformational change asks for causal explanation, and causal explanation allows for addressing such change. This way of first specifying a topic and then linking the topic and methodology might not be intended in such a strict sense—but the dynamic of the discussion tends toward this move, and it is this way of addressing the question of where the discipline is at present that articulates the unease felt on the part of those who pose the question while raising such on the part of those who are challenged by it. It is important to understand this dynamic and discern the terms of the discussion when we tackle the kind of survey on the discipline’s recent past that throws itself at the “cluster turn” (linguistic, cultural, micro, etc.), which is being called on to answer for the diagnosed loss. If I try to come into the discussion at this point, it is in an attempt to get a more nuanced historiographical picture and to question the disciplinary bookkeeping that goes with it: I am not convinced that said “turns” have lost sight of change and explanation *tout court*. However, I take seriously the call to address large-scale transformations and causality and would like to understand what is behind it—if it is not, or rather not entirely, a loss. One train can hide another, as the French saying goes.

When E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*, inspiring what was to become the “culturalist” approach to social history, moved away from what he called “empiricist orthodoxy” in Marxist history and modernization theory by

introducing “agency” and “experience” and, indeed, “culture,” it was not change he abandoned (quite the contrary, since conceiving of class as a historical process was at the center of his concerns), and it was not explanation he turned away from. Rather, he argued against models of change on the basis of isolated factors that provided pre-settled explanations for preconceived transformations that could not account for contingency (which Thompson located in social “logics” instead of historical “laws”). When Joan Scott in “Women in The Making of the English Working Class,” setting an example for what was taking shape as the linguistic turn, criticized Thompson for not going far enough when he replaced determined class consciousness with determined experience, she was abandoning neither the emergence of “class” as a topic of historical inquiry nor the attempt to explain what went on in societies of the nineteenth century. Rather, she explained not only the continuing problem of women in socialism, which was to haunt the New Left a hundred years later, but also why this problem could not have been historiographically apparent. She did so by excavating a mechanism of exclusion that would be repeated whenever universalist definitions (of the rights-holding subject, of the worker, etc.) were conceived in gendered terms or whenever the abstract was conceived by concretization—as in the paradoxic constitutional modern republicanism. To be sure, while Thompson remained dedicated to reconstructing a continuous historical process driven by a social logic, Scott delved into historical moments that produced discursive logics, which then were repeated in different settings. This approach owes much to Michel Foucault’s project of history as genealogy. While such history-writing went against any teleological drift, it can hardly be accused of neglecting large-scale transformation (just think of Foucault’s history of sexuality or his work on governmentality). Hence, I would like to argue that the rejection of models and determination should not be equated with abandoning change as an explanandum, and that a turn to social or linguistic logics is not the same as abandoning explanation.

If not change and explanation tout court, then what is at stake in diagnosing the loss of something that ought to define the discipline? My guess: It is not change, but a specific way of conceiving change, namely as a continuous movement through time. And it is not explanation, but a specific way of explaining, namely by abstraction. Rather than mourning and retrieving the things that may have been lost—or, for that matter, defending their preservation—we could tackle the way of: that is, reflect upon how we conceive of time for historical investigation and how we construct research objects through the use of analytical notions and categories. How do we conceive of the historical object? Or, more precisely, how do we conceive of the historicity of the objects of investigation? One way to do so is to identify “things” (phenomena, entities, etc.) as they move through or in time conceived as a flux. This is sort of a default mode, and while it seems evident, I think it merits critical reflection. More often than not, this way of conceiving the historical object involves the

reification of categories or conceptual perspectives—when, for instance, “gender,” which was meant to be a category producing questions for historical inquiry, instead becomes the very thing examined for how it fared in the past, over time.\(^1\) Another way of conceiving the historicity of the object is to look for it in the object itself instead of in how that object moves through time. The question, then, is not “What happens to XY through time?” or “What became of XY over time?” but “How/Why do things become something that was not there before?” This is what Foucault meant when he called for attention to discontinuities in history.\(^2\) Working with this impulse is not just about forgoing teleological narratives (which few would defend). It is about conceiving historical time not as a flux that transfers things from past to future, but as a complex constellation of continuities and discontinuities that makes us see “process” as a highly premised concept. While this does not necessarily mean abandoning larger time spans, it does shift the conceptualization of time, and thus necessitates a reflection on temporal concepts. A question might be, for instance, whether discerning discontinuities, while it performs a critical function by denaturalizing that which is given in the present, necessarily reduces the historical investigation to identifying historical difference at the cost of detailing transitions. This might be an entry into exploring what Gary Wilder has called “an analytical synthesis that relates the epistemological challenge of the linguistic turn to the social structural concerns of the Marxian tradition.”\(^3\) There is a field wide open for theoretical imagination and empirical experimentation: How do we synthesize these orientations? It would mean forgoing an opportunity to reflect upon fundamentals of historical thinking if such questions were short-circuited by too quick a jump from diagnosis to remedy in terms of a retrieval of “lost causes.”

**Pamela Kyle Crossley:** As may be well known, those of us who write Chinese history in English have few or no theoretical sources of our own; we are historians from the same theoretical milieu. Weber, Braudel, Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu, Lacan, and de Certeau have done their time as necessary invocations during the later twentieth century, and in some cases have had an actual impact. Less credit has been given to Bergson, and almost none to Dilthey, even though both have been seminal (sometimes through the recontextualization of their thought by scholars such as Gilles Deleuze and Michael Ermarth, respectively) to disassembling early-twentieth-century assumptions of time and causation.\(^4\) The Editor’s question raises two other

\(^1\) Gary Wilder has shown this dynamic in a concise analysis of the pitfalls of “turns.” Wilder, “From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (June 2012): 723–745.


\(^3\) Wilder, “From Optic to Topic,” 745.

\(^4\) Deleuze’s works relating to Bergson’s ideas of temporality, multiplicity, and consciousness are very numerous, but best known is probably *Le Bergsonisme* (Paris, 1966), translated into English as *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York, 1988). For Dilthey, see Michael
questions for me: How long is the longue durée, and how can we resuscitate an idea of causation that transcends the nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual frameworks in which it now rests?

On the question of the longue durée, Braudel’s early concept was that longue durée studies would reveal causations that had previously not been appreciated, whether it was the role of Kondratiev waves in Europe’s modern political history or the interplay of patterns of trade with demographic trends. Right away one sees an implied reference to Bergson, who had suggested that the durée was the moment of free-play consciousness, in which causality had no particular meaning. The longue durée is the durée that is long enough to recapture a sense of sequence and causation—long enough to transcend the individual and mark the experience of communities, regions, continents. This was accompanied by a hope that the rapid aggregation of both data and computational techniques in the later twentieth century would reveal patterns that were not only long but also massive; indeed, the axiom that more data necessarily led to more accurate discernment of relationships (including causal) was everywhere in twentieth-century thinking. Yet for Braudel, “social reality” remained the scale of everything. The cumulative effect of material forces on social interactions was and would remain for him the engine of change, and the measure of “reality.” In that sense, Braudel seems to me to be the consummate modernist. There is a reality that is independent of observation alone, and that reality is social, and it is determined by material trends of a scale forever just outside the comprehension of any individual historian—indeed, of any social scientist generally.

Intellectuals of the twenty-first century are less persuaded that reality and the observation of reality are two independent phenomena. They are both part of a larger problem of time-space interplay that, once assimilated, makes it difficult or impossible to think of twentieth-century historical ideas as much more than artifacts of the twentieth century itself. It is not unlike Braudel’s imagined twentieth-century historian, who, projected back to the sixteenth century, is able to view the surroundings and the customs as fundamentally “strange”—that is, “estranged.” Braudel looked to his Annales-style colleagues such as Ariès as practitioners of the art of regarding everything before the present moment as “strange,” approaching the experiences of last year (or this morning) with the same instinct to wonder as one would the world of five hundred years ago; indeed, for Braudel the basis of all social science was the skill of self-estrangement from social construction, of regarding the usual as surprising and problematic. This might be easier for historians to do now. As Braudel anticipated, the accelerated rate of social change in the twenty-first century rapidly widens the vista of strangeness, allowing current historians to wonder at the peculiar ideas of the late twentieth century, and indeed, to look back on the first decade of the twenty-first century as now possessing a chilling strangeness itself.

Of course, the posture of the estranged historian works with respect not only to time but to space. Historians of China writing in English, French, and German for the past century have created the same subject-object postures for themselves regarding China that Braudel adopted for medieval Europe and Ariès adopted for his
present. Not surprisingly, a good number—among them Jacques Gernet, Étienne Balascz, Wolfram Eberhard, and Mark Elvin—were European or trained in heavily Pirennean or Braudelian environments. They fostered a search for the *longue durée* and were grandfathers to later searches—led by scholars such as Pierre-Etienne Will and R. Bin Wong, editors of the seminal *Nourish the People*—for wide-ranging archival research that could transform the unstructured particular into the structured general, including big-data demographic studies led by James Lee. The “difference” that Braudel found so key to the historian’s intellectual pose, with respect to China and Asia generally, has been regarded as not only real but definitive, an estranged object whose character cannot be changed by observation, but whose integration into the social reality of the reader can be marginally improved by better descriptions embedded in longer and deeper chronological frameworks.

This steady observation by the subject (the historian, the historian’s milieu) of the object (the past, the present, Asia, Africa, pre-Columbian America, and so on) was fundamental to what Edward Said decried as “orientalism.” Following Said’s lead, cultural historians identified the subject-object relation as the basis of imperially or colonially embedded racism, and poststructuralist scholars generally have pathologized it as the “gaze” of the ostensibly dominant over the ostensibly subordinate. And in the case of Asia, the position of the historian as an outsider to his or her subject has been reinforced by much older and still robust Marx-derived ideas of Asia, in particular, as without history—mired in a para-historical world where the forces of transformation had been defeated by a culturally embedded deference that rejected efficiency, independence, and the pursuit of self-advancement. For Marx and his contemporaries, Asia was a swamp where tyranny could lurk indefinitely until it was hunted down and destroyed by the external forces of capitalism and imperialism. The cultural assumptions that had once undergirded European ideas of the “Asiatic mode of production” fit easily, and still do, with the ideas of those who explain China’s patterns—past and present—in terms of “Confucianism,” or some unique longevity of centralized government, or heightened regard for family and social stability. The *longue durée*, for some historians of East Asia, has become a license for explaining the present and near future in terms appropriated from a fabrication of an artificially exotic and evidently deviant past.

All the social sciences, but particularly anthropology and history, have been disoriented and enriched by the conscious “postmodern” or “postcolonial” attacks on subject-object social science, which leaves the contemporary historian in a dilemma. Whatever identity pretensions any historian might make to being an insider to

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26 The Annales style here merged with earlier demographic work done by Hsiao Kung-chuan (Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century [Seattle, Wash., 1960]) and Ping-ti Ho (Studies on the Population of China, 1368–1953 [Cambridge, Mass., 1959]).
specific neighborhoods of history, none of us live in the past or can prove that it exists. Our position is by default forensic; we are after the fact, working with fragmentary evidence of fragile reliability, constructing narratives that patch holes in the evidence, guessing about what causes what without the ability to enter the realms of parsimony where events can be repeated indefinitely in the laboratory. The historian is the subject, and an understanding of the past is the object, and little can be done to change that. Yet past practices of the unconscious projections, assumptions, and derogation of the object as something to be assessed and if necessary manipulated are now to be avoided. The subject-object relation is poisoned, but without it there is no perception and no expression—we are in danger of manufacturing a grand delusion of conflating the present observer with the willfully constructed “past.” What happens now?

For decades, historians anticipating the flow of poststructuralist perspectives from literature to history seemed to offer narrative as the antidote to the subject-object relation. A new theoretical fabric linking mentalité, discursive studies, autobiography, and modal narrative—in which one assumption renders one story, another assumption another story, and all possible assumptions are accommodated simultaneously—brought history for a time into closer relation with cultural theory. Work by Harold Bloom, Jürgen Habermas, Carlo Ginsburg, and Natalie Zemon Davis had a strong effect on the English-language writing of Chinese history, as shown most vividly in the work of Jonathan Spence, Anthony Yu (a literature scholar with a strong and continuing impact on historians), Susan Naquin, Ray Hwang, and John E. Wills, Jr., among others. So far as I know, few of these scholars apart from Habermas were referencing Dilthey. But they were all working in the spirit of Geisteswissenschaften—I mean here that they practiced a conscious, sympathetic immersion in the textures of and limitation to the awareness and expectations of the times they were attempting to recapture—and a few, such as Spence, were aiming straight for his target of Verstehen, reaching for the unmediated experience of past people. Though affective narrative has, to my mind, never achieved true contact between the present and the past, it has opened the way to twenty-first-century approaches to causation, with the suggestion that narrative can bend itself to touch two points (one of which is the present) at once, as we assume that time and space can do. In the twenty-first century, we do not believe that an object is not changed by observation. This makes narrative in this mode not the enemy of the longue durée—an enemy of the sort that Braudel feared the fashion for monographs and case studies would produce—but its twin, in the way that Joyce’s Odyssey is the twin of Homer’s, or the search for the Higgs boson particle is the twin of a unified field theory. If in twenty-first-century thinking causation can no longer be strictly linear, and the meaning of historical inquiry lies in the connection to or interception of elements of the past that still bounce around in contemporary society and culture, then narrative and causation are the same—not just equivalent, but the same. This would suggest that Bergson and Dilthey and other loosely connected hermeneuticists and phenomenologists

might be to historians of the twenty-first century what Braudel and Foucault were to those of the twentieth.

There is a problem with my speculation here. Davis and Spence are particularly good at demonstrating—both purposefully and sometimes accidentally—the irreparable vulnerability of what historians usually regard as “evidence.” From a completely different perspective, those such as Beatrice Bartlett, William Skinner, Evelyn Rawski, Madeleine Zelin, and others who have looked closely at the documentary processes in China have found that as impressive as some historians (mostly not researching Chinese history) find the length and width of Chinese documentation to be, it is in fact extremely limited in scope, and much of what is regarded as “original” has been in most cases systematically redacted by government officials. In the case of imperial China, as in all other cases, human experience has been only glancingly and erratically documented. If evidence cannot be stabilized, how is narrative to be constructed and causation derived outside the sort of direct-contact modes of the hermeneutical turn? We have made and will continue to make marginal progress on the technical side—better paleography and philology, computational techniques compensating for the softness of the data, more sources (as, for example, in the case of China, the opening of county archives). And Braudel was surely right in his advice that history should advance by encouraging as many historians as possible to use as many perspectives and techniques as possible. But in order to restore access to explanations for why things happen, we will have to get beyond a rejection of the subject-object relation in research, analysis, and writing. Rejection of the relation opens the door to unbridled subjectivity. Noting the agency of every living human is important, but it must be accompanied by some appreciation that because of proximity to immediate, material power (of which the living person may have known little or nothing), some individuals have a greater impact on change than others. Short-term change reveals one form of power, long-term change reveals another, and that is critical to the historians' work. Like Braudel, we want the durée to be just long enough to reveal the origins of the world as we perceive it. That makes the enterprise entirely subjective, but it does not have to make it unconsciously so.

