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## What is the Social in Social History?

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## WHAT IS THE SOCIAL IN SOCIAL HISTORY?\*

More than a decade after the controversies marking the reception of the cultural turn in the anglophone historical community, it is timely to consider some of the outcomes of the debates of the 1990s. One in particular has been the emergence of ‘cultural history’ as an important historiographical force, while another has been the partial eclipse of ‘social history’ — something also apparent in western European historiography as a whole, often for similar reasons.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the kind of influence social history had in the 1970s and 1980s has passed in good measure to cultural history. This marks undoubted advances in the discipline; but these advances have not come without certain costs. What those are, of course, is a matter for debate — which, it is to be hoped, will be encouraged by my version of not only the costs but also the possibilities of recent historiographical developments. Much of the 1990s’ debate was vigorous and productive. Some of it, though, was vigorous and unproductive: a matter of opportunities not taken. Heat exceeded light, especially when ‘postmodernism’ was taken to spell the end of history as we knew it; and the chance to consider what actually might be meant by and done with terms like ‘social’ and ‘cultural’, among the many other concepts then exfoliating in history, was too often sacrificed to the rhetoric of history’s ‘defence’ against the presumed depreda-

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<sup>1</sup>For a balanced, long-term account of social history, see Jürgen Kocka, ‘Losses, Gains and Opportunities: Social History Today’, *Jl Social Hist.*, xxxvii (2003).

tions of postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> Now, however, I trust that this account of some of the changes that have occurred as a consequence of the cultural turn will elicit discussion that represents an opportunity taken and not one lost.

In the 1990s, one of the opportunities that was *not* taken was a radical rethinking of the notion of the social itself; this has been evident even with respect to some of the most thoughtful and theoretically aware of social history practitioners.<sup>3</sup> Instead, older notions of the social have by and large remained in place: as William Sewell describes it, ‘The sense of society as a reified totality is surely the dominating contemporary usage of the term both in academic and ordinary language: other meanings have become decidedly secondary’.<sup>4</sup> In Britain this understanding of ‘society’ and the social has commonly been expressed in Marxist and Marxist-influenced terms,<sup>5</sup> although something similar is also evident in the more generalized, common-sense view of ‘society’ itself as constituting an underlying, structural reality, with the ‘Industrial Revolution’ serving as the classic case of ‘society’ as a subterranean mechanism of historical transformation. Much of this common-sense view was derived from the long-established and powerful radical-liberal tradition in Britain.<sup>6</sup> But the full

<sup>2</sup> Some examples of heat exceeding light were Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York and London, 1994); Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> This reluctance characterizes some of the key figures in the debates: for example Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What’s Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor, 2007); Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005). From a personal point of view, in the mid 1990s I wrote an article entitled ‘The End of Social History?’, *Social Hist.*, xx (1995). The fact that there was a question mark at the end of my title seems to have passed many by at the time, and some since. But what was a decided critique of then dominant forms of social history, and an equally decided affirmation of the ‘cultural turn’, was just as much a call for rethinking the concept of the social and with it new possibilities for social history itself; it did not advocate doing away with social history.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 322.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Johnson, ‘Culture and the Historians’, in John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson (eds.), *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London, 1979); Bill Schwarz, ‘“The People” in History: The Communist Party Historians’ Group, 1946–56’, in Richard Johnson et al. (eds.), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London, 1982); Renato Rosaldo, ‘Celebrating Thompson’s Heroes: Social Analysis in History and Anthropology’, in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> David Sutton, ‘Radical Liberalism, Fabianism and Social History’, in Johnson et al. (eds.), *Making Histories*; Raphael Samuel, ‘British Marxist Historians, 1880–1980:

story is more complex, for Britain's liberal left was by no means the sole progenitor of social history in its post-Second World War forms.<sup>7</sup> In the USA the radical-liberal elements were marked too (though Marxism was more circumscribed), for indigenous intellectual traditions were more apparent;<sup>8</sup> there also the strong social science influence contributed to similar notions about 'society'.<sup>9</sup>

Parallel to this reluctance to confront the foundational concept of social history has been a similar neglect of the concept of 'culture' in the term 'cultural history'. An often uncritical embrace of cultural history has meant that as it has become increasingly influential a certain routinization has set in: intellectual edges that once cut have become blunt with habitual use. Indeed, much the same kind of thing was apparent in social history in its day. Nonetheless, what social history at its best did have — and what has been increasingly lost to view in subsequent developments — was a critical engagement with theory as well as with other disciplines, especially the social sciences; it in fact actively helped to theorize and politicize (in varying degrees) the approaches of those disciplines. Social history's openness to ideas was evident in, for example, the reception and influence of European Marxism, *Annales* history, and American social science.<sup>10</sup> Indeed social history, in attempting to get beyond the narrowness of established political and economic historical understandings, was challenging and innovative, carrying a political energy because it took up the big theoretical and political questions of its time in a particularly urgent way.

(n. 6 cont.)

Part One', *New Left Rev.*, cxx (1980), esp. 31–42; Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978); Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'The Fabians Reconsidered', in his *Labouring Man: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964); Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1984), 153–61; Richard Johnson, 'Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History', *History Workshop*, no. 6 (1978).

<sup>7</sup> Miles Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?', *History Workshop* 31, no. 43 (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> See the account in Sewell, *Logics of History*, ch. 2, esp. 25–40.

<sup>10</sup> For works on *Annales* published at the time, see, for example, Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca, 1976); *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke, trans. K. Folca (London, 1973).

Whether this can still be said of cultural history is open to question. The traditional concerns of social history — questions of class, the state and the economic — have been largely eclipsed; but equally lost has been the very idea that the adjective in ‘social history’ is itself of the utmost importance as a matter of continuous *theoretical* inquiry and, just as much, of political concern. Now, this appears to have happened with the adjective in ‘cultural history’ as well. The significance of these adjectives cannot be simply taken for granted, as currently seems so often the case. By comparison with the early days of social history in the 1960s and 1970s, and with the vigorous and theoretically charged disagreement that marked the cultural turn in the 1990s and earlier, a certain degree of complacency is apparent and theoretical literacy has declined. Yet, just as the possibilities for social history have changed over recent times, so, in the human sciences, have those for theory itself. And as the nature of the political itself has changed, so have the possibilities for a more politically charged history; this is a topic to which I return in my concluding section.

