
AHR Forum
Comment: Not Yet Far Enough

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1984, just as the translation of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* proclaimed that "the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age," an older historian living on the North Carolina coast tried to teach me to surf cast.¹ At one point, despairing of my fishing skills, she steered the conversation to history and said rather wistfully that she longed to transfer all of her knowledge directly to me so that I would be able to carry on where she left off. Much to my retrospective embarrassment, I scoffed. I dismissed even the desirability of such a transfer, declaring, with all the wisdom of one year of graduate school, that the framework of knowledge, the questions posed, and, most of all, the progressive narrative embraced by her generation were passé. Contemporary theory had upended her epistemological assumptions and modes of representation, replacing them with a fierce, self-reflective knowingness about the discursive and contingent character of all practices. This older historian, born in 1899, had combined service in the Roosevelt administration and journalism with historical research, most particularly into the ideas behind the American Revolution with her book *George Mason: Constitutionalist*, in print since 1938.² History for her, if grasped firmly by right-minded political leaders, could have a teleological drive: progress was possible and cumulative; fascism had been defeated, civil rights promoted, prosperity attained. Likewise, historical knowledge could be progressive and cumulative; more could be added, but both what counted as knowledge and how it should be represented remained self-evident. In her America, the angel of history faced determinedly forward into brightness, leaving the debris behind him. For me, splashing in the waters of the postindustrial, postmodern age, interested in Japan, educated not only after her time

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), 3. I make my brief foray into autobiography fully aware of the contested status of experience as a basis for history and its uncertain alliance with forms of left and feminist historiography. For an excellent discussion, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006).

² Helen Hill Miller, *George Mason: Constitutionalist* (New York, 1938). The structure of Miller's experience gave plausibility to her liberal New Deal optimism as well as to the optimism of later social historians as part of what William Sewell describes as "the great worldwide postwar capitalist boom. So-called 'Fordist' or state-centered capitalism, with its fundamental pact between big business, big labor, and big government, its standardized mass production, its Keynesian steering of the economy, its fixed exchange rates, and its global guarantee by United States military power, had produced, or at least seemed to have produced, a graspable, predictable, and steadily progressing form of society." William H. Sewell, Jr., "Crooked Lines," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 393–405, here 399.

but after the intellectual gains and political disappointments of the 1960s and 1970s, after the introduction of Gramscian complications into Marxian paradigms, Foucault's conception of discursive structures, feminism and gender studies, Said's critique of Orientalism, and much else besides, her faith in history seemed the equivalent of Druidic ritual, strangely beautiful in its mysteries but lacking contemporary traction. Plus, I was young and primed for oedipal gestures.

Now, although rueful about my ungenerous tone, I still believe I was right in my general understanding: times really were changing. Historiography was undergoing what Geoff Eley would later describe as "the huge tectonic shift from social history to cultural history."³ Both the content and the form of knowledge were in contention. Looking back, I wish I could recast that conversation more gently, but I would still say that the discipline of history itself has an eventful history responsive to other disciplines and changes in the world. I would also suggest that history evinces losses as well as gains and, more perversely, often witnesses the two transmute into one another, the gains of one generation looking like losses to the next. The older historian's bright narrative had material, political, and epistemological foundations that seismic forces inside and outside the academy had undermined by 1984. This narrative's crumbling certainty had been washed out to sea along with those elusive fish. It could not be reeled back in.

Like me, but a few years later, all four contributors to this forum came of age as historians in the wake of the variously denominated "turns." Judith Surkis describes these turns as "a rapid succession of historiographical moments" seemingly initiated by "the linguistic turn" and "followed by the cultural and the imperial, and more recently the transnational, global, and spatial turns." However, the shared experience of these contributors counts for little. Their essays diverge sharply over the nature of the changes in historical practice over the last forty years and what they mean for the discipline today, what has been lost and what has been gained, and who is to blame. Judith Surkis dispels the linguistic turn into an airy chimera, contending that there was no turn. Gary Wilder believes in the reality of the turn from social to cultural history, but like Surkis argues that "turn talk" has authorized "analytic regression." These two dark visions are counterbalanced by brighter views. Durba Ghosh plots imperial history's several pivots, landing us, she argues, back in the archives with modestly enhanced tools for textual analysis and broader categories of personhood. Only James Cook portrays the turns as fully productive and far from over, even now definitively altering our approaches and the objects of our scrutiny, our understanding of power, agency, and resistance.