**Bill Sewell:** I do think that this first question has signaled a significant problem in contemporary historical scholarship. However, the problem as I see it is not that historians have lost interest in “explaining historical change.” It is true that the terms “cause” and “causation” have fallen out of style over the past three decades, largely, I think, because of the “billiard ball” model of causality that these terms tend to evoke. During the vogue for quantitative social history in the late 1960s and 1970s, some historians adopted the positivist language that dominated sociology, political science, and economics in those years, a language in which “causation” was a kind of sacred touchstone. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, when many historians turned from social to cultural history and from positivistic to interpretive modes of thought, uttering the words “cause” or “causation” tended to mark one as hopelessly backward. But “explanation,” unlike “causation,” has not become a tabooed term, largely because of its rather vaguer implications. (When, in ordinary conversation, we ask, “How do you explain that?” we might get a billiard-ball causal account, but we would be at least as likely to get a narrative or an explication.) When historians
gave up “cause,” they did not necessarily give up explanation, or even explanation of large-scale historical transformations. In my own field of French history, explaining the French Revolution continued to be the holy grail—but the explanations changed from class struggle or economic fluctuations to changes in political culture.28 The key question became not what social forces constrained or empowered actors, but how actors understood what they were doing—and how their construal of affairs guided their actions.

What certainly has shifted is the form of explanations favored by leading historical scholars. Here the crucial development, as I see it, is the cultural or linguistic turn—a complex movement with many different theoretical strands (e.g., structuralist, hermeneutic, anthropological, Foucauldian, and Derridean). Derridean post-structuralism or deconstruction, which was the most epistemologically radical form of the linguistic turn, has inveighed against the very concept of cause, which according to it erroneously claims to arrest the free play of the signifier. Poststructuralists’ aggressive denunciations of what they regard as naïve notions of cause or explanation in historical texts, let alone grand narratives, have had an intimidating effect on the general run of historians, whose grasp of philosophical and theoretical issues of any kind tends to be weak, and who understandably wish to avoid being denounced. Foucault, whom many categorize as a poststructuralist, seems to me an utterly different case. Far from abandoning “grand narratives,” Foucault proposes grand narratives of his own, such as the historical shift of epistemes or the rise of the disciplines or the rise of biopower—but grand narratives established by searching out patterns of thought that have structured the conduct of historical actors in different eras.29 Historians, by wrapping themselves in the cloak of Foucauldianism, often embrace what are in fact sweeping causal narratives while claiming (falsely, in my opinion) a poststructuralist epistemological high ground.

The hermeneutic or anthropological forms of the cultural turn lack the supposed epistemological radicalism of poststructuralism, but they share the poststructuralists’ focus on the sphere of signs as the key to understanding social life. This sphere of signs may be labeled culture, or language, or symbol systems, or meaningful action, or habitus, or signifying practice. Some versions of this theoretical position work strictly at the level of language or symbols; others embrace the meaningful character of practical activity. Influential theorists include Clifford Geertz, Erving Goffman, Marshall Sahlins, Norbert Elias, Paul Ricoeur, and Pierre Bourdieu. This tradition, I would say, has become dominant in the historical profession. In my own field of French history, a partial list of practitioners would include Natalie Zemon Davis,
Roger Chartier, François Furet, Bonnie Smith, Keith Baker, William Reddy, Mona Ozouf, Lynn Hunt, Robert Darnton, and, in some of his work, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. Most of my own writing certainly fits within this tradition. Historians who work in this style (or cluster of styles) generally embrace historical explanation as a goal, either explicitly or implicitly. But the emphasis on the sphere of signs, however conceptualized, makes most of them leery of invoking the sorts of causal arguments that were common during the high point of social history in the late 1960s or the 1970s—all the more so because they prefer to steer clear of denunciation by poststructuralists or would-be poststructuralists. References to, for example, social structures, class, market dynamics, demographic patterns, exploitation, or business cycles all have an odor of mechanical causation that nearly all cultural historians eschew. The embrace of cultural history doesn’t keep historians from engaging in explanation of historical change, but it tends to keep them from considering many of the sorts of explanations that figured prominently in social history in previous decades. There has, in short, been a “loss” as a consequence of the cultural turn, but a loss that most historians would probably regard as a gain—a gain in subtlety and sophistication that has preserved them from the crude errors of economic and social determinism.

I personally took the cultural turn (in an essentially hermeneutic mode) in the mid-1970s and remain a convinced cultural historian. I believe that the primary task of history—indeed, of the human sciences in general—must be to seek out the frameworks of meaning within which human action unfolds. In this sense I agree with Pamela on an essentially Diltheyan vision of the historian’s task. Nevertheless, I am convinced that cultural historians’ lack of interest in economic and social-structural explanation has been a very serious loss. It has been particularly serious because it has taken place during a period—since the mid-1970s—that has been marked by a profound transformation of the world economy from state-guided forms of capitalism to an aggressive financialized neoliberal capitalism. Especially in the United States, but not only there, economic inequality has risen precipitously, economic security of the middle and working class has been undermined, and democracy has increasingly mutated into plutocracy. Meanwhile the world’s political institutions have utterly failed to respond to the steady advance of global climate change, which threatens to make our earthly home uninhabitable within a century or two—unquestionably a consequence of the world’s current economic system. That the great bulk of the history profession turned its back on economic and social-structural causation during a period when the dynamics of capitalism weighed ever more forcefully on the course of the human endeavor is, in retrospect, an astounding fact and not something we should be proud of.

30 In addition to the economist Thomas Piketty’s *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*, see the sociologist Wolfgang Streeck’s *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London, 2014), and the political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson’s *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York, 2010).


To end on a more upbeat note, over the past decade or so, a younger generation of historians has taken up what has come to be known as the history of capitalism, finally putting an end to the profession’s thirty-year neglect of socioeconomic topics. Most of the work in this emerging field has successfully integrated cultural history with history of the economy, demonstrating that it has been a mistake to leave economic history to the economic historians. Meanwhile, I hope that historians will begin to pay more attention to scholars in the other social sciences who have been working on the history of capitalism from other perspectives. Likewise, the global environmental crisis has been a spur both to environmental history and to “big history” or “deep history,” which attempts to capture the long sweep of a human adventure now facing unprecedented peril. There is reason to think that the profession is now overcoming its reticence about topics that require us to accept the importance of social and economic causation, that demand the use of quantitative evidence, and that require the perspectives of disciplines outside the humanities—from sociology, to economics, to earth science, to genetics, and beyond.

Emmanuel Akyeampong: I have read and enjoyed the very thoughtful comments of my colleagues as they have reflected on causality in history and their specific fields. The process made me review my training as a historian in the 1980s and 1990s at the University of Ghana (where most of my professors had obtained their Ph.D.’s from universities in Britain) and in the United States. I see several points of intersection and overlap with my colleagues and their insightful responses to the Editor’s query on “why there has been a move away from explaining historical change.” I align myself with Bill’s observation that contrasts “explanation” versus “causation” in history, and how the shift away from assigning “causes” in historical scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s did not necessarily imply an end to explaining the social realities we study. In African history, big questions and longue durée studies have returned, spurred by the comparative regional approach of the “new economic history” and the availability of new databases, and the rise of world and global history that have positioned Africa in ways that historians of Africa have considered unsatisfactory. Works such as Kenneth Pomeranz’s The Great Divergence (2000), and the much-cited article “Reversal of Fortune” (2002) by Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson inspired the need to place Africa more centrally in these global conversations and to interrogate the place of institutions, natural resources and

geography, infrastructure, culture, and global trade. Quantitative approaches and the relevance of datasets have shed new light on Africa’s political economy, such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database created by David Eltis, David Richardson, and their colleagues (www.slavevoyages.org), which provides data on about 35,000 slave voyages across the Atlantic from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. This dataset has informed important recent studies by economists such as Nathan Nunn and numerous historians. Scholars interested in the relationship between good governance and economic growth turn to the research network Afrobarometer (www.afrobarometer.org), which measures the social, political, and economic atmosphere in Africa, examining key issues such as the impact of corruption on institutional trust and economic performance. A variety of datasets compiled by international development organizations such as the World Bank Group's World Development Indicators, the University of Pennsylvania’s Penn World Tables, or that compiled by Angus Maddison at the University of Groningen and continuously updated by a group of researchers as “The Madison Project” (www.ggdc.net/maddison/maddison-project/orihome.htm) provide scholars with data that have driven big questions about African economic growth in global contexts. While Jo Guldi and David Armitage point rightly to the return of big questions in history driven by big data, big gaps in African data collection and the “negotiated” nature of African income and growth statistics between vested interests underscore the reality that numbers as much as text are constructed. Douglas Rimmer raised the difficulty of compiling accurate statistics where Africa is concerned over a decade ago, a point restated more recently and forcefully by Morten Jerven. The longue durée has remained important in African history, with significant contributions by historians trained in ancillary disciplines such as linguistics. Christopher Ehret’s hugely significant An African Classical Age, which spanned the period from 1000 B.C. to 400 A.D., was in part a response to his colleague Jared Diamond’s Pulitzer Prize–winning and widely read Guns, Germs, and Steel. Ehret establishes how Africa was contemporaneous with other areas in the world in the earliest revolutions in agriculture, iron technology, and commerce in the last millennium B.C. Jan Vansina’s How Societies Are Born traces the early histories of societies in West Central Africa before 1600 and their development of governance institutions through linguistics, ethnography, and history. While I


38 Guldi and Armitage, The History Manifesto.


41 Jan Vansina, How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600 (Charlottesville, Va., 2004).
was serving as one of the editors of the *Journal of African History*, we invited Richard Reid to write an article on the state of precolonial African history, which was seen to be in decline. His piece, published in 2011, interestingly pointed to the return of *longue durée* studies, where understandings of early African history were harnessed to explanations of more contemporary social realities.\(^{42}\) Thus histories of contemporary violence in the Great Lakes region in East and Central Africa informed David Schoenbrun’s work on violence in this area for a much earlier period.\(^{43}\) As I reflect on the emergence of African history as a discipline (from the 1950s, so a relatively young field), the historiography, historical causality, and the problem of causality, if it is indeed a “problem,” I also want to make some preliminary comments on the particular historical circumstances that have shaped the writing of African history.

First is the limited nature of the archive. The archive on Africa is essentially a “colonial archive.” Aside from those African societies that embraced Islam and Arabic literacy in the precolonial era, most African societies, even the Muslim ones, were largely oral societies before the twentieth century. Missionary education from the early nineteenth century introduced Western literacy, but education in the colonial period had limited objectives: to produce clerks and lower functionaries for the colonial government and mercantile firms, and teachers and catechists for missionary societies. Most African countries on independence in the 1960s adopted compulsory basic primary education as a national goal. There has been a body of Arabic sources on sub-Saharan Africa extending back to the tenth century, but again with limited thematic coverage. Much of what we know about medieval West Africa, for example, is drawn from these Arabic sources, and the travel accounts of the intrepid Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta provide important access to both West and East Africa in the fourteenth century.\(^{44}\) Second, historical writing on Africa before the 1950s focused on the slave trade, missionary activity after the abolition of the slave trade, and colonialism. African historians were pressed to demonstrate that there was an African history beyond the history of Europeans in Africa. Roland Oliver has reflected on the paucity of materials when he was appointed to teach African history at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1948, the first academic position in African history in the world.\(^{45}\) The centrality of archives to our discipline of history proved a challenge in this regard, paving the way for an interdisciplinary approach to early African history that embraced archaeology and linguistics. The premier journal of our field, the *Journal of African History*, was founded in 1960. A perusal of its early volumes underscores how crucial archaeology and linguistics were to the reconstruction of a baseline history of Africa. Another important observation when one goes through the volumes of the journal is how dominant slave trade and slavery were to the historiography of Africa through the early 1990s. And here the distinction between *African* and *Africanist* scholarship becomes instructive. Most of the contributors on slave trade and slavery were Europeans and Americans (Africanists),

whereas most African scholars, with very few exceptions (Joseph Inikori and Akosua Perbi, for example), stayed away from the subject until the 1990s. Third is the introduction of a methodology for using oral evidence, pioneered by the Belgian scholar Jan Vansina, who would become one of the pillars in African studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, arguably the leading North American institution that produced historians of Africa through the end of the 1980s. Oral traditions, life histories, and life stories have become central to the writing of African history, invigorating also the study of Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as oral evidence enabled researchers to transcend the colonial archive. And as biography, life history, and life stories became important, so did the influence of studies of memory and representation, and here the poststructural, postmodern turn would be instructive. Fourth is the “nation-state.” European imperialists carved up Africa at the Conference of Berlin in 1884–1885. Africa’s borders are artificial. On independence from 1960, African states inherited the “nation-state,” which had become the basis of membership in the United Nations and participation in international relations. With artificial boundaries that have aggregated myriads of people, ethnic tensions have become a challenge in independent Africa. The functioning or malfunctioning of the nation-state has been an important staple in African historiography. Fifth and last is the elusiveness of development, which seeks to combine economic growth with an equitable distribution of wealth in African societies. Here early scholarship looked optimistically to modernization theory; then came the disillusionment of the 1970s and the importance of Marxism, the “modes of production” approach, the dependency school, and the relevance of world-systems theory and Immanuel Wallerstein. These historical realities have informed debates about the nature and legacy of colonial rule and the creation of extroverted economies and peripheral capitalism in Africa. By the end of the 1980s, most African nation-states had become clients of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund implementing structural adjustment programs. As the focus of indebted African nations shifted to debt repayment in the 1990s, “development” disappeared from the language of experts in an era when African development had become internationalized “in the most literal sense, as a process negotiated between sovereign nation-states, legally equal but in fact distinguished into those who gave and those who received.” The first decade of the twenty-first century, which witnessed a global boom in commodities to Africa’s benefit and the return of China to Africa as an economic power and now Africa’s top lender, has revived the discourse of development and the possibility of African paths toward development.

In the 1960s and 1970s, positivism was strong in African historiography, as historians of Africa explored themes in state and society that paralleled the research agendas of their colleagues in history departments who worked on Europe and other regions. Important themes included the history of elite groups, the forms that power

47 These realities inspired Basil Davidson’s *The Black Man’s Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (New York, 1992).
49 Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge, 2002), 91.
took, political centralization and kingship, bureaucracies, etc., and Weber and Marx were staples. A classic study in this vein was Ivor Wilks’s *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*. The cultural turn from the 1980s introduced challenges to this positivist portrait, and the debates between Wilks and Thomas McCaskie mirrored these tensions. The decentering of master narratives from the 1990s saw the influence of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonial studies. Modernity went from being a Western export to being a multi-centered phenomenon, and Arjun Appadurai’s work was influential. The Indian subaltern school became influential in postcolonial studies in Africa as culture became a site of resistance, and historians strained to read all the “signs” that had become fashionable. We read Said’s *Orientalism* to position ourselves to critique imperial cultures, and eagerly read similarly inspired works such as Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* and Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*. An important African intervention in terms of postcolonial theory was Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony*. Foucault was a staple, and he informed new works in the 1990s on the history of disease and institutions of confinement, even though scholars admitted that there had been no great confinement in colonial Africa akin to what happened in Europe. But Foucault’s influence has been particularly felt in studies of power, and that is where I have found him instructive in understanding technologies of rule and biopower, augmented by the work of Giorgio Agamben, particularly on the nature of sovereign power. My probing of political values and institutions of governance in terms of history and original intent, and how not to throw out the baby with the bathwater with regard to corrupt—but potentially empowering—institutions, led me to Habermas. Keeping up with theoretical turns in the human sciences and African studies also brought to my bookshelves works by Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida. More recently, the “ontological turn” and the “new materialism” in social theory have opened up new debates on agency, and in November 2014 I was part of a panel at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association on “Mystical Agency as a Problem of Knowledge.” The ontological turn pushes against Western frameworks of rationality that insist that non-Western understandings of essence (what there is) and epistemology (ways of knowing about what there is) should be accommodated within Western paradigms. This has been a challenge to studies on belief and spirituality among Africans with enormous import for cultural understandings of power. A senior scholar during the Q&A noted that there had been an ontological turn in the 1960s and 1970s in anthropology, and that perhaps we should more accurately refer to an “ontological re-turn.” This underscored for me the cyclical nature of academic scholarship.