In terms of theory within the social sciences, there has been a veritable explosion in recent years, producing a multiplicity not only of different theories but also of intellectual ‘turns’. This has been marked in parallel by a shift away from conceptions of theory in which the test of a theory has been its generalizability. In place of that, theory as *théorie concrète* has emerged. For instance, in current anthropology the earlier ‘scientific’ understanding of theory has been superseded by (to quote Martin Holbraad) a recognition of ‘the reciprocal effect upon theory that ethnography has to offer’; so that what is at issue is not ‘a theory’s extension over ethnographic data, but the data’s capacity to extend our theoretical imagination’. The aim is therefore one of ‘intensively transforming analytical concepts as opposed to applying them to data’.<sup>11</sup> On the face of it, this view of theory should be

<sup>11</sup> Martin Holbraad, ‘The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifa (or Mana Again)’, in Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (eds.), *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London, 2007), 190. The volume as a whole represents a powerful exploration of the sorts of dialectic involved in developing *théorie concrète*: the editors, in a nicely literal sense of concrete, elevate ‘things’ themselves to a critical place in the generation of theory, and in the process put in question the distinction between the theory of anthropology’s practitioners and its subjects of inquiry. Taking issue with Bruno Latour (see n. 43 below), they excavate the nature of ontology itself, showing how the local and particular can serve to reshape the fundamentals of theory — in this

(cont. on p. 179)

congenial to historians, whose experience of the archive is analogous to anthropologists' experience of the field and fieldwork.<sup>12</sup> Both disciplines have a broadly ethnographic interest in the concrete and the particular, and in the capacity of these concerns themselves to refashion theory more in their image than has previously been the case.

Of course, there have been important exceptions to the general quiet on the theoretical and political fronts that has prevailed in recent times; notably Sewell's recent book *Logics of History*<sup>13</sup> argues for the renewal of social history, and for a new dialogue between history and the social sciences — one that attends to new understandings of the social precisely in order to make the big questions of our time come more fully into the purview of social and cultural history — above all in its argument about the nature and genesis of contemporary capitalism.<sup>14</sup> To Sewell's concern with capitalism may be added a parallel concern with the political, in particular the nature and genesis of contemporary governance, especially in its liberal and neo-liberal forms.<sup>15</sup> Among other

(n. 11 cont.)

case their powerful claim that we live in a world of many ontologies as well as many epistemologies. Their claim is that their methodology proposes how 'things' may dictate a plurality of ontologies; whereas Latour offers only a two-dimensional 'new meta-theory whereby the inclusion of non-human/human hybrids portrays everything as a network of entities that breach the object/subject divide'. Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (eds.), *Thinking through Things*, 7 (editors' intro.) There is much for historians to consider in this anthropological work.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Osborne, 'The Ordinarity of the Archive', *History of the Human Sciences*, xii, 2 (1999), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Sewell, *Logics of History*, esp. ch. 10, 'Refiguring the "Social" in Social Science: An Interpretivist Manifesto'. But, while his reading of the social and the material in this chapter is of great value, nonetheless it is essentially a semiotic one, partaking still of the conceptual dualisms argued against here: see *ibid.*, 363–9 (where, however much 'language' and the 'built environment' may be 'dialectically' related, they do in the end make up another version of the familiar distinction between language and materiality).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 77. At the same time as history has drifted away from the social sciences, large areas of the social sciences, at least in the anglophone world, have, for a variety of reasons, including the cultural turn itself, abandoned much of the historical awareness that characterized them in the 1960s and 1970s. The particular US context is significant; Sewell's book for instance needs to be understood in the context of US sociology: it serves as a powerful riposte to a predominating ahistorical positivism, often in the form of rational-choice theory. In British social science, with notable exceptions, history very often serves as a vague and off-the-peg 'background' to a resolute presentism.

<sup>15</sup> Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1999); Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, 2007); Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the*

(cont. on p. 180)

recent works in this vein, Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt's collection, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, offers a criticism of cultural history for neglecting social dimensions — though it must be said that the editors themselves offer scant consideration of the concept of the social.<sup>16</sup> And a recent survey of cultural history on the British side by Peter Mandler has rightly been criticized for its confusion of cultural history with a narrowly understood version of textuality; but neither Mandler nor his critics pay any attention to the concept of the social.<sup>17</sup> This is also the case in the work of Gareth Stedman Jones, where a Cambridge School-influenced 'linguistic approach' to the then emerging concerns of cultural history served further to compound the association of cultural history with 'discourse' — hence narrowing its remit and cutting it off further from the social sciences and questions about the nature of the social.<sup>18</sup>

Now, there are significant differences in the various national takes on social and cultural history (as Sewell's book itself indicates), even if it is the underlying similarities between the US and UK cases that are striking, certainly by comparison with the French.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, both the variety and the amorphous

(n. 15 cont.)

*Modern City* (London, 2003): see also Tony Bennett, Francis Dodsworth and Patrick Joyce (eds.), 'Liberalisms, Government, Culture', special issue of *Cultural Studies*, xxi, 4–5 (2007), intro. and articles.

<sup>16</sup> Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> For critiques of Mandler's parochial take on cultural history, see the various contributions to 'Debate Forum', *Cultural and Social Hist.*, i, 2 (2004), especially those of Carla Hesse, 'The New Empiricism', and Colin Jones, 'Peter Mandler's "Problem with Cultural History": or, Is Playtime Over?'. For Mandler's original article, see Peter Mandler, 'The Problem with Cultural History', *Cultural and Social Hist.*, i, 1 (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s', *History Workshop JI*, no. 42 (1996). For a critique of Stedman Jones and his anti-Foucault return to a narrow linguistic model, see Miguel A. Cabrera, 'Linguistic Approach or Return to Subjectivism? In Search of an Alternative to Social History', *Social Hist.*, xxiv (1999).

<sup>19</sup> Sewell gives a good account of these national distinctions, including the French: Sewell, *Logics of History*, ch. 2. In Italy cultural history has developed only fairly recently, and its historians are therefore in a position to avoid some of the turnings that cultural history has taken elsewhere. See the website of the Centre for Cultural History, based in the University of Padua, and including the universities of Bologna, Venice and Pisa — Il Centro Interuniversitario di Storia Culturale: <<http://www.centrostoriaculturale.storia.unipd.it>>.

nature of social and cultural history must be borne in mind. However, while it is necessary to acknowledge this,<sup>20</sup> there are enough similarities *across* national cases to suggest that the picture of current disciplinary configurations presented below is a credible generalization.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, it is less the current state of play that is of concern here than some possible ways forward. Therefore, in order to engage with current disciplinary frameworks in a productive way, this article proceeds in the following manner. First, there is a brief consideration of some of the uses and limitations of the concept of culture in cultural/social history. Secondly, recent understandings of the social which may be of value for social and cultural history alike are examined in a theoretical and then historiographical manner. This consideration of the social leads in turn to discussion of recent understandings of power, particularly how these relate to the nature of materiality and of the material world — for it is the case that the inclusion of materiality in our thinking about the social is crucially important, and, in fact, it might be said that as well as the cultural turn itself there has been something like a ‘material turn’ in recent times. (This might indeed be the most significant of all recent ‘turns’, in so far as it can be distinguished from the ‘cultural turn’ generally, which is doubtful.) Thirdly, as a consequence of considering the social it will become apparent that the history of power and of the political is intrinsic to an adequate understanding of the social; so in the last main section the subject of the state provides a setting in which the theoretical positions developed earlier can be realized, however briefly, in an empirical and historical way.