In short, the stakes of this forum are both empirical and prescriptive. Empirically, did something happen to transform historical understanding, and if so, is it over? Prescriptively, was what happened productive, and how best are we to proceed? This is fascinating stuff. Along the way, we meet a menagerie of animals, a drove of transportation devices, a catalogue of pirouetting perspectives, some popular songs, and an array of emotions from dismay to optimism. As commentator, I take it as my brief to map these responses, asking, most importantly, what interests each narration serves. If history is, as Reinhart Koselleck suggests, in league with the future, then

³ Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2005), xii.

it is fair to interrogate each position for the future possibilities it might authorize.⁴ I will then rotate toward “the environmental turn,” neglected by this forum and by most sophisticated recent historiography, the absence in the midst of all that is present.

WEARING HER BRILLIANCE BOLDLY, French historian Judith Surkis does battle against “the linguistic turn,” insisting that it is inexact and “politically limiting” to use this concept in the way that William Sewell, Gabrielle Spiegel, Lynn Hunt, and others have done. Indeed, the whole idea of “the linguistic turn” is, in Surkis’s striking metaphor, a monster akin to Paul Veyne’s centaurs. Just as nothing true or false can be said about the digestive system of centaurs, nothing true or false can be said about “the linguistic turn,” a composite phenomenon presented, she claims, as a homogeneous, monolithic, generational moment, but actually a false, retrospective construct that rejects postwar revisionism and asserts a collective new beginning suspect in its “coherence and comity.” At stake most especially for Surkis are the contributions of feminist scholarship currently being consigned to a “periodized posterity and politically compromised epistemology” by Sewell and others. To defend feminist insights, Surkis wants to dispel the illusion of “the turn” by freeing us from the concept of linear time where it is lodged. Here she joins Judith Roof in “challeng[ing] the very notions of time and history” and undermining “concepts of originality, pioneer, tradition, and precedent.” The rigidly supersessionist “generational thinking” of beginnings and endings, beholden to tropes of familial reproduction, needs to be replaced with a concept of “genealogies” where recuperation is never foreclosed. In this way, the still-salient “critical resources of feminism” will not be consigned “to a chronologically and politically exhausted moment.” “A genealogical counternarrative,” Surkis tells us, “can keep multiple strains of critical interrogation open for the historiographical future.” She therefore pleads for a radical version of “untimely thinking” that rejects the possibility of loss. She proposes, in effect, an owl of Minerva that can take off from the same bough over and over again, spreading its wings in sunlight as well as shadow, as though options were never lost to time.

Surkis’s essay is engaged and compelling, yet it leaves me shaking my head. I remain unconvinced that we invoke a monstrous shibboleth when we speak of “the linguistic turn.” As already revealed in the tale of my fishing fiasco, I believed that great intellectual changes were afoot in the mid-1980s. But it is neither my experience that informs my disquiet nor a desire to downplay scholarship attuned to sexuality and gender. Rather, what perplexes me is Surkis’s understanding of eventfulness. By her implicit strictures, to attain the status of a real event, “the turn” must evince three characteristics: concision, homogeneity, and uniformity. She speaks of “the concise movement that a ‘turn’ is supposed to describe.” Further, she is troubled by the range of disputes, nuances, and ambiguities, concluding that “the complex debates that took place in the 1980s and 1990s—about discourse and subjectivity, or the relationship between ‘linguistic’ structures, agency, and experience—show

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck speaks of history’s “anticipatory content” in “On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History,” trans. Kerstin Behnke, in Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, Calif., 2002), 1–19, here 5, 7–8.

that there was no *singular* ‘turn.’”⁵ Third, pointing to the varying tempos and concerns in arenas such as subaltern studies, she shows that discussions constituting the “supposed” linguistic turn “did not occur once and for all, in an orderly logic of progression and supersession, or uniformly across the discipline.” These criteria puzzle me. “Linguistic turn” as a phrase may indeed be misleading if it conveys a crisp *volte-face* followed by consensus, but the same is true of terms such as “French Revolution” that also mask a welter of actions and impulses. The scholars involved in the turn, the very ones she cites, would be the last to say that they had executed a precise military-style maneuver or that it had been anything other than argumentative and uneven. Indeed, the turn’s lack of concision, homogeneity, and disciplinary uniformity is hardly in contention. But do these characteristics, rightly discerned by Surkis, disqualify it as an intellectual event?