55 A pathbreaking volume that acknowledged the significance of the ontological turn was W. Arens and Ivan Karp, ed., *Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies* (Washington, D.C., 1989).
In all this, explanation has remained at the center of African historical writing. Dealing with Africa’s disease burden, especially with the AIDS pandemic from the 1980s; environmental fragility, deforestation, coastal erosion, the increasing pace of desertification in Sahelian Africa, and the cycle of droughts and famine; the precariousness of the state and the common plight of international custodianship of African states; international debt; ethnic violence; the curse of natural resources, etc., etc., have prioritized “making sense” of Africa. African historiography has embraced the reality of multiple narratives and texts, but the works that have been widely read are those that have sought to explain African realities in ways that were meaningful to constituencies within and outside of academia. Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes how the materiality of history checks historical narration and explanation and ensures that not any “fiction can pass for history.”

AHR Editor: These responses have conveyed an enormous amount of information, as well as interesting interpretations of some of the assumptions contained in the first question. In a sense, there is a striking convergence in the trends that all of you see leading to a pull away from certain modes of explanation in the last decade of the twentieth century, trends loosely described by the movements of poststructuralism, the linguistic and cultural turns, postmodernism, and the like. But it is interesting to see, especially in the case of Pamela’s and Emmanuel’s comments, that the frequently evoked names—Derrida, Foucault, Dilthey, Habermas, Geertz, and others—are cycled through a secondary literature that is particular to their fields, reminding us that whatever the power and persuasiveness of influential thinkers, their impact is made real only in applying their conceptual veneer to the grain of particular historical experiences.

While you acknowledge the shift away from certain kinds of explanation, I think there was some pushback from the assumption that the shift has been decisive. Emmanuel reminds us that for compelling reasons “explanation has remained at the center of African historical writing,” whatever the theories or methods historians of African might embrace at the moment. Bill cites recent work in economic history that might be a harbinger of a return to “economic and social-structural explanation,” while Mark offers the insight that “controversies about postmodernism and the linguistic turn were always the affair of a minority, concentrated in particular departments, subfields, and countries.” Caroline finds that it is not so much explanation that has waned as an attachment to models, something she finds as early as the foundational work of E. P. Thompson. And Pamela offers a rather optimistic prognosis, merging narrative—“affective narrative”—and explanation, yielding, it seems, a new form of historical inquiry.

At this point, I think we need to sharpen our responses to the challenge of finding new ways of explaining historical change and transitions while preserving the insights of the last generation of cultural history, the linguistic “turn,” poststructuralism, and the like. To take just a couple of your provocative comments: Mark, quoting Miguel Cabrera, notes that “social conditions only become structural and start to operate as a causal factor of practice once they have reached some kind of meaningful existence,”

56 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Boston, 1995), 29.
which I think is a pretty uncontroversial statement, placing an emphasis on deciphering levels of meaningfulness and meaning in the past and culturally removed realms in all their likely opacity. I say uncontroversial, but only insofar as we acknowledge this insight; operationalizing it has proven much, much more difficult. Caroline, I think, ups the ante. She talks about “historicity” as a feature of the object itself, which, if I’m not mistaken, is another way of formulating Mark’s comment. But then she extends this analysis by asking about the advent of objects or concepts in history, putting the emphasis on discontinuity across time.

So my question for you now has to do with precisely how we pursue “explanation” without imposing a presentist or otherwise alien meaning system on past actors. And in explaining changes large and small, how much should we rely upon narrative, especially considering the “discontinuity” that Caroline’s sense of historicity would seem to imply? Pamela, as noted, has seized upon a very sophisticated and self-conscious sense of narrative as yielding explanatory results. But, evoking Dilthey, this entails a hermeneutic approach that would seem to imply a very different logic of explanation than most historians are accustomed to. How can we square these differences?

**Caroline Arni:** If we reflect upon how we might or might not have lost sight of “explanation,” it is important to acknowledge the longstanding theoretical work done on “explanation” since the late nineteenth century. (However out of fashion the “Methodenstreit” might be, it at least is informative.) Like Mark, I would want to stress that there are different ways of conceptualizing “explanation” in the metatheoretical tradition of the social sciences, and that there is a set of suggestions for how to move beyond an oppositional understanding of Erklären/Verstehen or “analysis”/“hermeneutics.” Think of Max Weber’s concept of verstehendes Erklären and how it displaced the notion of the “causal” in order to establish a genuine social-scientific research logic that reckons with the contingent while aiming at explanation (through generalization). Much of the work done in the vein of the interpretive turn, or, more accurately put, work done in the attempt to challenge the impact of structural functionalism on social history, dealt with these issues when mediating structure and action through meaning (historians reading Geertz reading Weber). A second and related afterthought to the first round—in order to add for the cultural turn what I have argued for the linguistic turn: Cultural history, microhistory, historical anthropology, etc., did not simply abandon interest in long-term transition and structural change. They were about different approaches to respective phenomena.57 Remember Geertz’s impact on such work when he insisted that anthropologists do not “study villages” but rather “study in villages.”58 Studies on proto-industrialization under the auspices of cultural anthropology, for instance, were deeply committed to the history of capitalism—while it is true that this work might, at the same time, have contributed to the history of capitalism losing its prominent role in organizing the research field (until recently, as Bill has shown—with global history, but also

58 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 22.
postcolonial and feminist critique, providing impulses). Of the many books written within this context, some failed, some did not. But these were the theoretical problems and methodological challenges that brought forth the said series of turns.

But the longer I think about it, the more skeptical I grow of the turn narrative that my own argument here draws upon (and that much of my work is founded upon, since my training as a historian went hand in hand with my training as a cultural sociologist). If we register not so much the *differing choice of focus* (structures, analysis, causality in the 1960s/1970s versus culture, interpretation, meaning in the 1970s/1980s/1990s) but the *shared reflective construction of the research object* in both fields, another picture might emerge—one that, given the political contexts Bill evoked, might prove more adequate to the present as the place from which we pose our questions. This picture might not so much be one of social history being swept away by an interpretive cluster turn. We might instead see how social history theorized the discipline by infusing a sense of how objects of historical inquiry are not given but conceptualized, and how this theorizing impulse was continued by those who called for different conceptions of the object by choosing different optics such as “culture,” “language,” etc. Here and there, whenever a shift from “optic to topic” (Gary Wilder) settled in, such awareness was just as absent as it had been in empiricist history, which had once been challenged on precisely that score by social history. Instead of drawing the line between social history and the turns it provoked, we could differentiate between critical and empiricist work: between history-writing that reflects upon its epistemological foundations, upon the ways in which objects of inquiry are conceived, and upon the necessity of transgressing disciplinary boundaries when conceptualizing objects, on the one hand, and history-writing that claims to discover objects and opts for disciplinary closure (even a guild identity), on the other hand. While this would allow for seeing continuities between social history and, for instance, poststructuralist history (with regard to a shared interest in relations of power), it would also undermine the lumping together of all those mentioned “turns” by examining them for heterogeneity.

For those of us who are interested in critical history, it might be important to shift the narrative in this way in order to provide critical history with a genealogy that could substantiate a current call for combining social-structural analysis (which deals with continuities) with epistemological reflexiveness (which reckons with discontinuity in the historicity of the object). I find this important because if I elaborated on a genealogy of critical history that might run through social history as well as through

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60 See, for instance, Bernard Lepetit, “La société comme un tout: Sur trois formes d’analyse de la totalité sociale,” *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques* 22 (1999): 21–38. Lepetit aptly frames the problem in terms of how we get from individual action and necessarily limited empirical exploration to the “social totality” and the “historical process.”

61 For an account that is helpful in forging such a perspective while also going against the narrative I aim at here, see Carla Hesse, “The New Empiricism,” *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 2 (2004): 201–207. The article is also interesting for the question of “causality.”
the cultural and linguistic turns, it was not just in order to continue a program. Indeed, I would think it interesting to retrieve a problem (methodological, theoretical) that can be said to be ongoing, while the answers to it vary. If the structure-and-action-mediated-through-culture theorem has been such an answer (to the question of how to explain structural stability and change at the same time), can it still be ours in how it puts the problem? This might be due not to a theoretical flaw but to the historical situation. The longer I look at it, the more I wonder about the homeostatic undertone in the said theorem, where dissent and conflict somehow always find their predetermined place—or, for that matter, are always already, that is, by theoretical anticipation, explained (as that which mediates stability/change).62 I still find this convincing. Yet I would also want to scrutinize it. Perhaps out of a similar unease, some call for “going back” to so-called “hard” structures—but can we (ever) go back? And when do such calls cause us to be seduced by “big history” projects that do indeed cover long time periods while not necessarily arguing historically?63

**Bill Sewell:** Caroline speaks of “combining social-structural analysis (which deals with continuities) with epistemological reflexiveness (which reckons with discontinuity in the historicity of the object).” While I agree that we should combine social-structural analysis with epistemological reflexiveness, neither of the statements enclosed by parentheses makes sense to me. Historical analyses of social structures, for example of class structures or of capitalism, necessarily deal with both continuities and discontinuities. Take the example of capitalism, which is in my opinion the most encompassing “social structure” of the past three hundred years of history, at least in the so-called “West,” and therefore the most important one to grasp. Capitalism is in its essence a dynamic system, built on the endless accumulation of capital, driven by unpredictable bouts of “creative destruction,” punctuated by wrenching geographical shifts, and, since the early nineteenth century, beset with the uncontrollable but repetitive fluctuations that we call business cycles. The continuity of capitalism is, perhaps paradoxically, its relentless but repetitive and therefore structured production of discontinuity.64 And while epistemological reflexiveness presumes that the object of study is discontinuous, and therefore presumably not immediately graspable in terms of our current assumptions and vocabularies, when we actually study the moments of historical discontinuity (what we normally call “events”), we find that, as Marshall Sahlins puts it, “the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction.” That is, unexpected happenings or actions are and can only be interpreted by people in terms of the existing categories of a language or culture. But when people act upon or interpret unexpected happenings—“technically,” Sahlins says, making new “acts of reference”—“the cultural categories acquire new functional values.” That is, the relationships, the functional effects, and therefore the

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62 Simona Cerutti has argued in this vein that the homeostasis of structural functionalism has been replaced by another one that moved from the linear to the circular. Cerutti, “Pragmatique et histoire: Ce dont les sociologues sont capables (note critique),” *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 46, no. 6 (1991): 1437–1445, here 1442.


meanings of categories are transformed. To understand the linguistic or cultural discontinuities of social life, we must trace out how novel happenings inflect and transform but also are absorbed and interpreted by the preexisting categories. Thus, whether we approach a historical problem from the point of view of social structure or from the point of view of forms of language or knowledge, we see that continuity and discontinuity are not categorically opposed states but mutually constituting “moments” in an ongoing temporal process.

Our task as historians is to sort out and make sense of the mix of continuities and transformations of social life. The methodologies that have arisen out of the various turns of the 1970s through the 1990s have focused particularly on continuities and discontinuities of meanings, language, knowledge, or meaningful practices, but have in general been much less concerned with what we would normally call social structures. But what are these “social structures,” and how are they related to the realm of signification? Their “hardness” (to use Caroline’s metaphor), by comparison with the apparent “softness” (or perhaps we might better say “malleability”) of sign systems, is more apparent than real. I have argued previously that all of social life should be conceptualized as composed of what I call “semiotic practices,” that is, practices, whether linguistic, aesthetic, visual, or gestural, that create, communicate, or embody meaning in human collectivities. The analysis of social life should therefore in principle be conducted by interpretive methods. What we often take to be “hard” social structures—like class, or economic inequities, or inscrutable markets, or entrenched racial difference—are all themselves aggregated consequences of semiotic practices, some of them unintended consequences of actions by the very people who are ensnared in them, some of them envisaged or planned by actors somewhere but that appear to most who are affected by them as merely fate or the shape of the world. It seems obvious to me that in the modern capitalist world of the past few centuries, with its globe-spanning markets upon whose operation our very lives depend and its complex and abstract forms of government and law, such seemingly anonymous “social forces” or “social structures” have become much more pervasive than in previous centuries. (Thus it is not surprising that the social sciences emerged in the nineteenth century to study these social forces or structures.) The proper job of historians and other social scientists is to de-reify these reified structures, to discover how they are in fact made up of aggregations of comprehensible semiotic practices and therefore in principle susceptible to purposeful semiotic restructuring or regulation.