<sup>20</sup> For an account of recent ‘cultural history’ works that have been undoubtedly innovative, see Colin Jones on Peter Mandler, n. 17 above. It may be noted that a number of these works draw upon the historiographical and theoretical influences which I advocate here.

<sup>21</sup> That it is so is further suggested by the recent presidential address to the American Historical Association given by the historian Gabrielle M. Spiegel. In this, while the engagement with theory is real enough, the cultural turn is reduced to a linguistic interpretation so that history comes in this account to be overwhelmingly associated with matters of meaning and representation. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ‘Presidential Address: The Task of the Historian’, *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, cxiv (2009). It is also suggested by Kocka, ‘Losses, Gains and Opportunities’.



I

CULTURE

In their usual eclectic and utilitarian way,<sup>22</sup> historians have often been uncritical and passive in importing concepts borrowed from other disciplines, while history in its turn has insufficiently contributed its particular kinds of understanding to these disciplines.<sup>23</sup> One consequence has been the indiscriminate merging together of culture and the social, as for instance in the increasingly frequent use of the category ‘cultural and social history’, where adjectival addition adds nothing to our understanding. The very distinction between the two — and the concomitant, frequently heard affirmation that ‘culture’ is implicated in the make-up of ‘social’ relationships — indicates that large parts of cultural/social history have not moved beyond the familiar mainstream binary thinking of much social science. In this understanding, metaphors of ‘construction’ and ‘constitution’ abound, signifying the purchase from the social sciences of loosely conceived concepts of social or cultural construction. What is constructed is primarily ‘identity’, something that has become a defining concern of cultural history.<sup>24</sup> Consonant with the predominating emphasis on meaning and representation, the agents of change in cultural history are frequently understood to be beliefs, meanings or narratives — agents which are often indistinct in their formulation and in their perceived historical operation. The more ‘linguistic’ the version of the cultural turn that is taken, the more this is the case.<sup>25</sup>

In fact (as the historical sociologist Richard Biernacki has shown), in its employment of the category of culture, cultural history has done something very similar to what social history did earlier: it has simply ontologized the cultural, just as social

<sup>22</sup> As described very well in Sewell, *Logics of History*, 1–6, 12–18.

<sup>23</sup> See Sewell’s very pertinent recommendation that social scientists might learn from historians (rather than the other way around), were historians to articulate more conceptually their rich but largely implicit and unspoken understandings of temporality: *ibid.*, 6–12.

<sup>24</sup> See Frederick Cooper, with Rogers Brubaker, ‘Identity’, in Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), for a discussion of the shortcomings of some of the identity approaches.

<sup>25</sup> Tony Bennett, ‘Making Culture, Changing Society: The Perspective of “Culture Studies”’, in Bennett, Dodsworth and Joyce (eds.), ‘Liberalisms, Government, Culture’, special issue of *Cultural Studies*; Tony Bennett, *Culture: A Reformer’s Science* (London, 1998).

historians ontologized the social.<sup>26</sup> ‘Culture’ has thus become a new sort of foundational category, something that involves buying into precisely the same set of binary oppositions existing within the old concept of society which it purported to reject. Timothy Mitchell’s recent book presents a similar argument, examining how the cultural turn is often held to mark a distance from the systematic social sciences.<sup>27</sup> Yet, in practice this emphasis on culture has often left the older kinds of social science untouched, since it has failed to contest the territory on which they were established. Demonstrating that everything social is cultural left on one side ‘the existence of the other spheres, the remainder or excess that the work of social construction works upon — the real, the natural, the nonhuman’.<sup>28</sup> Insisting on the centrality of the cultural tacitly recognizes that the material, and the economic in particular, are separate entities; or, otherwise, it removes the material and the economic from the scope of discussion and relegates from history altogether. Purely culturalist understandings of the cultural turn, as Mitchell argues,

intentionally or not, depend upon maintaining the absolute difference between representations and the world they represent, social constructions and the reality they construct. Maintaining these distinctions therefore leaves ‘hard’ social scientists (like economists) undisturbed, for they can point out they are not concerned with the history of representations but with the underlying reality their models represent.<sup>29</sup>

From a similar perspective, Tony Bennett has recently argued that differences between culture, economy and society are not ontological but historical, and that what he calls ‘public’ is a matter of power and its articulation by institutions.<sup>30</sup> What all

<sup>26</sup> Richard Biernacki, ‘Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History’, in Bonnell and Hunt (eds.) *Beyond the Cultural Turn*.

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, 2002), 2–3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–6.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, ‘Making Culture, Changing Society’, and intro. in Bennett, Dodsworth and Joyce (eds.), ‘Liberalisms, Government, Culture’, special issue of *Cultural Studies*. In the task of exploring the history of the differentiation of categories — in this case the social — clear distinctions need to be drawn between different historical and analytical orientations to the social in the usage made of the terms by historians and sociologists. Bennett’s understanding of the differentiation of ‘culture’, of course entirely legitimate, is shaped by a notion of the social as it emerged in the course of the eighteenth century, and especially as this has been articulated by Foucault and his account of the Classical Age. Historians, as opposed to, say, sociologists, might have a range of different understandings of the social, depending on which one is in question. See the various contributions to Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Social in Question: New Bearings in*

(cont. on p. 184)

this strongly suggests is that a major task of historians is to chart the process whereby culture, economy and society emerged and differentiated themselves one from another — and also, it should be added, from the political.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the tendency in cultural history to work with the separations and distinctions that Mitchell discusses as if they are historical givens can be seen as particularly ironic, for these distinctions themselves have an ineradicably historical and social form. The powers that this separation of things and representations serves, therefore, are themselves political, governmental and indeed academic, which means they are inscribed in different ways in academic disciplines as a widespread and very powerful intellectual inheritance, and are in fact part of academic common sense. Thus tracing the history of things and ideas, of representation and the material, inevitably involves self-awareness of their inscription in the history of disciplinary practice.