It is here, with the concept of “the event,” that we need to pause for a moment. The question of whether or not the linguistic turn—described as the progenitor of all the other turns—existed, whether it is a mythic centaur or a true lion, is crucial to this forum. The nature of our quarry must be discerned; we can hardly go hunting otherwise. On this issue, Martin Jay’s distinction between run-of-the-mill occurrences best understood through contextualization and those rare phenomena called “events” that “radically upend their contexts” is particularly illuminating.⁶ Had all the texts of that time been fully comprehensible through the intentions of the actors as “communicative *acts* dependent on the conventions and usages of their day,” then they would have been easier to read and analyzable by the means proposed by “Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock and their colleagues in the so-called Cambridge school of intellectual history.”⁷ Had Surkis discovered that the linguistic turn had been articulated in uniform fashion simultaneously by historians in every corner of the field, she would have excavated not a transformation but, in Foucault’s terms, the regularities of a well-established epistemic regime. The work on linguistic structures, agency, and experience would then have constituted not a “turn,” but a development; not a transformation, but a continuation.

Events, on the other hand, are altogether different creatures. Quoting Claude Romano, Martin Jay argues that events cannot be “submitted to a horizon of prior meanings” but “are themselves the origin of meaning for any interpretation, in that they can be understood less from the world that precedes them than from the posterity to which they give rise.” They break with patterned regularities and escape their context to be “world-establishing,” “inaugurating their own history” instead of being the product of history.⁸ If we make this distinction, at least for heuristic pur-

⁵ It may be helpful here to distinguish between the linguistic turn and the cultural turn, as Gabrielle M. Spiegel elegantly does: “Whereas linguistic turn historiography proclaimed culture as a self-enclosed, non-referential mechanism of social construction that *preceded* the world and rendered it intelligible by constructing it according to its own rules of signification, cultural history never abandoned a belief in the objective reality of the social world, and thus might more profitably have been labeled sociocultural history.” Spiegel, “Comment on *A Crooked Line*,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 406–416, here 409, emphasis in the original.

⁶ This phrase is one that Jay quotes from French theorist Claude Romano. Martin Jay, “Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization,” *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 557–571, here 564.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 577, emphasis in the original. This essay begins with a lengthy discussion of the Cambridge school’s position and the subsequent debates over their stress on context.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 564.

poses, we must use criteria other than those proposed by Surkis for asking whether the turn occurred. We should ask not if it was coherent, but if it altered what we took to be real. We should ask not whether it was logical and uniform, but whether it produced new objects of inquiry and new ways of talking about them. By these criteria of eventfulness, it seems to me that the profession did, in fact, experience a major event. By the 1990s, we were not as we once were. We continue to live and to work in the turn's wake.

ONE MAY DISAGREE WITH SURKIS's contention that there was no turn, as do I and the other contributors, and still share her anxiety that doors are closing on rigorous self-reflective practices. Wilder, closest to Surkis in his outlook, shares her dismay at current trends. Calling on historians "to ask questions about the conditions of possibility of the historical knowledge that they are producing—about the genealogy of their categories and their embeddedness in the social worlds they purport to explain, about their own implication in their objects of study, and the relation between those pasts and the historian's present," he instead finds "antipathy to theory, an allergy to intellectual discord, and a will to professional reconciliation." Although he provides footnotes replete with titles exemplifying best practices, he judges the field to have turned away from "the turn" to banal complacency. Fascinatingly, he castigates not those anti-turners or the diehard Rankeans who have always been dismissive about the value of theorizing, but the turners themselves for the enforced pall of politeness, this apoliticized "peace in the neighborhood."⁹ Exactly who these retrograde former proponents are remains obscure, since he insists that he does not wish to name names.¹⁰ Wilder's primary desideratum, different from Surkis's, is to recover and defend the insights of social history and dialectical Marxism, which, he claims, were rejected wholesale by the linguistic and cultural turns.¹¹ He insists that "crafting a history for and of our times will require us to move beyond the insidious logic of turns in order to reclaim the analytic space where history, social science, and critical theory once converged around large and pressing sociohistorical questions." Like Surkis's, his is a recovery mission, an effort at pre-turn recuperation.