But this job is so vast that, paradoxically, we frequently need to use something other than interpretive methods to properly make sense of whatever aspect of the world we study. We can’t possibly specify all the important contexts in which any of the local actions we study take place. Nor can we simply adopt the rough conceptualizations of the contexts used by the actors we are studying. Much of what it means to be a good historian is to effectively recontextualize the actions and thoughts of the people we study, which means that we have to develop our own conceptualizations and evaluations of the relevant contexts. Thus, for example, we might place the

65 Sahlins, Islands of History, 138.
struggles of peasants against their landlords within contexts that neither the peasants nor the landlords are likely to fully grasp: new forms of speculation on crop futures in distant financial capitals, changes in taste in urban markets, fluctuations in international exchange rates, competition by producers halfway around the world, etc. We might be able to engage in properly close and interpretive study of certain of these relatively distant contexts—perhaps looking in detail at both the struggles of Mexican campesinos and the operations of futures markets in Chicago.67 But for many of the larger contexts, we need means of summarizing, abbreviating, aggregating, or simplifying the buzzing complexity. Here some of the formal methods of the social sciences could be extremely useful—techniques like quantification, systematic comparison, even rational-choice mathematical modeling, all of which were essentially banished from historical methods by the cultural turn. I think a reappropriation of such techniques, but without the positivistic assumptions by which they are usually accompanied in the social sciences, would be an important step forward for historical research. These techniques, and the perspectives they make possible, can also enable us to detect important contexts or processes at the heart of the local situations we study that are invisible to participants in the situations. A good example is the historical sociologist Ivan Ermakoff’s use of rational choice methods, along with detailed and sensitive interpretive research, to tease out the social dynamics that led lawmakers in Germany in 1933 and in France in 1940 to abolish the republics of which they were representatives and enable the establishment of dictatorships.68

Pamela Kyle Crossley: I like the gentle push in the direction of “explanation” rather than “causation.” As I think Caroline suggests, it covers the function of both explanans (the explanation) and explanandum (the thing that is being explained—although to me, identifying such a thing must be an explanans in itself). It can encompass causation but also avoid it by pointing out relationships that are indeterminate—and possibly indeterminable—as cause or effect. The old idea that philosophers and historians are distinguished from each other by the fact that the former believe the product determines the process, while the latter believe the opposite, no longer holds. Historians today are willing to entertain any arrangement of causation, or forgo causation, even if explanation is still exercised to elucidate the relationship between phenomena—whether in a causal relationship or not. If we are not on our way to new causal paradigms, we could be on our way to seeing causal paradigms in new ways. As an example I would mention a word I heard quite a lot as a graduate student—“parsimony” (or, as reductionists would have it, “Ockham’s razor”). The imperative to not unnecessarily magnify causative explanations is all right, if one does not think too hard about the word “unnecessarily.” The only people who enjoy a clear definition of “unnecessarily” in this case are those who work in laboratory settings, or who can otherwise duplicate an event as many times as necessary to understand what “unnecessarily” multiplying causal explanations would really mean; their necessity to repeat the event and the necessity to increase possible explanations

67 For a fascinating attempt to work at multiple levels simultaneously, see American Value: Migrants, Money, and Meaning in El Salvador and the United States (Chicago, 2013) by the anthropologist/historian David Pedersen.
are in indirect relationship, so that repeating the event might ultimately reduce the necessary increase in possible explanations to zero—just one explanation. For historians, this will never apply, and I am puzzled by any historian who introduces the notion of parsimony into her or his methods. We have no sure means of even placing events in a chronology that would suggest proximate causes—for some historians, the causes of English democracy were found before the Norman Conquest; for others they were found after repeal of the Corn Laws. For some global historians, the causes of European global hegemony are found in Baconian science of the High Middle Ages; for others they lie in the fortuitous discovery of Central American silver in the sixteenth century; for others they have nothing to do with Europe but lie in the high wealth levels of China and the Ottoman Empire, where there was no need for an industrial revolution. Thus historians find it impossible to decisively place an event in a chronological relationship with its antecedents. Far less can we reproduce events interminably until we have reduced our explanation to a single one. In our world of possibilities, everything causes everything; our work lies in exploring explanations, and explanations of explanations, that satisfy our contemporary aesthetics of plausibility and significance.

I would give a simple example, one used in my undergraduate class: the cause of the Opium War between Britain and the Qing Empire, 1839–1842. At the time of the declaration of war by Parliament, the cause of the war was understood to be opium—specifically, acts by the Qing government to prevent British traders from selling it in China, and some ancillary issues relating to the Qing government’s rights over British property (opium) in its possession or British people (sailors) it would like to get into its possession. Opinion in Parliament and in Britain generally was divided on the morality of selling opium in contravention of Qing law, but very few were in doubt as to whether or not the selling of opium was the cause of the war. Over the course of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, a more elaborate explanation of the cause was issued from different quarters. Now the war was not about opium, but about the apparent unwillingness of the Qing to accommodate international conventions of free trade and standards of legal punishment (in this case, the punishment of British sailors who had beaten a Chinese fisherman to death during the period of negotiations that might have avoided war over the opium issue). In his classic study Commissioner Lin and the Opium War, Hsin-pao Chang commented that the war might as well have been the “Molasses War.” In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars argued a determinism of imperial hegemony: The war was an inevitable tool used by Britain in opening China to foreign trade and to coercive terms heavily favorable to Britain and detrimental to Chinese farmers and laborers. To my classes I have argued that the war was caused by the Treaty of Nanking, which concluded the war in 1842. It was based upon the model of the Treaty of Kokand of 1835, which included not only advantageous trade terms for Kokand but also extraterritorial protections for Kokandian merchants, and the expectation of their own unequal treaty led Britain to enter into a war they knew they would easily win. None of the explanations of cause are complete or convincing, as there is at least one bit of strong evidence against each. The rotations of imperialism,

free trade, gunboat diplomacy, smuggling, piracy, racism, and law between the center and the periphery of historical attention largely determine what historians at any moment consider the most likely cause of the Opium War. This is a nice example of an unusually well-documented series of events. We see the Parliament looking forward to the prospect of war in Hansard transcripts in 1838, we see the product of the war in the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, and at each stage in between we can read the diaries, the reports, and the testimonies of the major and minor actors. Yet there is no final determination of the cause of the war. What is more illuminating is that the explanation becomes the thing being explained—the explanans becomes the explanandum. As I said earlier, we no longer believe that phenomena and the observation of phenomena are different things. They are the same, and in a dance of mutual transformation. The facts relating to the outbreak of the Opium War have not changed, but their relationships and meanings change constantly in train with the changing mental landscape of the historian. This is a commonplace for us, but not so much for dialectical materialists, for empiricists, or for Braudel’s “estranged” social scientist. In some ways we are more akin today to historians of classical and medieval times than to our predecessors of a hundred years ago. Explaining relationships between phenomena—and explaining the explanations—is probably better than speaking strictly of causes.

This is why I suggest that for the early twenty-first century there is a certain orienting mechanism to be found in restoring an analysis of frank power—the ability to control the physical well-being, wealth, or life choices of others—to our practice. I am struck by the number of young historians who physically shrink when they hear the word “power,” and proceed to advise one to be “careful” when dealing with the ambiguities, the self-referencing complexities, of “power.” I don’t mind being careful. I am careful of the danger of the nearest nuclear power plant, but it doesn’t stop me from turning on the lights.

We have long seen a focus on power as vulnerable to a “great man” fascination, or as a threat to discourses of agency. It does not have to be that way. Consider what is happening in studies of slavery. When you think particularly of the arc—in relation to American slavery, a subset of a much larger global field—from Kenneth Stampp to Stanley Elkins to Eugene Genovese to Michael Gomez to Edward Baptist, you see a progression that seems to me to be repeated in many fields, particularly those relating to gender and ethnic studies: from economic frameworks to cultural studies and exploration of agency to new examinations of the sources and motivations of frank power. Agency is an important issue, not least because it relates so intimately to the “narrative explanations” we have been coming back to. But when discussions of agency begin to obscure the structures of coercion and disenfranchisement that circumscribe choice and take on a determinative role for the future, there is a need for some restoration of an understanding of power and its pathologies. I appreciate the impressive work that historians have done in studies of oppression; it is essential for...
all readers to be reminded of the dignity and achievement of the vast majority of
people who have lived, and I hope that this focus never fades for historians as a
group. But our understanding will never be sufficient until we know more about how
coercion works—that is taking oppression and spinning it around about 180 degrees.
I don’t suggest a return to the days of Charles and Mary Beard, in which biography
and prosopography could be stood on a simple foundation of pecuniary self-interest.
Undoubtedly profit and power are related, but very little of this has been illuminated
beyond the sort of self-profit model that has come and gone in studies of war, slav-
er, labor, migration, capitalism, and so on. We need bigger answers to—perhaps—
simpler questions. Why is slavery still here? Why do modern humans struggle with
essentials such as water, air, and natural habitat, which two hundred years ago were
not objects of control and coercion? Why is it increasingly difficult, nearing impossible,
for contemporary humans to encode privacy and personal discretion into their
laws and get access to enforcement? These and related questions are found by many
historians to be irreducible, or boring, or so vulnerable to simplistic approaches that
it is painful to broach them. But along with that is the assumption that regarding
power means regarding the powerful, their functions, their perspectives, their ambi-
tions. The study of power does not have to go the way it went in the early twenty-
century and earlier.

Mark Hewitson: I agree with Caroline that the challenge of historical explanation
is to move beyond (or to combine) what Weber termed causal adequacy and ade-
quacy on the level of meaning, or in other words, analysis and hermeneutics. In the-
ory, many forms of poststructuralism are compatible with causal explanation in this
sense. In practice, though, some poststructuralists’ emphasis on interpretation or de-
construction has deflected attention from—or left unanswered—the question of how
to integrate or take account of different types of actions, whether communicative or
repeated, or not. If “epistemological reflexiveness” is predicated on “discontinuity in
the historicity of the object,” how can reflective or critical historians explain continu-
ities, if “discontinuity” here is to mean more than the contingency of concepts, and
how do they account for ruptures, beyond labeling them in a new way? I am not
seeking to suggest that such labeling, explanation, and accounting are unimportant,
merely that they are, in themselves, insufficient (or incomplete). Comparison and the
evaluation of counterfactuals, it can be contended, presuppose the possibility of dis-
continuity (and continuity). Insofar as they rely on these methods, historians and
other social scientists might be considered “critical.” Even functionalist sociologists
such as Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils claimed to be “concerned equally with the
conditions of stability and the conditions of change,” arguing that “it is impossible to
study one without the other.”71 As Bill hints, critics of structuralism like Marshall
Sahlins have similarly insisted that “the definition of a ‘something happened’ as an
event, as well as its specific historic consequences, must depend on the structure in
place.”72 The principal debates here concern our understanding of terms such as

71 Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, Toward a General Theory of Action (Cambridge, Mass.,
1951), 230–231.
298.
Explanation is considered by Arthur Danto to describe “not simply an event—something that happens—but a change,” which in turn implies “some continuous identity in the subject of change.” Such continuous identity and associated variants of explanation are simple to understand when they refer to an individual’s shift in attitude or a minor car accident, but not when they concern vast transformations over several centuries, themselves involving a myriad of overlapping smaller changes and complex historical processes such as the breakup of feudalism or the emergence of nationalism, to use the philosopher’s own examples. Danto’s question—“what are the elements which persist through a change?”—also implies consideration of the elements which do not persist, criticism of concepts—with feudalism and nationalism contested terms—and a justification of explanations for why a given state of affairs came about, and not others. To Danto, this form of diachronic explanation has a “narrative” character, in contrast to “deductive explanations” relying on covering laws, which are rarely—if ever—applicable in history. The problem is that narrative has been understood in many other ways by historians, literary critics, and social scientists, from Charles Tilly’s “simplified cause-effect accounts of puzzling, unexpected, dramatic, problematic or exemplary events” to Alun Munslow’s underlining of “the manner in which a story is told,” where “a story is the recounting of a sequence of events.” The meanings of “narrative explanation” are correspondingly and confusingly diverse.

Caroline is right, in my opinion, to point to the dangers of assimilation in any “structure-and-action-mediated-through-culture theorem,” according to which unexpected events and areas of ignorance are made sense of by existing cultural schemes. In one respect, the danger derives from unifying understandings of “cultural schemes,” “structures,” or “systems” of signification, which Sahlins is careful to describe as “arbitrary and historical” but whose limits, hiatuses, and contradictions he seems, at times, to overlook. In another respect, it seems to derive from the lack of attention that historians give to actions, and the relations, contexts, and structures of actions, that are not merely communicative. Here I think that it is necessary to question Cabrera’s assumption that social conditions only “start to operate as a causal factor of practice,” which he equates with their “structural” character, “once they have reached some kind of meaningful existence,” since it elides—or neglects differences between—repeated actions or practices that are fully elucidated and comprehended by the actors themselves—where intentions or motives appear to be

74 Ibid., 249.
75 The most famous definition of covering laws is probably that of the “logical-empirical” philosopher Carl Hempel. His claim was that all disciplines, including history, rely either on “deductive-nomological explanation,” based on laws expressing “unexceptional uniformities,” or on “inductive-probabilistic explanation,” where “at least some of the relevant laws are not of strictly universal but of statistical character.” Hempel, “Explanation and Prediction by Covering Laws” (1963), in James H. Fetzer, ed., The Philosophy of Carl G. Hempel: Studies in Science, Explanation, and Rationality (Oxford, 2001), 69–71.
77 Sahlins, Islands of History, 145.
discoverable and relevant—and those that are not, as a consequence of disjunctions between words, images, and emotions in “thinking” and “recollecting.” There are additional reasons why actions should not be equated with communication or meaning. These include the existence of extensive unarticulated repositories of knowledge within humans’ life-worlds (Jürgen Habermas), providing individuals with apparently natural yet ill-comprehended horizons and contexts of action; the importance of practice itself, informed by routines and norms, “rules and resources recursively involved in institutions” and social groups (Anthony Giddens), in the acquisition of knowledge; the effects of the exercise of power, leading to responses that “can be almost ‘mechanical’” (Georg Henrik von Wright); and the unexpectedness of outcomes of human interactions, which is characteristic of Karl Popper’s World Three, where World One is the physical world and World Two is made up of mental states, ideas, and perceptions.  

Most repeated, concerted, or structured interactions occur, of course, between the extremes of communicative intention and motiveless, physical arbitrariness, as do singular actions (whether or not they are dissenting or conflicting), which Cabrera ignores. In disciplines such as economics, political science, and sociology, the majority of scholars appear at once to assume that interactions can, in some circumstances, be observed directly and cannot be understood entirely in terms of their “meanings” (for the actors themselves and for others), and they focus almost exclusively on repeated or structured actions. In history, scholars tend to pay attention—justifiably—to the conjunction of singular and repeated interactions, which can lead to all kinds of conflict and catastrophe as well as to rational outcomes, repetition, adaptation, and evolution. They also concentrate largely on meaningful actions, and the linguistic and semiotic means by which these actions can be understood, partly because historical evidence of human activity is literary (texts) or constructed (artifacts and modified environments). In my view, this theoretical and evidential predisposition has unduly limited our explanation, as historians, of the clashes and coordination of communicative and non-communicative human actions, in changing sets of cultural and social contexts and environmental conditions, over time.

**Emmanuel Akyeampong:** I must start off again by reiterating how instructive I find this conversation. With each round, I add to my reading list. Our conversation underscores for me the influence of different schools of history or epistemological foundations in shaping the understanding and practice of history. Pamela and I observed in our last exchange that for our fields (Chinese and African history) the introduction to thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Dilthey, and Habermas was often through a secondary work. Having found the recycled ideas of Foucault instructive to my study of power, institutions, specialized knowledge, etc., I acquired several works

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by Foucault and read him directly. The Editor summed up the situation succinctly in his prelude to the second question—that the impact of these influential thinkers is only made real in our fields “in applying their conceptual veneer to the grain of particular historical experiences.”

As we reflect on explanation, narrative, evidence, the cultural and linguistic turn (theory broadly), I ask myself, as a product of a Ghanaian-British school of history, very empirical in its reliance on archival and oral evidence and rather rigid in its purview of historical subjects (in short, not heavy on theory), whether our understanding of the practice of history has shifted so fundamentally in the past three to four decades that I have been a member of the guild. Let me write in an autobiographical vein. My introduction to poststructuralism and postmodernism was in the early 1990s as a graduate student, when I won a coveted dissertation fellowship at the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change at the University of Virginia. As I read and participated in the weekly seminars dominated by cultural and literary critics and anthropologists, I unconsciously imbibed the language and sensibilities of the new turns. These crept into my draft chapters, to the alarm of my dissertation adviser, and we had a serious conversation about theorizing from the evidence, language, and the meaning of language. That conversation reminded me of comments I had heard my history professors at the University of Ghana make when I was an MPhil student in the mid-1980s, when the approach or conceptualization of some new works on Ghana by Africanist historians seemed so alien to them that they wondered where the field was headed. My resolve in the early 1990s was to strive to write simultaneously in ways that could be comprehended by my two audiences, Western and African, bringing together theory and reflexiveness with empiricism.