Meanwhile, cultural history goes on working with the old and unhelpful conceptual apparatus: on the one hand lumping culture and the social together (and in numerous versions conceiving of culture and the social as both made up of *organized structures of meaning*); and on the other, in contradictory fashion, differentiating the two as being composed of *different* things (as will already have become apparent in the discussion of the cultural/social history distinction itself). There remains a powerful understanding of cultural history as essentially about representations, and thus in some sense primarily about ‘texts’, which if not exclusively verbal are mainly so. By the same token, social history is presumably

(n. 30 cont.)

*History and the Social Sciences* (London, 2002), especially that of Catherine Pickstock, who traces the emergence of one form of the social as early as the theology of Duns Scotus: Catherine Pickstock, ‘The Mediaeval Origins of Civil Society’.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Poovey has been of critical significance in accounting for processes of differentiation, as of course have many historians of science and technology: Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998); Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago, 1995). See also her recent *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2008). Having in earlier work attended to the emergence of the ‘modern fact’ in relation to the elaboration of a distinct sphere of the economy and the economic, particularly in relation to political economy, in this latest book Poovey switches her attention to the accelerating differentiation of that which is not fact — namely the fancy and the imagination. See the discussion of this work, by Patrick Joyce and others, forthcoming in *Jl Cultural Econ.*

about that which is *not* representation — though it is not clear what that is. This contradictory understanding of culture/the social is apparent, for example, in Bonnell and Hunt’s *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, where the familiar oxymoron of several scholarly literatures is once again employed, with so-called ‘material culture’ being seen as one of the ‘arenas in which culture and social life most obviously and significantly intersect, where culture takes concrete form and these concrete forms make cultural codes most explicit’.<sup>32</sup> As Chris Otter observes, in this reading, ‘Matter is where immaterial culture materializes: its only purpose is to *mean*. Outside of these meanings, it has no history whatsoever’.<sup>33</sup> This way of looking at things — meanings and representations on the one side, and materiality and social relations on the other — therefore presents us once again with the replication of that division of the world which the cultural turn originally set out to counter. Such a division represents a serious impediment to new and productive forms of history.

II

THE SOCIAL

Whatever the neglect of the concept of the social in cultural history (and to some degree in social history too), it is difficult to avoid it. As Keith Baker’s brief but brilliant history of the social argues, in Western culture since at least the eighteenth century the concepts of the social and of society have replaced religion as what he calls ‘the ultimate ground of order’, and the ‘underlying generalized ontological signification of the totality of complex inter-relatedness that we understand as constituting the basic reality of human existence’.<sup>34</sup> ‘History’ has provided a similar ontological ground, just as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the social accrued to itself ‘laws’ which explained the grounds

<sup>32</sup> Bonnell and Hunt (eds.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 11 (editors’ intro.).

<sup>33</sup> Chris Otter, ‘From the Social to the Collective: Writing Posthumanist British History’, unpubd seminar paper.

<sup>34</sup> Keith M. Baker, ‘Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History’, in Willem Melching and Wyger Velema (eds.), *Main Trends in Cultural History* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1994); and see the utilization of Baker’s argument in Joyce (ed.), *Social in Question*, editor’s intro.; also Sewell, *Logics of History*, 321–8.

of order. 'Culture' has also stood for the symbolically constituted ground of human existence, especially in anthropology; and so, latterly, has language.<sup>35</sup> Now, as Sewell observes, the social is not only ambiguous and polysemous, but also peculiarly vague and indeed mysterious. This is perhaps related to its emergence out of a framework of religion, something which may also be connected with its distinctive inclusiveness and its durability. It still tends to subsume the historical, the cultural and language: but when it is juxtaposed to those terms this subsuming is much qualified or negated. Therefore, the ambiguity and vagueness of the social do *not* make the term vacuous. On the contrary, it is replete with meanings, going back beyond the Enlightenment to at least the Reformation.<sup>36</sup> And it is, indeed, the very fullness and suggestiveness of its meanings that makes its use so necessary — even unavoidable.

Thus it is that the social stands in need of constant theoretical scrutiny and reinterpretation. This scrutiny need not begin *de novo*; it has, first, the long tradition of social history itself to draw upon. As Thomas Osborne remarks, 'One might argue . . . that the notion of the social for social historians themselves was never a fixed category (invoking hard and fast philosophies of history); its use was always in its malleability and its promiscuity'.<sup>37</sup> Even if the social history tradition has in part ossified, its record of engagements between theory and practice (*théorie concrète* indeed) remains to be employed. That is one route to rethinking the social. The route taken here, however, is a consideration of the nature of 'the social' as it has recently emerged in certain key developments in the social sciences — and the obvious place to begin is with social theory. Here, for many years, scholars have been attempting to arrive at new understandings of the social which overcome the dualisms that have bedevilled the social sciences, and which still form a great deal of their disciplinary common sense. In this attempt, what may in general be called the *processual* (as opposed to *structural*) understandings of the social that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s have in turn given

<sup>35</sup> Sewell, *Logics of History*, 326.

<sup>36</sup> Baker, 'Enlightenment and the Institution of Society', *passim*; Pickstock, 'Mediaeval Origins of Civil Society'.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Osborne, 'History, Theory, Disciplinarity', in Joyce (ed.), *Social in Question*, 77.

rise to new concepts and analytical tools.<sup>38</sup> In Britain there has been the development of a ‘post-societal sociology’, one that in dispensing with the notion of ‘society’ as a reification is attentive to the mutable, to the provisional, and to practice — both in terms of what it sets out to explain in the world, *and* in the character of the sorts of explanations it offers.<sup>39</sup>

This serves as a critique of orthodox notions of the dualisms of structure and agency, of structure and culture, and obviously of ‘society’ and ‘culture’ even in their dialectical forms. Consequent upon the major ‘turn’ of the cultural, there has (in the USA as well as in Britain) been a series of what might be called secondary ‘turns’ — ‘empirical’, ‘affective’, ‘descriptive’ and so on — which all to one degree or another build upon and develop this critique, seeking in the process to ‘move beyond documentary positivism, simplistic notions of causality, and quasi-philosophical social theories of change’.<sup>40</sup> To simplify greatly, there are two principal aspects of these complex intellectual currents. The first is related to questions of agency, and the second to questions of phenomenology, to modes of being in the world — a good deal of which is summed up in the term ‘affect’. ‘Affect’ has registered as much and probably more in the humanities than in the social sciences. The sociologist Nigel Thrift recently defined ‘affect’ as denoting an approach that attempts to capture the ‘onflow’ of everyday life by attending to the biological and the precognitive rather than to consciousness.<sup>41</sup> In the light of this, ‘affect’ can be seen as