Wilder's voice is passionate and his goals are clear and bracing, yet his essay strikes me as divided against itself. Its tale of dissipated intellectual vigor is at odds with its many references to vibrant, accomplished work such as Todd Shepard's *Invention of Decolonization* and Jeremy Popkin's *You Are All Free*, and to efforts, such

⁹ Frequently mentioned in this company, though largely neglected in this forum, are Lawrence Stone, "History and Post-Modernism," *Past and Present*, no. 131 (May 1991): 217–218; Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990); G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge, 1991). Less extreme within this group is Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York, 1997).

¹⁰ Wilder, however, pointedly distinguishes among the turners on some scores. For instance, he writes: "Note that the critique of the linguistic and cultural turns from the standpoint of 'society' developed by Sewell, Eley, and Goswami differs fundamentally from the call by Bonnell and Hunt for a renewed social history and historical sociology 'beyond the cultural turn.'"

¹¹ While Wilder contends that "because the talk of turns objectified 'social history' as a singular package, the turn away from it was often wholesale," others have described the relationship between social and cultural history as "more dialectical than merely sequential." Editor's introduction to "AHR Forum: Geoff Eley's *A Crooked Line*," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 391–392, here 391.

as Sewell's, to combine the cultural turn with social history.¹² Wilder is surely right that among "turners" and younger scholars, there are some who long for "a new nominalism," promoting a methodological positivism and an "archival fetishism" more concerned with topics than optics. The desire for "the consolation of a truth in the past which cannot be questioned" can be overwhelming even for so subtle a theorist as Roland Barthes, who, in the wake of his beloved mother's death, poignantly sought that perdurable truth in photography.¹³ Yet the wealth of references that Wilder provides suggest that his story could have been told differently, clearing new ground for histories of society built on the foundation of the turns' insights. Wilder's story of the cultural turn's strong-armed rejection of social history followed by the profession's rejection of even the turn's self-critical posture leaves us mired in longing for an irretrievable golden age of social history without recourse.

BY CONTRAST, DURBA GHOSH PORTRAYS imperial history's broad concurrence today as heartening. She masterfully charts its several reorientations through engagements with "other historiographical turns—the global, the postcolonial, and the archival," in order to argue that the imperial turn has been produced by and generated other historiographical developments. Contra Surkis and Cook, she sees these turns as explicitly generational, with "tensions between gray-haired patriarchs, younger matriarchs, and an unruly group of interdisciplinary graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and untenured faculty setting off on a long road trip in an overstuffed minivan." Although concerned that generational "turn talk" might foreclose self-reflection, she ultimately embraces familial affinities, arguing that current scholarship feeds on the generative energies that transformed the profession in the 1980s and 1990s. If Ghosh now proclaims a "return to the archives," this is not a retreat to some prelapsarian world before the turns. Rather, she portrays a regained archival adventurism by macho, swashbuckling younger scholars (playfully including herself) as overcoming the archive-versus-theory dichotomy in a new synthesis. Here a note of warning should be sounded. Talk of a "return to the archive" risks repeating the canard that "theory heads" had abandoned the high ground of dedicated research.¹⁴ This charge was mostly caricature. Rather than being for-or-against archival labor, central arguments were about the nature of archives, how they are constituted, what they leave out, and whether we could explore them "naked" in the manner of Geoffrey Elton or had to approach them mindful of our own positionality and commitments.¹⁵ Ghosh, building on the rearticulation of the nature of the archives by fem-

¹² Wilder argues that the reception of the books by Shepard and Popkin smoothed over their fundamental challenge to our understanding of events such as the "French Revolution."

¹³ It is in these terms that John Tagg describes Barthes's quest in *Camera Lucida* to find in photography the absolute guarantee of "a reality" even though it is a "reality one can no longer touch." Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis, 1988), 1.