About a decade ago, I visited a university in the U.S. Midwest to give a public lecture. As part of my two-day visit, I attended a graduate seminar and met a former student from the University of Ghana who was now enrolled in graduate study. After the class, the student took me aside and whispered urgently, “I am very relieved to see you. Everyone in our graduate class talks about Foucault. Who is Foucault?” I gave my former student a crash course on Foucault. Did we fall through the theory chasm at the University of Ghana? My mind goes back to my training in the philosophy and practice of history at the University of Ghana. Most of our professors were British-trained, so we had a solid diet of British historians. We read E. H. Carr, *What Is History?*; R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*; Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*; and other works. We were taken back to the foundations of history as an academic discipline, taught the relevance of Leopold von Ranke and B. G. Niebuhr, and the value of context, referencing, and source criticism. Anthony Grafton, in *The Footnote: A Curious History*, has reminded us how central these developments in nineteenth-century Germany were to the emergence of history as an academic discipline. This was, above all, a very empiricist school. We wrote without reference to ourselves in our works and wary of moral judgments, as if the author could be neutered. We sought to reconstruct an objective past, though aware of different position-abilities, as reflected in ideologies and models, but convinced there was an art to good historical writing that could be recognized by all historians. “Continuity and change”

was a constant motto for us, as we sought to discern instructive patterns in the study of the past, engaging structures and processes, distinguishing between long-term and short-term influences, accommodating contingencies and indeterminacies—driven above all by our need to reconstruct a usable past for a recently independent continent. Our understanding of our craft is driven not just by our disciplinary expectations or turns, but also by society’s expectations of what historians do.

My turn to social history in the early 1990s, and my choice of the social history of alcohol as a dissertation topic, raised concerns among my Ghanaian professors. It is anthropology that deals with food and drink and issues of commensality. Was I straying from history? During my archival and field research in Ghana in 1992, I gave a seminar in the faculty–graduate student history colloquium series that reassured my professors. I deliberately chose some of the most “historical” aspects of my work, focusing on liquor revenues, colonial legislation, and relations of power between colonizer and colonized, drawing predominantly on archival sources. My professors were stunned to discover that the financing of colonial rule in the Gold Coast before 1930 was largely based on liquor revenues. I was given the stamp of approval.

To tackle explicitly the question of how we “pursue ‘explanation’ without imposing a presentist or otherwise alien meaning system on past actors,” I am struck by the fact that what historians do has not changed fundamentally over the decades I have been a practitioner; we have become, perhaps, more reflexive and modest about our work. That modesty arises from our realization that our ability to reconstruct or recover a truthful, objective portrait of the past is limited, and, as Joseph Miller aptly phrased it recently, history is partial, it is fundamentally perspectival, and it is inherently plural. Hence we have become more reflexive about our work and more explicit about our position in our work—how our social context, language, training (epistemological foundations), theoretical predilections, and the kinds of evidence we utilize inflect our portraits of history. This would not have been strange to Carr, despite his resistance to contingency as important in historical analysis. Caroline stresses rightly the need to combine “social-structural analysis (which deals with continuities) with epistemological reflexiveness (which reckons with discontinuity in the historicity of the object).” I agree with Bill’s qualification of Caroline’s call, that “whether we approach a historical problem from the point of view of social structure or from the point of view of forms of language or knowledge, we see that continuity and discontinuity are not categorically opposed states but mutually constituting ‘moments’ in an ongoing temporal process.” Narrative is central to my practice of history: the chronological sequencing of events is my attempt to create linkages and give meaning. I aim to tell a good story; as my mentor Richard Rathbone often reminded me, good history is good storytelling, a position we share with A. J. P. Taylor. The impact of the present and my singular intellectual development on my practice of history is not lost on me, leading Collingwood to opine decades ago that “All history is the history of thought.”

in his important book *Deconstructing History* and his thoughtful and lengthy review of the recasting of an old classic, Marwick’s *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language*, in *History in Focus*. Munslow acknowledges the centrality of empiricism to all historians, but in the spirit of the critical reflexivity we have all endorsed in our exchanges here, he proposes four key aspects to historical thinking and practice: (1) the epistemological foundations chosen for historical knowing; (2) the reality of empiricism and the importance of references (the relationship between the word and the world, crucial for our archive-based discipline); (3) the importance of theory and concept in shaping our engagement with the past; and (4) how we represent meaning through the figurative processes of our writing. Munslow considers history a “literary genre,” but I would add, in the words of Miller, one that seeks to explain *how* and *why* people actually behaved, however far away or long ago. Historicizing is the process by which we seek to come as close to a past context as possible. I guess laudatory book reviews and awards are how our colleagues indicate their professional approval of the success of this endeavor. We would have achieved, in Munslow’s words, “narrative truth.”

**AHR Editor:** It is fortuitous that Emmanuel ended his comment by espousing “narrative truth,” for this helps to set up what I would like us to explore next, especially by way of focusing our remarks. Several of you, in particular Caroline, have discussed continuity and discontinuity as elements of historical awareness, with Bill, however, insisting that social structures can exhibit both, noting the disruptive dynamic inherent in capitalism, for example. I think that most of us would agree that even apparent “continuity,” insofar as it often is masked as “tradition” or “custom” or other seemingly immobile social or cultural regimes, still has to be reproduced across time, this reproducibility itself being a dynamic process. Even the Annalists’ notion of *histoire immobile* implied the inevitability—across sometimes long stretches of time, to be sure—of change, even fundamental, epoch-making alterations that, by definition, are of a structural sort. Mark, quoting Danto, underscores the same point, I believe: explanation aims to describe “not simply an event—something that happens—but a change,” which in turn implies “some continuous identity in the subject of change.” Clearly, as Caroline asserts, there is no going back on the significant gains and insights of cultural history and the linguistic turn. That said, would you agree that one feature of these approaches has been to focus more on the synchronic (or “continuity”) rather than explaining change and transformation across time? (An important qualification: the ways cultural history has been deployed precisely to explain major transformations. For example, the Habermasian “public sphere” was found useful precisely because it suggested a possible bridge between the culture of the Enlightenment, the breakdown of the Old Regime, and, ultimately, the advent of the French Revolution. Still, I think the work done on the public sphere was more successful in reconstructing the first, rather than fostering connections with the latter two.) If, then, we focus on change over time, how do we accept the goal of “explanation” and

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84 Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History*, 8.
at the same time not succumb to the “parsimony” that Pamela, I think correctly, pos-
its as something most historians would reject? I may be exaggerating your positions
for effect (frankly, to provoke), but both Bill’s and Mark’s comments might be read
as challenging her assumptions, insofar as they seem to want to push us, in Bill’s
words, to “summarizing, abbreviating, aggregating, or simplifying the buzzing com-
plexity [of history].” How do we avoid “parsimony” while accepting the burden of ex-
plaining, with as much rigor as possible, the nature of historical change and transforma-
tion over time?

**Pamela Kyle Crossley:** When you contrapose “continuity”—which you produc-
tively associate with “tradition”—and “discontinuity,” you hit at the heart of English-
language historiography of China, and so for my part it raises a great many themes
that might not be widely applicable. John King Fairbank, apparently influenced by
ubiquitous assumptions of the middle nineteenth century, saw modernity in Asia as
precipitated by “Western” intrusions that violently fractured “tradition” from “mo-
dernity” (meaning nationalism, revolution, industrialization, development of a public
sphere, and so on). Continuity/tradition became a time—before the twentieth cen-
tury, and a place—anywhere outside Western Europe, North America, or Japan.
Reformers and revolutionaries in Asia or Africa were by implication reactionaries—
grasping at imported weapons such as nationalism, capitalism, science, Christianity,
and European dress to survive an existential threat from the modern. As in Alain
Peyrefitte’s *L’empire immobile, ou, Le choc des mondes* to describe the height of the
Qing Empire, Marx’s insistence that Asia did not yet have history in the eighteenth
century is invoked to contrast China to the nimble, uprooted, grasping nature of Brit-
ain—and characterize the *choc* of encountering the power of the real imperial forces
in the world. Nobody goes for this “challenge and response” model anymore, and
the twentieth-century equation (in both Chinese and English writing) of “Chinese”
with “Chinese tradition,” or “Japanese” with “Japanese tradition,” has no purchase
in a world where robots are Japanese and self-limiting drones are Chinese.
“Tradition and Transformation” is a textbook trope now, useful for indicating to un-
dergraduates where the threshold is between modern and premodern (hint: it’s in
the break between the end of volume 1 and the beginning of volume 2).

That being the case, historians of Asia (and perhaps of other areas outside West-
ern Europe) may need to detoxify this vocabulary and allow ourselves to really exam-
ine the elements of continuity and discontinuity over time. On one level this is a
necessary mechanic of narrative; it allows us to periodize, which I don’t think we are
ready to do without. I think most of us assume that the punctuations of periodization
 correspond in some way to discontinuities. How significant does a discontinuity have
to be to reach the level of a chronological divide?

In many ways, my own work revolves around problems of continuity and disconti-
nuity associated with “empire.” I was taught in high school and even in college that
the early twentieth century—say, round about World War I—was an age of disconti-
uity, as the old empires decayed and “nation-states” emerged. The wars of the
twentieth century were attributed to the difficult birth of these nation-states from the

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corpses of the old empires. In my work I don’t see discontinuities in this period as very important. The national entities were not in concept inimical to the empires; they were the product, and the final phase, of imperial codes of identity, developed over centuries of conquest and imposed upon the communities of the empires through law, historical narrative, language policies, educational programs, academic discourse, and public ritual. What changed was not the criteria of identity—not “nationalism”—but the relationships between personal and community identities as mediated through the state. The characteristics of identity established in the eighteenth century—language, genealogy, proximity, often religious affiliation—did not fundamentally change until the very late twentieth century, and in the twenty-first are changing very rapidly.

Continuity and change can also be comforting constructs, and again I see this in relation to “empire.” Since the invasion of Iraq, it has become fashionable to refer to the United States as an “empire,” or as exercising “imperial” power in the fashion of Pax Americana (which surely by now can be read only as bitter irony). Indeed, there has sprung up a cottage industry of empire-enablers (some of them historians), who invoke “empire” as a way of suggesting that there is something traditional and familiar (and thereby legitimate) about dismantling foreign governments and constraining dissent at home. In fact, there is little in the current patterns of decision-making and benefit calculation that resembles what happened under the historical empires, and the sense of geographical rootedness of empires—including the archetype of spatial center and periphery—has little to do with patterns of power in the contemporary world. The use of “empire” to characterize these behaviors falsely domesticates practices that are novel and probably far more determinative of our individual fates than any historical empire ever was. “Continuity” and “discontinuity” have been turned on their heads—because of the power of “continuity” to console and of “discontinuity” to intimidate.

When historians commit themselves to “explain” change over time, there is an obligation to demarcate time by period, and there is an ambiguity regarding how and why this is done. One could say it happens empirically. There were a lot of revolutions between 1789 and 1848, so let’s call it the “age of revolutions.” On the other hand, we can use periodization to imply explanations, which the narrative will do whether the periodization itself is empirical or analytical. In that case, we might start the age of revolutions in the middle seventeenth century, and carry it on to about 1925. What is necessary, in my view, is that historians not make rules for themselves on these points. Though in general I don’t like quantum analogies for what social scientists do, Richard Feynman’s interpretation of the double-slit experiment is, I think, useful for understanding what historians would like to do. Just as each photon went through both slits, every movement in space must be the cumulative effect of all possible paths to that point. Historians can never capture or freeze the past, and they certainly cannot reproduce it. They can, perhaps, present serial simulacra of each possible path to a certain point in time. And in this way each historian’s work makes sense only as part of the infinite task for historians cumulatively of re-creating all possible paths of change over time.

Mark Hewitson: One of the difficulties encountered by historians, in my opinion, concerns the visualization or description of causation. Pamela’s extrapolation from
Feynman’s interpretation of the double-slit experiment—namely, that “every movement in space must be the cumulative effect of all possible paths to that point”—seems close to that of Adorno as he criticizes Kant for “transferring the uncomplicated surveyability of small town conditions to all possible objects”: “Even Kant would have to admit that an awareness of all the causal sequences that intersect in every phenomenon—instead of its being unequivocally determined by causality in the sequence of time—is essential to the category itself.”

Notwithstanding the fact that scientists had come to work with “causal networks” rather than “causal chains,” no metaphor, contended Adorno, could capture the infinitude of “causal relations.” Common images such as causal “webs” frequently employ lines and points of intersection (or nodes) to denote relations and events, without defining what “relations” and “events” are, and therefore leaving Paul Roth’s question about “the basic unit . . . of the record” unanswered, for “events may be sliced thick or thin,” with “a glance . . . identified as an isolated event or as an instance in an event”: “Events simpliciter cannot be shown to exist.” Faced with the challenge of defining what is to be explained and of making sense of an infinitude of causal relations, when objects of study are in constant and unpredictable flux, historians’ principal problem is to establish grounds for selection, relating to their choice of question and topic and to the identification, collection, and use of evidence. In comparison, the danger of oversimplification or the pursuit of “parsimony” in the explanation of events appears to be a relatively minor one.

I associate parsimony in the specification of causes with a certain type of modeling in economics and political science, where a reduction in the number of variables is necessary for prediction. Whereas some social scientists “consider an ‘overdetermined’ event—that is, one with multiple causes—to be an inadequately explained event . . . because their goal is not just to explain the past but to forecast the future,” making the “oversimplification of causes” a “necessity to them,” in John Gaddis’s words, historians continue to view multiple causation as “the only feasible basis for explanation.” In order to arrive at accurate probabilities governing the occurrence of future events, it seems necessary to establish covering laws referring to a limited number of variables. Although social scientists can take into account a far larger number of variables and look for correlations between them with the aid of computers, the basic difficulty of defining and coding (or quantifying) variables continues to exist and entails a form of “parsimony.” Historical explanation does not involve prediction, covering laws and the calculation of probabilities, or parsimony in this sense. It does, though, require classification and generalization. The extent to which such activities necessitate reduction, comparison, and counterfactual evaluation of causal processes is of course disputed, with many concepts in history having “abusive” genealogies and appearing to be little more than “composite representations, extracted from earlier designations,” in Paul Ricoeur’s formulation.

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87 Ibid.
89 Gaddis, The Landscape of History, 105.
In themselves, however, the inadequacy and occasional abuse of concepts (or, indeed, discontinuity in the historicity of the object) do not make generalization redundant, in Ricoeur’s view: “What historians understand by ‘unique’ means that nothing exists exactly like their object of inquiry,” but “this assertion does not prevent them from employing general terms such as revolution, conquest of one country by another, and the like.” More importantly, the French philosopher accepts the need for “causal criteriology,” resting on an inductive test (“The factor in question must be a really necessary one”) and a pragmatic one (“There must be a reason for selecting the condition in question from among the conditions that as a whole constitute the sufficient condition for the phenomenon”). Causal explanation is “an essentially selective analysis, aimed at verifying the credentials . . . for occupying the place of ‘Because . . .’ in response to the question ‘Why?’” On this reading, it is not only necessary to criticize and deconstruct the terms that we use (recognizing the discontinuity of signifiers and signified) and to reflect on the disjunction of signs and their referents, as well as paying attention to the historical discontinuity of objects themselves; it is also vital to find means of describing the world and of working out why it has come into being, justifying one’s choice of topic and selecting the factors that have brought a given state of affairs about. If the task of re-creating all possible paths of change over time is “infinite,” as Pamela indicates, I am not sure that we can “present serial simulacra of each possible path to a certain point in time,” nor that we can define what we mean by a point in time, without referring to the infinity of incomplete events that occur at a specified moment.