<sup>38</sup> In the terms of Zygmunt Bauman, for example, these include concepts like ‘sociality’, which unlike ‘society’ aim to encompass the fluidity and liquidity of social formations in the modern world: Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London, 1992), 39–42, 53–7, 189–93. The line of thinkers in this enterprise is long and very diverse: for example, the work not only of Bauman but of Giddens, Touraine and Bourdieu, among others. For a consideration of this intellectual sea change in relation to class and the social, see the Oxford reader, *Class*, ed. Patrick Joyce (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> John Urry, ‘Introduction’ and ‘Conclusion’ to ‘Sociology Facing the Next Millennium’, special issue of *Brit. J. Sociology*, li, 1 (2000). See also the other contributions in this issue.

<sup>40</sup> See, especially, the anniversary issue of the *British Sociological Review*, lvi (2008), including the editors’ introduction: Tom Osborne, Nikolas Rose and Mike Savage, ‘Introduction: Inscribing the History of British Sociology’, quotation at p. 9. The issue represents what might be called the ‘descriptive term’, in which there is a shift from emphasizing causality to description itself. See also Patricia Ticineto Clough (ed.) *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, NC, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, and Affect* (London, 2007), appendices 5–6.

concerned with practices, conceived of as corporeal routines stable enough to reproduce themselves over time. These practices and routines are inseparable from the material practices and things through which they are brought into being, above all in contemporary life in mass consumer capitalism.<sup>42</sup> Obviously, questions about agency are closely related to this: agency is opened to new perspectives when the precognitive realm of emotions and states-of-being more generally are understood in terms that deny traditional dualistic ontologies. The title of Thrift's book, *Non-Representational Theory*, indicates clearly enough the common drift of both approaches: post-humanist, anti-individualist, relational, and hence concerned with moving the agenda of inquiry beyond questions of meaning and representation, at least as these are presently understood. Nonetheless, the relevance of theories of 'affect' to many of the traditional concerns of cultural history will be apparent.

The interest in agency owes much to the work of Bruno Latour,<sup>43</sup> although his work is only one of the influences involved in the 'science studies' agenda that has been so important. Because this approach is more directly concerned with the nature of materiality, because it so directly engages with the nature of the social, and because questions of agency are so pertinent to historical writing, I concentrate on this aspect more than on the phenomenological. The crucial intellectual move regarding agency and the social is one that moves away from notions of a coherent social totality, towards the erasure of familiar conceptual distinctions between the natural and the social, the human

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–18.

<sup>43</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005). Also, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Hemel Hempstead, 1993); Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999); Bruno Latour, 'When Things Strike Back: A Possible Contribution of "Science Studies" to the Social Sciences', in *Brit. J. Sociology*, li, 1 (2000); Bruno Latour, 'Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social', in Joyce (ed.), *Social in Question*.

<sup>44</sup> This line of thinking runs from Foucault and Deleuze through to actor-network theory, and post-constructivist science studies, including Latour, Michel Callon and John Law. In John Law's account of modernity he draws on the work of his colleague Bruno Latour, who locates the arbitrary division of the world historically in terms of modernity itself. In turn, in his *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour is heavily indebted to a classical work in the history of science and technology, namely Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, 1985). See John Law, *Organizing Modernity: Social Order and Social Theory* (Oxford, 1993).

and the non-human, and the material and the cultural — divisions that are all in the first place predicated on the immaterial/material divide. The social, in this intellectual departure, is seen to be performed by material things just as much as by humans, so that labelling one thing a person and another a machine, or one thing material and another thing not, is not a given in the order of things but is itself a product of the ordering of people and things that make up ‘the social’ in the first place. The general idea here, therefore, is that the social does not lie outside the actors and networks in which it is located (in ‘society’ or ‘nature’, say). Thus ‘society’ is seen to be radically contingent rather than necessary — an interpretation marked by a keen apprehension of the difficulty and complexity of achieving order. The social and society are viewed in terms of the ‘path building’ and ‘order making’ of the networks and the actants involved (the latter is a better word than actors for describing non-human as well as human elements).<sup>45</sup> The task of analysis involves following the actants and the networks themselves, particularly those that become ‘strategic’ because of the number of connections they make possible in a highly contingent world.

One way of elucidating this further is by employing spatial metaphors: thus Latour writes about a ‘flat’ social, instead of received understandings of a surface/depth one.<sup>46</sup> It is the latter that still suffuse common sense and much of academic usage: when we talk, for instance, of the ‘social context’ or the social setting or the social ground of something, and above all when we speak about notions of ‘social construction’. But ‘social context’ is meaningless when the distinction between text and context is dissolved, as it is here; and ‘social construction’ is equally meaningless because it automatically presupposes a distinction between what is and what is not the social (the latter in practice usually meaning the material). Similarly, still prevalent if often unacknowledged notions of the social as akin to either a structure or an organism are undermined. For, in this ‘flat’ social, forms of addressing the social that are part of disciplinary common sense (such as foreground and background, figure and context, actor and system, and hence micro and macro) are all dissolved.

<sup>45</sup> This paragraph draws on John Frow, ‘Matter and Materialism: A Brief Prehistory of the Present’, in Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce (eds.), *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, Routledge, forthcoming.

<sup>46</sup> Bruno Latour, ‘How to Keep the Social Flat’, in his *Reassembling the Social*.



Historical outcomes and events, therefore, are *not* the reflection of something else which lies hidden beneath the surface of things. It is the ‘surface’ itself that signifies.

As well as a ‘flat’ social replacing ‘society’, the process of social ordering itself replaces the traditional model of social order. Consequently, questions of agency come to the fore and take precedence over questions of identity, representation and meaning, the characteristic concerns of cultural history. From these new perspectives on the social, the central questions are not about meaning but about action and agency — how these are mobilized and performed by a vast array of human and non-human actors (performed through the working out of meanings, but not by that alone). As Otter remarks, ‘Action is not simply something humans do: in a collective, action is distributed between multiple agents’.<sup>47</sup> This notion of the social as a ‘collective’ of different agencies is helpful, enabling us to differentiate between the human and the non-human or the animate and the inanimate, not with respect to their capacities for agency but in terms of the interactions that exist between them. Although it has of course been emphasized in cultural and social history, agency has tended to be seen from an anthropocentric and humanist perspective, dwelling on individual and collective actions and on intention, or, alternatively, has been conceived in highly structure-like or organic-like ways as manifestations of what is in one sense or another hidden below the surface.