¹⁴ Ghosh cites several imperial historians who have voiced concern about the abandonment of the archives, including Richard M. Eaton, "(Re)imag(in)ing Otherness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India," *Journal of World History* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 57–78; and Matthew Connelly in "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441–1464.

¹⁵ E. H. Carr makes a mockery of historians who try to walk in the archives as "in the Garden of Eden, without a scrap of philosophy to cover them, naked and unashamed before the god of history." Carr,

inist and queer studies scholars such as Ann Stoler, Anjali Arondekar, and Elizabeth Kolsky, celebrates an “archival turn” that “relies on strategies of ‘theorizing about texts,’ while doing a lot of gathering at the same time.” Today she sees raucous comity, depicting the squabbling passengers in imperial history’s minivan as sharing a “political project—anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism—with disagreements about the value of different disciplinary methodologies.”

While Surkis and Wilder might label this comity a source of worry, a resistance to articulating higher stakes, Ghosh depicts it as contentiously productive. While Surkis and Wilder distrust generational “turn talk,” Ghosh discerns progressive family legacies. But while Ghosh maps an agreed-upon destination for imperial history’s road trip, Cook depicts “the cultural turn” as so explosively dynamic across such a wide spectrum of subfields that there can be no single endpoint. Indeed, he speaks not of “the turn” but of “the turns,” not of something we are “beyond” but of continuing, mutating energies feeding the field today. Nor are we locked in oedipal contests; indeed, we are not even “we” in a generational sense. “The kids are all right” precisely because they share their parents’ engaged style of self-reflective history, driven to understand past interactions and ideas with an expanding repertoire of analytical moves.

JAMES COOK, AFTER REVEALING the surprising paucity of references to the “cultural turn” before the late 1990s, examines the moment when the use of this phrase shoots skyward, precipitated most particularly by Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt’s *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, which arrived not to praise “the turn” but to bury it. Cook points to this moment’s “dramatic refashioning of the story . . . from the live and bracing debates of Eley and Samuel to the fixed and finished turn of Bonnell and Hunt.” As his clever graft shows, the “declensionists” who tried to place “the cultural turn” in its coffin were the very ones who spurred it to life as a contentious concept. What followed the premature funeral was a spate of competing master narratives using this very phrase to excavate historiography’s recent past. These narratives tended to revolve around a certain “timeframe (1960s to the 1990s), setting (one or another corner of the European field), narrative arc (rise and fall), and authorial voice (the generational ‘we’),” and it is here, most especially, that Cook wishes to intervene in order to transform the story from one about “the turn” to one about continuing, multiple turns. He questions each element of this four-part template and revises the tight generational, subdisciplinary tale by opening it up to the present, broadening our focus away from Europe and European imperialism, rejecting the autumnal gloom of “an ending,” and embracing the scholarship of younger people who, far from rejecting the turn, are pushing it onward into new variants.

Looking at today’s scholarship, Cook demonstrates that on the ground level of history-writing, the dissonance spawned by the cultural turn has been enormously productive, leading to attentiveness to a whole range of circulating cultural forms,

What Is History? (New York, 1962), 21. See G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London, 1967), and most especially his attack on the linguistic turn in *Return to Essentials*. See also Keith Jenkins, *On “What Is History?” From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London, 1995).

including capitalism, neglected in earlier iterations of “the cultural turn.” Walter Johnson’s work on slavery, *Soul by Soul*, is singled out in this regard for revealing the ways the continuing turns combine discursive and economic analysis, allowing the mutual constitutiveness of the cultural and the social to emerge. In short, Cook takes up the challenge and the optimism of Eley’s still-unfolding story, suggesting not only that “it” is far from over, but that the widening ripples of the turns extend across the globe. In the manner of true events, one might say, the recent changes in historiography were “world-establishing,” creating hitherto unimagined spaces for exploration, inaugurating a history that cannot be buried, and giving us a future productively at odds with the past.