Continuity is essential for Ricoeur and for Danto because they conceive of historical explanation as an account of changes wrought on and by an enduring entity (nationalism during its emergence or a car during an accident). For the French philosopher, historical narratives explore the fortunes—or the continuation, transformation, and termination—of “quasi-characters” or first-, second-, and third-order entities in a “quasi-plot”: “History, in my opinion, remains historical to the extent that all of its objects refer back to first-order entities—peoples, nations, civilizations—that bear the indelible mark of concrete agents’ participatory belonging to the sphere of praxis and narrative.” As Ricoeur hints, there are many potential pitfalls for such an approach to avoid, not least the “revival of the notion of the collective subject” in contexts where “we-groups” seldom attain “a stable existence over time,” as David Carr—another phenomenologist adopting a similar strategy—concedes. Yet I am not convinced that an answer to Ricoeur’s own question of “why” a set of events came about requires the narration of other events befalling a changing but continuing entity. Why was there a revolution in France in (and after) 1789? In explaining such events, which need to be defined and whose concept—“revolution”—has to be compared to—and, according to Ricoeur, differentiated from—those denoting other instances of revolution, historians generally work backwards from immediate actions (including acts of communication) that appear to have played a decisive role, at the

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92 Ibid., 124.
93 Ibid., 126.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 182, 181.
96 Carr, “Narrative and the Real World,” 130, 128.
same time asking themselves what sorts and conjunctions of causes might have brought about this type of event, which in turn rests on the comparison of other, similar events. Gaddis is surely right to want to go further back than “the launching of the planes from their carriers” in his endeavor to explain why Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941: “you’d want to know how the carriers came to be within range of Hawaii, which requires explaining why the government in Tokyo chose to risk war with the United States.”

This “why” question leads to a whole series of others, including those concerning the relationship between the American oil embargo against Japan and the Japanese occupation of French Indochina, the frustrations encountered by Japan in attempting to conquer China, the rise of authoritarianism and militarism in the 1930s, and the impact of the Great Depression and the political settlement after the First World War. What is more, such a list of factors points to a much longer list of discounted areas of investigation. It is difficult to discern an enduring or continuous entity at the center of this kind of narrative explanation. Moreover, it can be contended that those who purport to trace the changing history of a set of practices or discourses, groups, institutions, societies, empires, or states’ systems over time are, in fact, obliged constantly to redefine their object of study—how can the Whig Party be described, as it existed in 1714, 1760, or 1782, for example—and to ask, repeatedly, why it came to be so.

The historical processes that I have just described and historians’ procedures for explaining them are complex, not parsimonious. The connections between intentions, beliefs, ideas, assumptions, emotions, the unconscious, communication, physical movements, structures of action, empowering and constraining conditions, immediate, distant, direct, and underlying causes are not easy to establish and evaluate. Nevertheless, historians have to choose and to justify the grounds for their choices, as a proponent of narrative history such as Louis Mink accepts: “Think,’ Gallie urges, ‘of the convergence of the different kinds of causal lines that met at Sarajevo in 1914... Can anyone seriously maintain, as he traces even a few of these lines backwards, that they evidently belong to... a single, comprehensive causal system?’”

“Probably not,” Mink replies, “but tracing the lines backwards is exactly what an historian does, and there are no contingencies going backwards (if there were, there would be no lines).” Only in this respect, perhaps, can continuity be taken for granted. However, because there are many lines, of different kinds, lengths, thickness, opacity, and visibility (to extend the metaphor), it arguably still makes sense to talk of contingency, agency, compulsion, and determination.

**Caroline Arni:** I apologize for harking back (again), but I want to try to clarify my last contribution before I tackle this new question. It seems important to be clear that discontinuity (as opposed to continuity) is not a synonym for change (or dynamic, as opposed to stasis). While change, as Mark noted by quoting Danto, implies the “continuous identity in the subject of change,” discontinuity is about a transformation so radical that such continuous identity gets lost and something categorically

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97 Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 95.
novel emerges. In other words, discontinuity is about historical difference. This is how I understood the poststructuralist or the Foucauldian take on the historical, and in that sense I brought it up when arguing for the value of this take as one important resource for reflecting upon what makes the métier of the historian. I do wholeheartedly agree with the arguments that have been made on the co-substantiality of change and no-change in historical phenomena, as well as those on continuity being the product of events, actions, etc. (something that has to be made, with this making having transformational as well as conservative potentials and effects). But I would also like to make a case for reckoning with discontinuity (as opposed to continuity, but not being the same as change), because that compels us to examine the ways in which the question of how we explain is premised upon the question of how we construct the object. Reckoning with discontinuity is nothing more and nothing less than being sensitive to how we choose descriptive or analytical categories (the perspective Mark and Pamela insist upon) and to moments in our inquiry when we might have to abandon or shift some of them.99

An example: When I examine how the entity we call an embryo/fetus was reconceptualized in physiology from the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century, I encounter the problem that there is no analytical category that could designate such an entity before and after this transformational moment. Any categorical designation misapprehends one or the other. My colleagues and I have become accustomed to using “the unborn,” avoiding notions that are codified in terms of the human and life sciences we investigate. But even so, a crucial point of the transformation at stake is that what had been the unborn became the not-yet-born. This seemingly hairsplitting phrasing contains a fundamental inversion of time and space in concepts of the coming-into-being of new humans, which made the enclosed beginning disappear while giving rise to the prenatal organism. This is not the place to go into details—but let me argue that there is no continuity in the entity that would make for a single “subject of change.” Instead, however, there is a question that runs through these discontinuous ways of conceiving the coming-into-being of new humans: the question of whether and how there is ontological continuity across the moment of birth (that is, ontological identity of the born and the unborn). So, while asking for how the unborn changed within the context of emerging human and life sciences, I and others working on those matters are forced to think in terms of a discontinuity—instead of an object being subject to change, there are two incommensurable objects.100 But with regard to our research, this very discontinuity yields yet another object (the ontological challenge posed by birth), which indeed can be understood as the continuous object subject to change in the period at stake—while its continuous identity might well fall apart at yet another point in time, displacing the inquiry once more. This is why I


100 Barbara Duden’s work has been seminal here—with regard to this discontinuity as well as with regard to its origination in research and medical practice. See Duden, “The Fetus on the ‘Farther Shore’: Toward a History of the Unborn,” in Lynn M. Morgan and Meredith W. Michaels, eds., Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions (Philadelphia, 1999), 13–25. Another example of a very careful and productive dealing with issues of continuities/discontinuities is Dagmar Herzog’s Sex after Fascism (Princeton, N.J., 2007).
brought up discontinuity with regard to critical history. It forces us to think not just about what we do with our object when we elaborate a historical explanation, but about how such explanation starts where we construe the object. Mark is right that not just explanation but the object of explanation is at stake in our discussion—such object, sorry for the commonplace, never being out there to be found but being construed through notions, concepts, categories (which has nothing to do with denying it “reality,” but with avoiding reification).\(^\text{101}\)

In catching up with the third question, yes, it does seem to me that an important feature of the poststructuralist approach in history is the focus not on continuity, but on discontinuity—for the reason that what is addressed in such terms is historical difference. However, a concern with historical difference is not exclusive to poststructuralist historiography. Since through the exposure of historical difference the seemingly given is denaturalized, here we have critique—which situates poststructuralism in a larger genealogy.\(^\text{102}\) On the one hand, this does imply, as the Editor suggests, a focus on the synchronic, the momentous, even the irruptive. Mark is right when he asks how critical historians can explain continuities if “epistemological reflexiveness” is predicated on ‘discontinuity in the historicity of the object.” Yet to stick to references already introduced, Joan Scott’s book on French feminists in the nineteenth century might be an example of how this can work.\(^\text{103}\) She investigates a paradox inherent to liberal republicanism as it emerged with the Declaration of the Rights of Man in order to examine how it repetitiously played out in feminist thinking through the century. This brought forth articulations of critique differing to the extent that there was discontinuity in feminist arguments that were, at the same time, generated by a continuous paradox. At work here is the poststructuralist take on (historical) difference as always being in motion, thus constituting difference, on the other hand, as diachronic (think of poststructuralist concepts like iteration, repetition, etc.). While I do think we need to think more explicitly about how to combine the exposure of discontinuities with the detailing of transitions, this is not necessarily a theoretical lacuna—think of poststructuralism’s insistence on the very impossibility of historical closure (when democracy, for instance, is understood not as a historical achievement but as an ongoing process of inclusion/exclusion). Perhaps all that might even qualify as a way of “explaining change over time.” But equally important is its potential for scrutinizing the very notion of “over time” in order to prevent what Siegfried Kracauer exposed as a categorial mistake that occurs when “the historical” is understood as the thing that is both “in time” and explained in such terms.\(^\text{104}\) Kracauer considered such a conception of the historical to be problematic whenever it organizes explanation

\(^{101}\) With regard to these issues, I time and again find Paul Veyne instructive, despite, or perhaps because of, his solitary idiom. Veyne, L’inventaire des différences: Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France (Paris, 1976); Veyne, Comment on écrit l’histoire: Essai d’épistémologie (Paris, 1971).

\(^{102}\) Scott, “History-Writing as Critique.” Indeed, I do think it interesting and timely to link reflections on historical continuity/discontinuity with other and more recent theoretical contexts such as the anthropological debate on ontologies and the related program of a recursive anthropology I referred to in footnote 22. In terms of where the making of continuity/discontinuity is theoretically located, this would entail quite a radical shift from the linguistic and discourse to enactment and relationality, while the critical impulse would be continued.

\(^{103}\) Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer.

per se, that is, whenever historical explanation is inferred on the basis of temporal sequences. Such explanation turns chronology into matter and form into content.\textsuperscript{105} I think for the same reason Paul Veyne makes the hyperbolic claim that while there are “historical events,” there can be no “historical explanation.”\textsuperscript{106} That explanation needs more than a succession of events is why we all bring in theory (poststructuralist, sociological, anthropological, or otherwise) and insist on how explanation is premised on perspective (see Pamela’s argument on the impossibility of chronologically placing an “event” or Mark’s highlighting of the problem of “establishing grounds” for questions and topics). Being a historian deeply committed to transgressing disciplinary boundaries, I think that while we always need to look to other disciplines for explanatory tools, as Bill suggests, we should also engage with what is black-boxed in the historical discipline, encrypted by such notions as “in time.” This is why I find thinking about continuity/discontinuity such a productive provocation.

\textit{Bill Sewell:} This round of conversation seems to have been mostly about continuity and discontinuity. Caroline makes a strong argument on behalf of discontinuity, understood in a poststructuralist way, as one of the gains of the “turns” of the past few decades. Her example of the strikingly different way that the unborn came to be conceptualized in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century is a nice example of a sharp discontinuity that could easily be missed without the epistemological probing characteristic of the poststructuralist mode of thought. The commonsense point of view would say that in both the early eighteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, people were talking and writing about “fetuses.” The critical poststructuralist point of view would argue that the unborn entity was understood in such a different way, through such a different set of codes or discourses, based on utterly different assumptions about temporality (from “enclosed beginning” to “prenatal organism”), that it would be incorrect to see the emergence of the new discourse as anything but a radical discontinuity. I agree that this interest in identifying radical discontinuities has been one of the important gains of recent historiography.

To see such sharp discontinuities in history implies that we need to slow down our steady march through time, indeed to be ready to switch now and again from a strictly diachronic narrative (and then, and then, and then . . .) to a synchronic mode, in which, analytically, we effectively suspend the march of time in order to grasp the shape of the discursive and practical field at a given “point in time”—which of course is never really a point, but rather a range of time in which life is lived and thought in some way that we historians regard as distinctive. The radical discontinuities of history are between two such synchronic moments, which are not naturally occurring but are constructed by the historian.

Moreover, such apparent discontinuities emerge over time, and their emergence can therefore be narrated diachronically. Here the sharpness of the discontinuity fades. The new discourse or practice does not appear suddenly in its fullness. It typically incorporates terms or technologies or concepts or materials that were part of the old discourse or practice, elements that are modified by their incorporation into


\textsuperscript{106} Veyne, \textit{L’inventaire des différences}. 

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a new configuration but that also indicate a form of continuity with the old. The new is often formed by an articulation between two preexisting practices/discourses not previously articulated, and the new articulation takes place over time. The old configurations don’t disappear in some instantaneous flash. It typically takes time and repeat performances for the new to congeal into something solid enough to displace the old. As in Thomas Kuhn’s scientific revolutions, what look like sharp changes are sometimes in retrospect consequences of generational replacement. Moreover, “continuity” is not unadulterated sameness but a temporal process of imperfect but “good enough” reproduction of existing relations. Continuity of meanings or practices is impossible without unceasing adaptations, additions, subtractions, repairs, stretched meanings, minor innovations, etc. Dichotomies like continuity and discontinuity are figures of thought that we use to make sense of the underlying quasi-repetitive flux of life. But we need to be careful not to reify them.

On another topic, responding this time more to Mark (and also to the Editor), I’m not sure we should be so disdainful of parsimony. If I think of my long experience of reviewing article submissions as a peer reviewer for historical journals, I’d have to say that historians’ most common weakness is that they are insufficiently parsimonious—that they wander through forests of archival quotations and try to get out of tough explanatory spots by narrating more and more apparently relevant but often superfluous and confusing detail. The articles I recommend for publication tend to be relatively crisp, one might even say “parsimonious.” They set clear explanatory or explicative criteria and provide their arguments and evidence in an economical fashion. Parsimony in historical narrative and explanation is not the same as in economics or quantitative sociology—we rarely use equations or regression coefficients (which, of course, can also be used un-parsimoniously)—but the spirit of clear thinking and careful identification and weighing of genuinely probative evidence is quite analogous.

Emmanuel Akyeampong: The Editor posed the question of how we focus on change over time, how we pursue “explanation” without submitting to parsimony or reducing the complexity of historical events through the need to synthesize and underscore the takeaway. In his words, “How do we avoid ‘parsimony’ while accepting the burden of explaining, with as much rigor as possible, the nature of historical change and transformation over time?”

I am grateful that Caroline clarified what she meant by discontinuity in our second exchange. Her clarification aligns with some of the points raised by Pamela. The distinction Caroline draws between change (as in continuity and change) and discontinuity is instructive to my work as a historian of Africa. Arjun Appadurai’s work on modernity and that of the philosopher Kwame Gyekye speak to how “multiple” or “parallel” modernities emerge, as culture or “tradition” represents the lens through which peoples make sense of, adapt, and modify the new, a process that speaks to the very dynamism of continuity.