Now, these two aspects or strands of inquiry, evident in revisionist social theory, are sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory. For instance, agency-centred approaches recognize that human subjects acquire their powers from the powers of the networks with which they interact, and so there is an ineradicable materiality to human subjectification. However, ‘affect’ in the form of, say, emotions and memory is not well captured simply through an understanding of how different agencies interact. At the same time, neither approach is very good for explaining inequalities and other differences of access to networks that different parties had — the political economy of agency and affect

<sup>47</sup> Otter, ‘From the Social to the Collective’; also Chris Otter, ‘Making Liberalism Durable: Vision and Civility in the Late Victorian City’, *Social Hist.*, xxvii (2002); Chris Otter, ‘Cleansing and Clarifying: Technology and Perception in Nineteenth-Century London’, *Jl Brit. Studies*, xliii (2004).

(as it were), something that is always historical.<sup>48</sup> Both currents, while not inherently inimical to history, are not in general marked by a historical awareness. In the work of Latour, for example, the accent on contingency and on description as explanation (a reaction to structure-like understandings of the social) is so marked that there are no satisfactory accounts of pre-existing formations of agencies and powers, and of how those relate to newly emerging ones. It has frequently been pointed out that this makes the relevance of accounts of what actors do theoretically unmanageable, likewise the adequacy of explanations of outcomes.

All this suggests that a third element is necessary: one that is more historical and more aware of the operations of power, but which also builds upon the advances of the other two strands of inquiry.<sup>49</sup> One such approach (developing, in fact, in a similar intellectual space to the other two)<sup>50</sup> is that of 'governmentality'.<sup>51</sup> Governmentality is that area of study, developing in the wake of Foucault, which is interested in the governance of conduct in all its forms, especially but not exclusively those of politics and the state. It recognizes that 'the social' is itself to be seen as a product of different powers, the drivers of which have always to be understood historically. These powers, human and non-human, involve the harnessing of agencies that in turn create

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of the drawbacks and differences of different aspects, see Chris Otter, 'Locating Matter: The Place of Materiality in Urban History', in Bennett and Joyce (eds.), *Material Powers*.

<sup>49</sup> The influence of historical work itself, and dependence on historical narratives arising from this work, has, however, been far from absent in the work on affect and agency in social theory: on the contrary, the history of science and technology and in turn its impact on science studies has been crucial in opening up the question of the role of material things and processes in the politics of knowledge (see n. 44 above).

<sup>50</sup> For a useful account of the relationships between science studies and sociology, especially political sociology/governmentality, see John Law, 'On Sociology and STS', *Sociol. Rev.*, lvi (2008).

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose (eds.), *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationalities of Government* (London, 1996); Rose, *Powers of Freedom*; Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, 2nd edn (London, 1999); Rose, *Politics of Life Itself*; Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London, 1999); Graham Burchill, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (London, 1991); Mike Gane and Terry Johnson (eds.), *Foucault's New Domains* (London, 1993). The pioneering work of Paul Rabinow has been of fundamental importance for this development, and Rabinow was of course closely involved with Foucault during Foucault's time at the University of California, Berkeley. See for instance, Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago, 1995).

rationalities and technologies of power. Particularly in relation to questions of power and the political, governmentality studies have drawn very powerfully and substantially upon the other two currents described above, and developed them further. This has also been manifest in the way in which interest in governmentality has taken a decidedly historical turn in recent years, with historians developing these departures across historical times and geographical spaces, especially in terms of the history of the political rationalities and technologies of liberalism.<sup>52</sup> In Otter's work on the politics of light and vision, for instance, or in that of James Vernon on hunger and nutrition, or in my own work on the city,<sup>53</sup> liberal subjectivity is seen to be inconceivable without the agency and the 'affects' of urban and pedagogic infrastructures — such as running water and road paving in the cities, an agency itself maintained by armies of engineers, inspectors and manual workers, and in turn by the multiple agencies that these engaged. Indeed, in the course of the nineteenth century modern versions of the 'social' in Britain emerged precisely around questions of the provision of infrastructure and public health; while this was particularly so in other rapidly urbanizing and industrializing states at the time.

As a way of further elucidating these matters, more systematic attention is now given to some historical works, concentrating on

<sup>52</sup> For some of these historical applications, see Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge, 1999); Matthew G. Hannah, *Governmentality and the Mastery of Territory in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, 2000); Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, 1999); Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, 1999); Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, 2001); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995); Tony Bennett, *Pasts beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800–1910* (Chicago, 2008); James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); James Vernon, 'The Ethics of Hunger and the Assembly of Society: The Techno-Politics of the School Meal in Modern Britain', *Amer. Hist. Rev.*, cx (2005). See also the work of Tom Crook, Francis Dodsworth and Gavin Rand, among others: Tom Crook, 'Power, Privacy and Pleasure: Liberalism and the Modern Cubicle', in Bennett, Dodsworth and Joyce (eds.), 'Liberalism, Government and Culture'; Francis M. Dodsworth, '"Civic" Police and the Condition of Liberty: The Rationality of Governance in Eighteenth-Century England', *Social Hist.*, xxix (2004); Gavin Rand, 'Same Difference? Liberalism, Modernity and Governance in the Indian Empire', in Simon Gunn and James Vernon (eds.), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Britain*, Univ. of California Press, forthcoming; Joyce, *Rule of Freedom*, particularly chs. 1–2.

how in particular these have handled the crucially significant category of materiality. For it is in understanding the material world that inherited and often unacknowledged assumptions about the nature of the social have to a large extent blocked the development of cultural and social history. In shifting from a theoretical to a historical approach, I must emphasize that the works now considered should not be taken as merely exemplifying the reinterpretations of the social considered so far. While there are many links between them and recent social theory, the former are not to be seen as simply exemplifying the latter: the historical works considered each have their own agendas (such as the agendas of science studies and those of historical sociology), and, in the same way, the agendas of social theory have their own intellectual trajectories. Rather, the two bodies of work — theoretical and historical — can be seen, at this stage of development anyway, as providing commentary one upon the other. Certainly, the historical work shows how it is possible to make up the historical deficiencies evident in many of the theoretical approaches, for instance in the provision of novel and more capacious accounts of historical change, including how pre-existing formations of agencies and dispositions of powers are transformed into new ones. By the same token, theoretical perspectives provide new possibilities for historical work.