AN ENERVATING POLITESSE MAY HAVE descended in some quarters of the profession, but the voices in this forum evince no complacency. Instead, there is passion and intelligence in grappling with our position. Yet my own sense is that we still understand only dimly the forces reshaping our field and our world over the past few decades, and that these essays, broad and bracing though they are, are not broad and bracing enough. Perhaps, as Nietzsche noted in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “the greatest events and thoughts (and the greatest thoughts are the greatest events) are comprehended most slowly. The generations which are their contemporaries do not experience, do not ‘live through’ them—they live alongside them.”¹⁶ Alongside the turns analyzed here, a world-altering force has been emerging, one larger, more devastating, and more definitive even than the “contemporary flexible forms of capitalism” emphasized by Sewell: I speak of climate change—or climate collapse—and all of its related global transformations.¹⁷ Wilder rightly insists that we be mindful of “the conditions of possibility of the historical knowledge” we produce, yet the most fundamental of these conditions of possibility, the environment itself, has gotten short shrift from most of us. If we accept that historians need to be conscious of the material basis of the means of production—our own as well as past generations’—and that contemporary predicaments necessarily inform our understanding of the

¹⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Chicago, 1955), 230.

¹⁷ William H. Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 62. The older insistence on “capitalism” as the culprit in climate collapse has been disputed. For instance, Kenneth Pomeranz argues, “if one measures industrialization not by the market value of the output but by the quantities of land and people that become involved—probably more relevant criteria for environmental historians—then noncapitalist (or at most semicapitalist) regimes have presided over most of the spread of industrialization.” Pomeranz, “Introduction: World History and Environmental History,” in Edmund Burke III and Kenneth Pomeranz, eds., *The Environment and World History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2009), 3–32, here 8. For this argument, see also Robert B. Marks, “Commercialization without Capitalism: Processes of Environmental Change in South China, 1550–1850,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1996): 56–82. The phrase “climate collapse,” as opposed to “climate change,” is favored by David W. Orr, *Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse* (Oxford, 2009). The literature on climate change in general is vast. See, for instance, David Archer and Stefan Rahmstorf, *The Climate Crisis: An Introductory Guide to Climate Change* (Cambridge, 2010); Clark A. Miller and Paul N. Edwards, *Changing the Atmosphere: Expert Knowledge and Environmental Governance* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Spencer R. Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* (New York, 2006); Paul N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); WorldWatch Institute, *State of the World, 2010: Transforming Cultures—From Consumerism to Sustainability* (New York, 2010); Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007*, 3 vols. (New York, 2007).

past, environmental consciousness makes exacting intellectual demands. This “new materialism” will produce new questions, new objects of study, and new types of evidence beyond those developed through the social, linguistic, cultural, and imperial turns.¹⁸

Understanding the history of our altered physical world will require us to readapt our magpie tendencies and steal some eggs from the nests of scientists. Such intellectual thievery marked prior turns. In the 1960s and ’70s, social history was energized by the collateral disciplines of economics and sociology; then, with the linguistic and cultural turns in the 1980s and ’90s, anthropology, cultural studies, and literary theory reoriented our outlook. Now it is to our more distant intellectual cousins in biology, chemistry, physics, and related fields that we must turn. We are currently devouring “the [natural] resources and services of 1.3 Earths. In other words, people are using about a third more of Earth’s capacity than is available, undermining the resilience of the very ecosystems on which humanity depends.”¹⁹ To understand how this unprecedented situation arose, we must reconsider what counts as a “fact,” what level of interaction requires analysis, how one narrates such a history, where one gathers evidence.²⁰ In its general silence on these matters, this forum accurately represents our discipline’s still-halting engagement with the monstrously difficult problem of how to execute an environmental turn.

One can be either pessimistic or optimistic about the likelihood of our meeting this radical challenge to our practices. Pessimistic because the difficulties of analyzing the organic and inorganic substrates of history dwarf the difficulties posed by reconfigured concepts of context and text. While we may be inching toward “a historiography that acknowledges both the social, contextual determinants of thought and behavior in the past and the mediating role played by language and culture in their functioning” in what Gabrielle Spiegel calls the “unified field theory” of history, accommodation more broadly between the competing realities of human social and cultural histories, on the one hand, and nature’s realities as described by science, on

¹⁸ I discuss Sebastiano Timpanaro’s phrase “the new materialism,” which appeared in *On Materialism* (London, 1980; orig. Italian ed. 1970), briefly in *Reconfiguring Modernity: Concepts of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001) and at greater length in “Atarashii busshitsu shugi” (The New Materialism), the preface to the Japanese translation, *Kindai no saikochiku: Nihon seiji ideorogi ni okeru shizen no gainen* (Tokyo, 2008). Older Marxist explorations of the way that “materialism” might be expanded to encompass the environment include André Gorz, *Ecology as Politics* (Boston, 1980; orig. French ed. 1975); and Gorz, *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* (London, 1994; orig. French ed. 1991). For more recent work on the new materialism and politics, see Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, N.C., 2010), especially Jason Edwards, “The Materialism of Historical Materialism,” 281–298; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C., 2010); and Mick Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World* (Minneapolis, 2011).