Caroline is pointing to a deeper sense of disjuncture with her meaning of discontinuity.
nuity: “a transformation so radical that such continuous identity gets lost and something categorically novel emerges.” Here discontinuity is about historical difference. Many see European colonial rule in Africa as one such radical transformation. The fact that colonial rule came with a new geopolitical map for Africa, the creation or invention of tribes, denominational Christianity, missionary schools and colonial curricula, and radically new epistemological traditions that degraded or obliterated entire existing systems of knowledge placed colonial and postcolonial Africans in the predicament of explaining their lived realities through novel and alien concepts. In colonial East Africa, overnight the British abrogated writing the Swahili language in Arabic script and made the Roman alphabet the accepted script, selected Zanzibari Swahili as the standard, and created an Inter-Territorial Language (Swahili) Committee for the British East African dependencies to serve as authenticators of Swahili. With this context, a writer like the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has advocated that African writers write in the vernacular and not in the language of the colonizer. African philosophers have written on the crisis of identity that colonialism has created in Africa. The psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, based on his work in French North Africa, would advocate revolutionary violence as cleansing for the colonized psyche.

This brings me to epistemologies and several points raised by Pamela. The disciplines we work in were birthed within the context of empire, and understandings of historical difference shaped analytical concepts and European identities. Numerous works can be cited in this regard. To take the specific example of psychiatry in the first half of the twentieth century, imperial notions of the colonized came to inform psychiatric understandings of the normal and abnormal mind. In a colonial context where all adult normal Africans were seen as having the mental maturity of a European child, the abnormal African was twice removed. Such ideas were reproduced in John C. Carothers’s The African Mind in Health and Disease, published by no less esteemed an institution than the World Health Organization. For first-generation Western-trained African psychiatrists such as the Senegalese Ibrahim Sow, the entire nosology of psychiatry was problematic for an African psychiatrist practicing in Africa.

Pamela raised three points that I find resonant where African historiography is concerned. The first dealt with the West’s relations with the non-Western world, and how many of the analytical concepts we use, such as modernity, nationalism, revolution, and industrialization, all come with Western understandings. She notes that

historians of Asia may need to “detoxify this vocabulary . . . to really examine the elements of continuity and discontinuity over time.” Her call echoes that of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Her second point is about periodization and how discontinuities are what inform periodization or chronological divides. Periodization in African history has often been through transitions in the nature of external contacts: the Atlantic era or the era of export slave trade; the era of “legitimate trade” or post-export slave trade; post–Berlin Conference (1884–1885), which describes the era of the scramble for and the partition and pacification of Africa; the colonial period, with the two world wars and the depression of the 1930s as major turning points; 1945–1960, seen as the era of nationalism; and then the postcolonial. I remember as a graduate student how exhilarating it was to read George Brooks’s use of shifts in climate to periodize West African history. ¹¹⁵ This provided a periodization of African history from within and not from the outside. The third point deals with historiographies, and Pamela’s comment on how since the invasion of Iraq, some scholars refer to the United States as an “empire,” though how the U.S. operates in the world today is very dissimilar to the empires we have known historically. In a recent contribution I wrote for an edited volume on the global history of anti-vice activism, I mused over how in the received historiography of Africa the United States has often been portrayed as anticolonial and a force for decolonization, when the U.S. has been an empire since the late nineteenth century, and in its colonies acquired from Spain it “inserted itself into an already established set of colonialist practices.”¹¹⁶ There is scholarly merit in not subscribing to American exceptionalism when it comes to empire.

As an African and a historian of Africa, I come at explanation—the “why” and “how” questions—and an examination of continuity and discontinuity by “deconstructing” or interrogating the very systems of knowledge I work in (epistemologies—concepts, periodization, received historiographies). I pointed out in an earlier conversation that the archive in Africa is a colonial archive, and other archival holdings, such as those of missionary societies, are not without their biases, requiring a critical reading of the archive. Many in post-genocide Rwanda blamed “bad history” for the ethnic divisiveness that resulted in the tragedy of 1994. In the post-genocide era, the Rwandan government and other vested interests have sought to create new archives for a new Rwanda with the goal of a history that unites. Though this endeavor is not without its pitfalls, it underscores the problematic nature of the colonial archive.¹¹⁷ I strive to write critical history that takes cognizance of the discontinuities in the period I write about and how, paradoxically, some of these discontinuities

have been normalized as retreating empires left in their wake nation-states (see Pamela’s note on this) and a statecraft that continues into the present, with government bureaucracies reproducing colonial systems of governance and law books still retaining colonial laws. We have gone from the reality of missionary boarding schools having been created to isolate impressionable young Africans at an age ideal for proselytization, to the current state when these schools have become the ideal site for the pursuit of a rigorous education in contemporary Africa. “Continuity” and “discontinuity” have been turned on their heads, Pamela observes ruefully. As a historian, I seek to help my readers understand how this has come to be so. I agree with Caroline that “Reckoning with discontinuity is nothing more and nothing less than being sensitive to how we choose descriptive or analytical categories... and to moments in our inquiry when we might have to abandon or shift some of them.”

Explaining continuity, change, discontinuity, requires a reflexiveness in my practice of history, as I combine not just narrative and explanation, but also the elucidation of systems of knowledge and the history of these. The result is a complex history that I seek to make accessible through storytelling and lucid writing and with patterns or takeaways underlined, for historical explanation does require classification and generalization, as Mark reminds us. I value writing tightly or with precision, and as someone who has edited journals, I agree with Bill that there is something to be said for parsimony in terms of succinctness, which should not take away from clear thinking, careful identification, and the weighing of genuinely probative evidence.

**AHR Editor:** Our conversation has covered an enormous range of methodological and historiographical material, producing a welter of ruminations on what began as a rather simple question about recent trends in the thinking and writing of history. I find myself torn between two conclusions: On the one hand, there is a sense, especially given the range of references you have made to historians and theorists going back at least to the early part of the twentieth century, that despite the many “turns” that have been invoked, there is still a long-lived intellectual tradition that we can draw upon. I am struck, for example, by how many times the name Braudel has been mentioned; and Pamela, Mark, and Caroline have often cited Dilthey, Weber, and their intellectual descendants. In sum, your collective bibliography is a remarkable homage to the entire previous century. And yet I also note Pamela’s telling comment (again, interestingly, taking off from Braudel) that “the accelerated rate of social change in the twenty-first century rapidly widens the vista of strangeness, allowing current historians to wonder at the peculiar ideas of the late twentieth century.” It is always dangerous to make a claim about the novelty or unprecedented nature of the present, but the vicissitudes in thinking about historical method since the seventies have been quite remarkable—head-spinning and disorienting to some. And I imagine that all of us are aware that many of our colleagues have long since stopped paying attention to the various “turns” in our practice—whence the empiricism that characterizes a lot, perhaps even most, of what gets produced (and a lot of it very good history, it must be said). As Mark reminded us, “Controversies about postmodernism and the linguistic turn were always the affair of a minority, concentrated in particular departments, subfields, and countries... as could be expected.” So, by way of concluding, let’s try to simplify the matter. In a way, the original question was poorly
posed, or rather presented in a hopelessly truncated fashion. It is clearly inadequate to ask about “explaining historical change” without specifying what, precisely, needs explaining. Explaining what—what is the object? We have, in fact, discussed the historicity of objects—that they are not “discovered” but “conceived.” But there is another way I would like us to think of framing the objects of our explanations—that is, as problems. There are, to be sure, pitfalls here. For example, it is still common to pose a historical problem in terms of “unequal development,” where the standard of the “correct” historical path is established by a historical experience deemed to be successful by some predetermined criteria. Or there is the kind of heuristic problem exemplified in what used to be a stock question among U.S. historians: Why is there no socialism in America? The task of framing problems to be explained does not have to hew to these sorts of constrained examples. But can it avoid amounting to a process of imposing “our” problems on the past? (To answer my own question with an exemplary case, I think that Jan Goldstein’s 2014 AHA Presidential Address, “Toward an Empirical History of Moral Thinking: The Case of Racial Theory in Mid-Nineteenth-Century France,” published in the February 2015 issue of the AHR, manages to pose a well-defined problem while deftly contriving a method to avoid seeing the problem in presentist, moralistic terms.) Perhaps this is to invite the “parsimony” that several of you have warned against—and of which others have been less critical. Is this way of conceiving historical inquiry too constrained, too channeled, for a critically minded twenty-first-century historian? Does it risk turning “optics” into “topics,” in Gary Wilder’s felicitous phrasing (cited by Caroline)? Might we conclude, to simplify further, by suggesting ways of approaching our question—that is, explaining historical change—that are more suited to the workaday concerns of our colleagues—perhaps, if you wish, by offering examples of exemplary works?

Pamela Kyle Crossley: My briefest reply to the question requires a tentative shorthand: “hermeneutical,” meaning to take all evidence relating to the past on the terms of an interpretable text, and “objectivist,” meaning that the past has a reality of its own that is amenable to apprehension by living people without significantly altering that reality. With that in hand, I would mark off the implied question as: “Should historians resign themselves to the illusions and ephemeralities of hermeneutical pursuits, or should they continue an objectivist search for a real past that is not their own?” To that, my answer would be that historians must be self-conscious hermeneuticists, disciplined by the fact that while the past does not deserve random or self-serving reconstruction, it will never be objectively attainable (because it basically does not exist). Observation itself is a product of the observer and what is observed. The present determines what aspect of the evidence relating to the past will become legible to us and what we will read it to mean. There is no way around this. But the ideal of a real past must discipline the hermeneutical efforts of the historian in her or his own “present.” While we cannot access the experiences of our predecessors, we have every reason to believe that those predecessors were here, and it is a matter of common respect to dedicate ourselves to the standard that they—and not we—are the subjects. It is fiction, but a compassionate and responsible one.

I think that our twenty-first-century profession will remain productively localized by genre, even if historians slip in and out of genres in the course of their careers.
Some of us will at any given time be seeking patterns of deep change at the local, regional, or global level, and some of us will be pursuing reconstructions of experience, whether individual or group. These sound distinct—perhaps even contradictory—but each is indispensable to the greater historical enterprise, and each contributes to the overall coherence of the discipline. Any pattern consists of moving points. To link them, I would return to my theme in these responses of power—material power to affect the well-being or ability to make life as meaningful as possible of others, or the extension of material power to effect the psychological, emotional, or cultural control of others—as a subject of historical study. The twentieth-century focus on agency and subjectivism was important and has had a maturing effect on perceptions of the profession as a whole, but it has had the unintended byproduct of obscuring the sources and effects of power on individual and collective lives. At present, it can go without saying that even the most powerful individuals have not created that power themselves, and are not more interesting or significant for having wielded power. I would like us to get on with the study of questions relating to the realities of power that lead us to a present world in which violence increases (I guess I am not convinced by Steven Pinker on that, since I can’t limit violence to acts of war and things of similar scale) and privacy decreases, while basic environmental sustenance is threatened in new and unnecessary ways.

If I had to cite examples of exemplary twenty-first-century histories, I would probably go back to Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told*, which revisits historical slavery in North America as a product of the largest structures of wealth production and social conservatism. I would add just as offhand additional examples Thomas Bisson’s *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century*—I can’t judge it as medieval history, but as a way of looking at how the experience of being overpowered could become interpreted as the experience of being governed, it is fascinating—and Carlos Rojas’s intriguing new book, *Homesickness*, which examines the ideations of stability and well-being that emerged from Chinese who were caught in the grips of forced migration, disease, and political dislocation in the early twentieth century. Each offers a look at the interface between huge economic and social forces, on the one hand, and the mutating awareness of the people trapped in the clockwork. I’m not in favor of a formula or program. In general I would prefer a book on dynamics of cotton production to a book on fashions in clothing, but I could learn from either. I would prefer a book on food security to a book on cuisine history, but I could learn from either.

**Mark Hewitson:** I am not convinced that the distinction between a noumenal and a phenomenal world, which was drawn and examined in the eighteenth century by Kant (to go back a bit further), has been overcome (or the two “worlds” reunited).119

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119 There have been many attempts to “go beyond” the distinction, as Caroline points out. Although there may not be much to be gained from reconsidering putative oppositions between subjectivism and objectivism and so on, there is still a need to investigate the connections between communicative and non-communicative actions (and singular and repeated ones). Poststructuralists have added to the toolbox of linguistic and discursive interpretation (along with other literary critics, cultural and intellectual historians, and philosophers of language), but they have arguably added little to the instrumentarium of social science, in which utterances and systems of signification are linked to actions, structures of action, and wider sets of
Certainly, we conceive of—and construct—objects of study, which we will never fully know, but how we conceive of them is affected by whether we believe they exist and what we believe they are (not merely by the contemplation of our own act of conceiving). If noumena (or objects) and phenomena (our subjective understanding of objects and ourselves) are regarded as the same, then perhaps Dominick LaCapra’s “dialogical” approach to texts is all that is required. Of course, such a dialogue with the dead (for the most part) can easily lapse into a dialogue with oneself or a monologue with the living, but the pursuit of some form of hermeneutic “fusion of horizons” or textual, contextual, or empathetic understanding, where historians seek the meanings of artifacts and texts, is an integral and inescapable part of historical inquiry. For neo-Kantian and post-Marxian scholars (and I mean our contemporaries, not Kant’s and Marx’s descendants), the focus of social “science”—in the weak sense of Wissenschaft, including history—is relational and explores an unknowable world of objects—that is, noumena and their relations that cannot be fully known—in conjunction with our ways of conceiving of that world. The elision, equation, or fusion of noumenal interaction and phenomenal experience (or judgment) not only carries the risk of academics bumping into lampposts, but it can also affect historians’ formulation of questions, their theoretical approaches to a subject, their methodological choices, and their selection of evidence. To Pierre Bourdieu, the “limits of objectivism” are hermeneutic as well as objective. “The practical privilege in which all scientific activity arises never more subtly governs that activity (insofar as science presupposes not only an epistemological break but also a social separation) than when, unrecognised as privilege, it leads to an implicit theory of practice which is the corollary of neglect of the social conditions in which science is possible,” he writes at the start of his Outline of a Theory of Practice: “The anthropologist’s particular relation to the object of his study contains the makings of a theoretical distortion inasmuch as his situation as an observer, excluded from the real play of social activities by the fact that he has no place (except by choice or by way of a game) in the system observed and has no need to make a place for himself there, inclines him to a hermeneutic representation of practices, leading him to reduce all social relations to communicative relations and, more precisely, to decoding operations.”