In another sense, the works considered here are more clearly exemplary, in that in their different empirical ways they bring out very clearly how theoretical perspectives have a real pay-off for historical work. Theoretically, the significant development they share lies in extending the activities of history and the social sciences into the realm of what — as the ‘natural’, non-human, material world — has usually been considered as beyond the ‘social’. I begin with writings at the extraordinarily productive intersection of history, the sociology of materiality, and science studies,<sup>54</sup> most of it concerning the state, my object of attention in the next section.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, in the historical sociology area, Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge, 1997); Chandra Mukerji, *Impossible Engineering: Technology and Territoriality on the Canal Du Midi* (Princeton, 2009); Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998), esp. ch. 1; Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914* (Berkeley, 1995); and, on Ireland, Patrick Carroll, *Science, Culture and Modern State* (cont. on p. 194)

First, the fine work of Chandra Mukerji on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French state concerns the ways in which the power of that state was performed in and through the land of France itself, literally in terms of the state's 'territorialization'.<sup>55</sup> This was apparent both in the fortifications at the periphery and in the gardens at the centre of the new French state. Territorialization also took material form in the dispersal of state power into French products and economic practices, encouraged and developed by the state, so that France became part of the economic landscape itself, the landscape of industrial and rural production in their everyday forms. Mukerji also considers the crucial role of major public works, such as the building of canals, in formatting in material fashion the powers of the state. However, because the contrivance of great engineering projects at the time depended upon the input of many forms of expertise, high and low, the state was the outcome of the 'distributed cognition' of its many makers.

The result was therefore not merely an expression of state power from above, but also of state-fashioning in a multi-directional way, in which stakes in the state were diverse, and so the operation of the powers of the state were correspondingly complex. While it is apparent from this work that the French state was discursively constituted and experienced, in terms of practice and materiality it was also, and perhaps mainly, produced in ways other than through discursive articulation alone. Analysing this complexity of outcomes is considerably forwarded by Mukerji's distinction between personal and impersonal rule, which she considers in terms of what she calls 'strategics' and 'logistics'. As she puts it, 'Strategics are efforts to organise human relations while logistics are efforts to organise things'.<sup>56</sup> Although they are related they need to be distinguished. Because it is involved with the natural world, 'logistics' requires a different type of power in which the often unknown and

(n. 54 cont.)

*Formation* (Berkeley, 2006). Another work that does not, however, share the theoretical literacy of the other works cited here is David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany* (London, 2006). Because of this, the book is 'resolutely human and anthropocentric', as the author puts it (p. 12); important avenues of inquiry remain unopened.

<sup>55</sup> As well as Mukerji's works cited in n. 54, see also Chandra Mukerji, 'The Unintended State', in Bennett and Joyce (eds.), *Material Powers*.

<sup>56</sup> Mukerji, *Impossible Engineering*, 214.

uncontrollable agencies of the natural world have to be accounted for. Canals leak; roads crumble; pipes burst.

Next, the work of Richard Biernacki has considered how what he calls the pragmatic form of a symbolic practice may carry messages apart from the signs these practices use.<sup>57</sup> In particular, he demonstrates how nineteenth-century German and British workers received different concepts of labour as a commodity in the actual process of using their piece-rate scales. Not only in this dimension of practice, however, but also in the spatial arrangements of factories in Germany and Britain and in the different forms of time discipline practised in both countries, contrasting notions of abstract labour were reproduced over long periods of time. Biernacki points to how an emphasis on culture *in practice* (rather than culture *of or for* practice) calls on bodily competencies that have their own structure and co-ordinating influence, extending beyond purely semantic relations in a sign system.

Seminal work on scientific experimentation in seventeenth-century Britain long ago established how material objects and processes (including the body) are the bearers of both knowledge and social relations, and therefore of 'culture'.<sup>58</sup> This and subsequent work shows how the replication of scientific tests depended on tacit bodily know-how to make and operate instruments, a capacity that was lodged in the body and in the hand, and was represented on paper or in speech only with great difficulty and much inadequacy. Forms of understanding were transformed by a non-verbal enculturation of the body.<sup>59</sup> More recent work in this vein indicates how natural knowledge is embodied and materialized in different historical forms, including knowledge seemingly as abstract as mathematical physics.<sup>60</sup> In the work of Peter Becker and William Clark, the formation of those key figures of modernity, the bureaucrat and the academic, is seen to be the outcome of the material forms of the 'office', including (and especially) paperwork and the physical forms of their actual

<sup>57</sup> Richard Biernacki, 'Work and Culture in the Reception of Class Ideologies', in John R. Hall (ed.), *Reworking Class* (Ithaca and London, 1997).

<sup>58</sup> As well as Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, see also Christopher Lawrence and Stephen Shapin (eds.), *Science Incarnate: Historical Embodiments of Natural Knowledge* (Chicago, 1998).

<sup>59</sup> Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Warwick, *Masters of Theory: Cambridge and the Rise of Mathematical Physics* (Chicago, 2003).

working environments.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Miles Ogborn's recent work on the East India Company demonstrates how, across several centuries, the material forms and practices of writing embedded British colonial power.<sup>62</sup> Thus, in terms of 'affect', historians have perhaps as much to teach social scientists as vice-versa.

Parallel to some of these studies — coming from a much more theoretical and indeed philosophical direction, but having an empirical purpose, however heterodox — is the innovative work of Manuel DeLanda.<sup>63</sup> This provides what DeLanda calls a 'non-linear' history of the last millennium, in which matter is brought directly into historical explanation; his account is shaped by the ways in which, over the long term, matter and energy have transformed and in turn have been transformed by their passage through human populations. This reminds us of the significance for environmental history of this sort of work, including the politics of environments, and it links to studies in somewhat different veins, such as that of Mitchell on the history and politics of carbon energy.<sup>64</sup> DeLanda also makes considerable use of the work of that very great historian of the material world Fernand Braudel, and of others of the *Annales* School. There is indeed a pleasing circularity here: what was once the major influence on the old social history (expressed in part in the aspiration to *histoire totale*) might, hopefully, turn out to be a major influence on the new. There is no doubt that Braudel's work is of foundational significance for the sorts of departure signalled here — but this will be a Braudel seen in the light of intellectual changes that have occurred subsequent to his structuralist sensibility.