¹⁹ WorldWatch Institute, *The State of the World, 2010*, 4.

²⁰ Engaged work on this question of how environmental studies challenge historical practices has begun in earnest, but more must be done. My own modest attempts to articulate this problem can be found in Ian J. Miller, Julia Adeney Thomas, and Brett L. Walker, eds., *Japan at Nature’s Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power* (Honolulu, forthcoming 2012); “From Modernity with Freedom to Sustainability with Decency: Politicizing Passivity,” in Kimberly Coulter and Christof Mauch, eds., *The Future of Environmental History: Needs and Opportunities* (Munich, 2011), 53–56; and “The Exquisite Corpses of Nature and History: The Case of the Korean DMZ,” in Chris Pearson, Peter Coates, and Tim Cole, eds., *Militarized Landscapes: From Gettysburg to Salisbury Plain* (London, 2010), 151–168.

the other, is truly thorny.²¹ Science speaks in different temporalities with such concepts as the Anthropocene; produces different notions of agency with the interactions of entire species, chemically altered brains, and inorganic forces; and, even more cantankerously, insists on not making “normative statements,” manifesting an allergy to the very articulations of value and meaning rightly prized by engaged history. Science as science has nothing to say about the desirability of social justice or even of human survival. Engaging the sciences should not rekindle false dreams of history *being* a science. In remaining true to our calling, historians will find that our conversations with scientists often seem like very rough translations.

On the other hand, the possibility of optimism rests precisely on the theoretical mindfulness produced by the turns. In articulating competing ways of describing power, competing ways of understanding power’s agents and operations, and, ultimately, competing modes of creativity and resistance, the theoretical engagements within our profession, as Cook shows, have produced nimbleness of mind and flexibility of outlook.²² Thoughtful debates over representation and the limits of our capacity to comprehend totalities (while we yearn to do so) will aid us in addressing the new materialism. But they will, I think, be inadequate. The tectonic plates that shifted in the early 1980s are once again causing ruptures that cannot be “submitted to a horizon of prior meanings.” Neither recuperating the approaches of feminism or social history as they were before “turn talk” nor celebrating the fruits of these turns’ continuing productivity will be sufficient to understand the precarious state of our world. Only with a readiness to accept eventfulness, weather loss without consolation, and yet persevere in the spirit of willed, generous optimism can history constitute the new optic now required. In short, were I to return to the ocean—30 percent more acidic than it was at the beginning of the industrial revolution and, since 1950, depleted of 40 percent of the phytoplankton that produces much of our oxygen—the sharp decline in fishing stocks would make my feeble casting skills even more evident. But my understanding of the tensions between the hopes of human history and the determinations of our manifestly material nature have been sharpened, and I would come with new criteria for the formation of historical knowledge.²³

²¹ Spiegel, “Comment on *A Crooked Line*,” 410.

²² “Indeed,” as Geoff Eley says, “being a historian during the last third of the twentieth century has required learning to live with a condition of virtually continuous flux.” *A Crooked Line*, 8.

²³ Never in the last 300 million years has the ocean acidified at the current rate. See Bärbel Hönlisch et al., “The Geological Record of Ocean Acidification,” *Science* 335, no. 6072 (March 2, 2012): 1058–1063. On fish depletion, see Ranson A. Myers and Boris Worm, “Rapid Worldwide Depletion of Predatory Fish Communities,” *Nature* 423 (May 15, 2003): 280–283; Boris Worm et al., “Impacts of Biodiversity Loss on Ocean Ecosystem Services,” *Science* 314, no. 5800 (November 3, 2006): 787–790, here 787.

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