Bourdieu’s “relationalism,” like that of others, is partly epistemological, analyzing what is presupposed in knowing, and partly applied, definitional and explanatory, conceptualizing and delimiting the subject matter of social science. Because it is predicated on the existence and unknowability of a world external to us, however we conceive of subjective knowledge, it has tended to treat objects, others, actions, utterances, texts, languages, practices, institutions, and environments equally, or at least

 openly. Why should historians privilege one type of action (say, communicative ones) and one form of evidence (writing or texts) over others? We can \textquotedblleft see,\textquotedblright \textquotedblleft hear,\textquotedblright \textquotedblleft feel\textquotedblright (in both senses), and \textquotedblleft imagine\textquotedblright (via images, not words) things, others, and their interactions and relations, as well as reading about them, de- or reconstructing their meanings.\textsuperscript{124} Obviously, actors\textquotesingle s meanings—their reasons, beliefs, assumptions—inform their actions, and historians\textquotesingle explanations of those actions (in concert, conflict, and conjunction with a host of others) rest on an understanding of—and dialogue between—their own ideas and those of their objects of study, yet the conjunctions of historical actions are not explicable solely in terms of their meanings and any fusion between the horizons of the historian and those of the actors themselves. \textquotedblleft Causes,\textquotedblright or actions and conditions that bring about specified events, exceed actors\textquotesingle reasons and assumptions, or the linguistic and cultural schemes from which such reasons and assumptions derive their meaning (and their aporias). If historians want to avoid becoming what Adorno termed \textquotedblleft introverted thought architects,\textquotedblright dwelling \textquotedblleft behind the moon that is taken over by extroverted technicians,\textquotedblright they need to develop theories and methods that explain such actions, in relation to acts of communication in particular linguistic, cultural, institutional, political, and physical contexts.\textsuperscript{125}

An exemplary—if not contemporary—work that examines these themes is Molière’s \textit{Le bourgeois gentilhomme}, where the philosopher settles down to instruct Monsieur Jourdain in the “three methods of thinking” after being beaten up by the music and fencing masters, whose “arts” he had derided as “miserable \textit{métiers}.” “The first method is conceiving of things by means of universals; the second is to judge well through the use of categories; and the third involves drawing conclusions from the models and diagrams of Barbara, Celarent, Darii, Ferio, \textit{Baralipton}, etc.”\textsuperscript{126} When Monsieur Jourdain replies, “That all sounds a bit off-putting,” his teacher asks whether he would like to study ethics (“It deals with happiness and teaches men how to control their emotions”), to which he replies “no”: “I want to be able to lose my temper whenever I please.” “How about physics, then?” asks the philosopher: “Physics is the study of the principles of nature and the properties of matter; it explores the nature of elements, metals, minerals, rocks, plants, and animals, and explains the causes of meteors, rainbows, shooting stars, comets, lightning, thunder, rain, snow, hail, wind, and tornadoes.” When Jourdain replies, “That all sounds like a terrible racket,” the scholar asks: “Well, what would you like me to teach you?” “Teach me to spell,” says the \textit{bourgeois gentilhomme}. “Willingly,” replies the \textit{philosophe}. Arguably, historians have to learn—and to combine—all of these lessons, and to continue to be wary of them.

\textbf{Caroline Arni:} The Editor rightly observes that we harked back to longstanding debates about history as a discipline. We could interpret this as a common way of constantly making and re-making a discipline’s “historical identity” (Wolf Lepenies) as it goes along with any reflection on where it stands. But I wonder whether it could also be interpreted as a symptom of quite a persistent structuring of grand epistemological

\textsuperscript{124} I have tried to show how historians from different subdisciplines have done this in Hewitson, \textit{History and Causality}, chaps. 1–2.

\textsuperscript{125} Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics}, 3.

\textsuperscript{126} Molière, \textit{Le bourgeois gentilhomme} (Paris, 1670), Act I, Scene 3, my translation.
paradigms that once informed the marking of boundaries between disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. Time and again, it seems, we deal with being caught up in oppositions like the general/the particular, explaining/understanding, analytics/hermeneutics, theory/empiricism, subjectivism/objectivism—although we have at our disposal shelves full of work that critically examines such oppositions and a sophisticated toolkit to use in working beyond them, much of it referred to in our discussion. But then: oops, here they are again, haunting us like unfinished business or the living dead in all their vital triteness. Perhaps they are neither of those and can also not be disposed of once and for all, since history as a discipline rests on the tension produced by them and, by laboring on this, assures itself of its disciplinary identity and its relationship to other disciplines. The challenge might be to bear such tension by using it as a constant incentive to reflect upon how we—sorry for coming back to this—construe the object of history-writing. Whether we opt for causal explanation or meaningful understanding or narrative explanation depends not only on theoretical taste (and, perhaps more importantly, on individual talents), but also on what we take to be a valuable object of historical inquiry. And vice versa, of course.

This might be why I keep coming back to the “object,” and also to the question of time (somewhat privileging them here over questions of methodology). We should engage with what we do when we construe objects of historical inquiry and what we mean when we say that we do so—for I would want to challenge the “empiricism” the Editor mentions, and it could be challenged from this vantage point (this goes not against the empirical or “the archive,” but against positivistic conceptions of historical practice). Let me mention Paul Veyne again, who speaks of the “tale” (which is not the narrative) when referring to both the substance and the means of historical inquiry. The “tale” neither reproduces the past (which does not mean that we cannot know anything about it), nor is it a mere perspective of the historian (which does not mean that it is not constituted by the present). The word “tale” might be confusing (and for sure it is meant to provoke). But Veyne’s take helps me to think about what makes the specificity of the object of historical inquiry by insisting not on whatever defines it, but on how it is made when we relate categories and concepts, and for that matter concerns (of the present), to the matters we deal with (that is, texts, pictures, things from the past). This relation is always unstable for all those minuscule differences that constantly slip between matter and means, permanently redefining and re-questioning the object of inquiry. This is not denying the past or categories

127 And also how we organize research (which is worth a conversation of its own). With regard to the question of long-term transitions that set off our discussion, for instance, I admire work that, by way of collaboration, combines long-term perspectives with microhistorical studies. See David Warren Sabean, Simon Teuscher, and Jon Mathieu, eds., *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development, 1300–1900* (New York, 2007); or Staffan Müller-Wille and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, eds., *Heredity Produced: At the Crossroads of Biology, Politics, and Culture, 1500–1870* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

128 Following up on my earlier reference to anachronism, it can be said that Veyne teaches us how not to see “anachronism” (the deliberate use of categories foreign to the time examined) and “historicism” (the attempt to explain a time in its own notions) as theoretical alternatives, but rather as the poles of a constant moving back and forth between addressing the past through categories of the present and putting those categories into question through a past that does not accord to them. Braudel argued in that vein with regard to models, comparing them to boats: they need to be abstract enough to sail backwards on the waters of time, but they also need to be specific enough to shipwreck at some point—because that is where some quintessential change has happened. It is the possibility of shipwrecking, Braudel says, that makes for a good model.
“reality”—or endowing one of them with exclusive “reality,” attainable or not.129

“Reality” might be an important category, but in many debates of the recent past, it has more often than not served as a placeholder for claims of relevance, leading into the trenches many of us are tired of, even if perhaps for opposite reasons.

I like Veyne’s “tale” because it gives us a more honest and direct way of debating relevance. A take on the historical object as one that belongs neither to the present (while coming from it) nor to the past (while being defined by it) forces us not only to openly debate what actually might be problems of the present that we take to inform historical work (to take up a concern of the Editor’s and Pamela’s that I share, as well as Pamela’s choices in that matter). It can also serve as a vantage point for a threefold critical intervention defining a historical take on such debates: First, we can historicize what are taken to be problems of the present—which is different from asking for a problem’s past. Here we can still learn from Foucault’s history of “problematization.”130 Second, we can historicize the criteria of relevance that implicitly inform the debate. Here there are lessons to be learned from the struggles of women’s and gender history for acceptance in the discipline. And, third, we can be sensitive to how problems of the present are more often than not, in political debates, framed by a rhetoric or indeed a politics of time that bestows upon them a seemingly self-evident continuity or discontinuity (the “tenacious longevity” or “absolute novelty” of a problem as that which constitutes it as such).131 It might flatter our vanity as historians when we are called to provide “expertise” in such matters. But often the politics of time fueling such calls black-boxes the very historicity that constitutes problems of the present. Often, then, the gift of the historical approach is to displace the premises of the problem. This makes for uneasy expertise but offers the historian the position of the happy troublemaker—not only to those who ask for answers but also with regard to his/her own work—by ever complicating the questions.

**Bill Sewell:** Like other participants in this conversation, I like Pamela’s brisk and sensible proposed solution to the problem of hermeneutic versus objectivist meaning.

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129 Perspectives are as real as texts, pictures, and things are, lest we reproduce the confusion of “reality” with the kind of “objectivity” that for good reasons has become an object of historical inquiry. See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York, 2007).

130 See Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia*, 6 lectures given by Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, October–November 1983, ed. J. Pearson, http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/index.html. In a very different theoretical vein, we might also profit here from French sociologist Luc Boltanski’s “sociology of critique,” which draws attention to “critical competences” not as a privilege of the observing scholar but as a competence of the social or historical actors in question. Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (Cambridge, 2011); Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner, *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the “Pragmatic Sociology of Critique”* (London, 2014). For how this strand of contemporary French sociology, while only recently gaining international attention, almost immediately inspired the 5th Annales generation, see Lepetit, “La société comme un tout.” For many intersections with what is debated in our conversation with regard to causal analysis and interpretation, see Cerutti, “Pragmatique et histoire.”

As I would put it, we can’t help but be hermeneutical in our relationship to the past. Those pasts really did exist, but our making of histories about them requires us to examine the debris the pasts left behind, whether textual, archaeological, or visual, and to construct a human world of thought, action, and experience that we judge compatible with evidence gleaned from the debris. The past world we construct is inevitably our construction, based, to be sure, on our sincere efforts at a fusion of horizons with those who lived, strived, and died in these pasts. We try to understand what their experiences must have been like, but also to understand how the world they lived in inevitably surpassed and thereby shaped their own understandings and experience. Such interpretations must be based on inferences from the inevitably partial (in both senses of the word) evidence available to us.

The Editor asks if we can avoid “impos[ing] our problems on the past.” I agree with Benedetto Croce that all history is contemporary history, in the sense that the questions we ask of the past inevitably arise out of our present concerns and anxieties. This can, at one extreme, mean self-consciously searching for what has been called a “usable past,” for example, one that traces the oppressions and struggles of workers, or women, or immigrants—histories that might inspire or instruct those engaged in contemporary struggles. Of course, such “usable pasts” might also be studies of diplomacy or bureaucratic reform that might instruct current policymakers. But present concerns and anxieties also inform historical studies of those whose lives and experiences we understand as utterly different and remote from our own. I would say that we cannot help but impose our problems on the past, but that we should strive for self-reflexivity—that our history will be deeper, more useful, and truer if we consciously reflect on how our contemporary concerns and anxieties affect our choices both of our subjects of study and of the methods we employ in pursuing them.

Emmanuel Akyeampong: In this last question, the Editor raises the issue of how historians frame problems for explanation and how we can avoid in the process imposing “our” problems on the past. I like Pamela’s restatement: “Should historians resign themselves to the illusions and ephemerality of hermeneutical pursuits, or should they continue an objectivist search for a real past that is not their own?” Her answer is “that historians must be self-conscious hermeneuticians, disciplined by the fact that while the past does not deserve random or self-serving reconstruction, it will never be objectively attainable (because it basically does not exist).”

We have come quite a distance from the nineteenth-century founders of our discipline who believed objectivity in history was possible. The “turns” in history since the 1970s have contributed to this modesty in expectations. In our exchanges here we have highlighted how present concerns, approaches, language, and extra-archival sources shape the nature of historical reconstruction. Yet we strive to recapture the context and spirit of past times, mindful, as Pamela puts it, that the past does not deserve random or self-serving reconstruction. We will never recapture the full range of emotions and aspirations of our historical actors—the uncertainties, indeterminacies, and contingencies they experienced. We are a meaning-making species, so we applaud historical works that we believe get us successfully close to a past context and provide a window onto past lives, aware that this is but one of many possible
snapshots. Indeed, our historical actors probably could not explain fully the tumultuous events they lived through, and Mark notes sagely that “‘Causes,’ or actions and conditions that bring about specified events, exceed actors’ reasons and assumptions, or the linguistic and cultural schemes from which such reasons and assumptions derive their meaning (and their aporias).” For a student of violence, this is especially true in the quest to explain or make sense of violence, when “violent situations” get out of hand and violence escapes the control of those who sought to harness its instrumentality. It is as if violence assumes its own agency.132

In the second round of our conversation, I concluded on the value of “narrative truth,” which serves as the historian’s equivalent of “objectivity,” while conceding that following the “evidence” could lead to other “truths.” As a social historian with an interest in power as experienced by those we consider socially “marginal”—and who seldom create independent records—I admire historical works that are able to look past the constraints of sources and provide meaningful glimpses of the lives of the powerless or the silenced. It is as if the lens of the camera captures more than the photographer intended. In this vein, Trouillot’s Silencing the Past is an excellent read. Two more recent examples are Stephanie Smallwood’s Saltwater Slavery and Vincent Brown’s The Reaper’s Garden.133 The first “lifts” the experiences of captives or slaves from the accounting records of the Royal African Company that sought to commoditize them, reading qualitative experiences from largely quantitative data; and the second achieves a similar exercise for slaves in Jamaica through planters’ journals, diaries, and ledgers. I also admire works that transcend the limits of written sources, and provide portraits of an early African past with an “authentic feel.” Two examples of this are Ehret’s An African Classical Age and Vansina’s How Societies Are Born. These are historians with facility in linguistics and who also draw on archaeological findings on Africa.

**AHR Editor:** As usual in these conversations, we have covered an enormous amount of territory and raised numerous points, all of which deserve further comment. It is hoped that the footnotes you have added to your interventions will serve as a guide for readers to explore your many assertions and insights: there is a formidable bibliography gathered at the bottom of these pages! I don’t think we have come to any conclusions—how could we with a subject as capacious and complex as this one?—but I do think there is a consensus that there is no going back to a theoretically and methodologically less self-conscious mode of analysis where modeling, billiard-ball notions of causality, independent versus dependent variables, or other rather mechanistic approaches to historical change were common. Beyond this, a couple of issues strike me as worth stressing. One is this question of “parsimony”: How much do we want to insist on or rather prefer historical accounts that streamline our presentation in service of explanation? Do we want to strive for what we might call “takeaway points” or what Louis O. Mink characterized as “detachable

conclusions”? Or are there legitimate reasons to resist this approach in favor of more embedded, more contextually entrenched understandings of the meaning of a historical period, event, or the like? This gets very much to historians’ actual practice. But another point raised here has taken us into more meta-historical realms—that is, the discussion over continuity and discontinuity in history. This is endlessly fascinating to think about, ultimately leading to questions of the nature of time itself. But despite its undoubted intellectual importance—its speculative dimension—I wonder what place this antinomy has in historical practice, say, beyond the choice of Marx or de Tocqueville. More generally in this conversation, there has been an insistence on the importance of the hermeneutics of historical thinking, which indeed requires that we remain aware of the problematic nature of the object of our study, whatever the field or the period. The past is not only “a foreign country”; it no longer exists. Its problematic nature, however—and I think that this conversation has been a prolonged meditation on the challenges presented to us by the pastness of the past—does not mean that we cannot pursue the question of historical change rigorously. The question is not only what kinds of changes and transformations we find important and meaningful; after all, to pose this question is to open ourselves up to a virtually limitless number of analytical pursuits, which is the source of the dazzling range of topics found in contemporary historical writing. But it is also how much we try, despite the difficulties adumbrated here, to identify these changes and transformations in terms of the past itself, and how much they are rooted in our own concerns and interests. In practice, and from what we have said in this conversation, to choose between one or the other would seem to be impossible. The choice, then, lies in the balance.

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Explaining Historical Change; or, The Lost History of Causes


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