Although much of the work mentioned so far concerns the history of power and the political, that of Ken Alder is an especially useful way to introduce a more focused consideration of

<sup>61</sup> Peter Becker and William Clark, *Little Tools of Knowledge: Historical Essays on Academic and Bureaucratic Practices* (Ann Arbor, 2001); see also Peter Becker and Rüdiger von Krosigk (eds.), *Figures of Authority: Contributions towards a Cultural History of Governance from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Brussels and Oxford, 2008).

<sup>62</sup> Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago, 2007).

<sup>63</sup> Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York, 1997); Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> Timothy Mitchell, 'Carbon Democracy', research paper. My thanks to Timothy Mitchell for making this paper available to me.

these aspects.<sup>65</sup> Alder's work concerns the efforts of eighteenth-century state military engineers in France to produce functionally identical artefacts, for example weaponry of all sorts. Encountering the resistance of merchants and artisans, military engineers defined these artefacts with instruments — technical drawing and tools — to produce a degree of deliberate and controlled variability. Such 'manufacturing tolerance', as Alder terms it, was then refined by engineers in increasingly rule-bound ways in order to forestall further subversion. These new standards of production arose from the social conflict of the state with these different groups; and so the standards can be understood as both reproducing and also partially resolving this conflict, doing so through material forms which appeared to take on the nature of 'objectivity'.

The creation of 'manufacturing tolerance' in the production of artefacts operated in relation to the emerging political toleration of the French state for its citizen-producers. In this period, the state's rules regarding the invention, production and consumption of artefacts came to be defined in formal terms, rather than in terms of particularistic privileges granted on an individual basis. More generally, economic relationships between the state and its citizen-producers were henceforth defined in public terms, rather than as a matter of private law or of the moral obligation of subjects. These developments were of a piece with the emergence of manufacturing tolerance as a way to define the boundary between the state's need for commodities and the right of its subjects to make an economic livelihood. The juridically limited state and the decentralized capitalist order which emerged at the end of the eighteenth century thus put an end to the particularistic legal status which both persons and artefacts had enjoyed for most of the *Ancien Régime*. As Alder says, we might even conclude that henceforth objects could in some sense be considered 'objective'.

It is precisely this 'engineering in', and subsequent reproduction of, culture and social relations in material objects, and vice versa (including the forms of 'truth' present in notions of apparent objectivity), that is considered in so much of this work. As is apparent in Alder's work on the French state and in my own on the

<sup>65</sup> Ken Alder, *Engineering the Revolution: Arms and Enlightenment in France, 1763–1815* (Princeton, 1997); Ken Alder, 'Making Things the Same: Representation, Tolerance and the End of the Ancien Regime in France', *Social Studies of Science*, xxviii (1998).



British city — for example in the apparent reality and objectivity of technical systems which are in fact techno-social systems — it is clear that this distinction between representation/culture and the real/material is decidedly a question of power; so the employment of the category of the ‘cultural’ solely as representation, and the history of its emergence as representation, always involves an understanding of power and indeed very often of the political.

This discussion of the social can be concluded by considering one particularly valuable deployment of these newer developments, especially since (as with Alder, Biernacki and Mukerji) it draws attention to the economy and the economic, which has been ignored by cultural historians even more emphatically than the social. I have in mind Mitchell’s recent *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. Cultural history has not only neglected the economic; it has also, with honourable exceptions,<sup>66</sup> neglected the state. The great value of this book is that it plays out in detail — in terms of the history of twentieth-century colonial and post-colonial Egypt — the argument that ‘the distinction between the material world and its representations is not something that we take as the starting point. *It is an opposition that is made in social practice*’.<sup>67</sup> In twentieth-century Egypt, ‘The economy became arguably the most important set of practices for organizing what appears as the separation of the real world

<sup>66</sup> George Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, 1999). There is indeed a new, more ‘cultural’ reading of the economy and the economic, for instance in the important initiative in the history of consumption of Frank Trentmann and others, where culture and the economic are seen to be linked. This is also the case in the new history of economic thought that is also emerging. For example, Martin Daunt and Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Worlds of Political Economy: Knowledge and Power in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Basingstoke, 2004). And, of course, there is the considerable literature on the history of work and of class, represented in the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ of the 1980s and 1990s, which shows clearly how it is now impossible to write an adequate history of the economic in the sphere of production without understanding culture. However, much of this literature is at some considerable distance from the approaches I outline here. On the other hand, for an important new departure, emanating from the Centre for Research in Sociocultural Change at Manchester University and the Open University, <<http://www.cresc.ac.uk>>, which brings culture and economy together in line with the new approaches I consider here, see the first number of the *Journal of Cultural Economy* (2007).

<sup>67</sup> Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 6 (my emphasis); see also p. 5. In addition, see Timothy Mitchell, ‘Society, Economy, and the State Effect’, in Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture*; and Michel Callon (ed.), *The Laws of the Markets* (Oxford, 1998) for an important theoretical/empirical context for Mitchell’s account of what needs to be in place, in the human and non-human worlds, for an economy to be ‘fixed’ in position.

from its representations, of things from their values, of actions from intentions, of an object world from the realm of ideas'. As Mitchell concludes, 'the mechanisms that set up the separation preceded . . . the separation itself'; hence taking this 'separation as foundational is not the solid ground it so often seems'. And in earlier work, on the basis of the conditions upon which the twentieth-century economy was established, Mitchell has explored the making of modern practices of representation in the colonial politics of nineteenth-century Egypt.<sup>68</sup>

Historical and empirical demonstration and argument is therefore one of the great virtues of Mitchell's book, in which 'social theory' is not distinguished from empirical work but is developed in terms of it, in an instance of what is here called *théorie concrète* (Mitchell in fact calls his book a work of 'social theory'). It is also a book steeped in the social theory and empirical practices described here — for instance actor-network theory and science studies — yet it wears that theory lightly, with a garb of empirical demonstration and theory-exploration, so that it (like the other works considered), speaks directly to historians, given their widespread anxieties and reticence about 'theory'. By the same token, the ahistorical character of much social science work is highlighted. All these works demonstrate the unity not only of practice and theory but also of history and the social sciences, offering proof that many existing disciplinary and sub-disciplinary distinctions are as often as not an impediment to understanding.

### III

#### THE STATE

It will be apparent from the discussion so far that new perspectives on the social have the capacity to radically call in question some of our central analytical concepts. One of these, as will also be evident, is the state (though it is not the only one, and the traditional concerns of social history, including economy and class as well as culture, are far from being sidelined by new developments and indeed become available for rethinking and hence renewal). With respect to the state, when it is written about, the writing still tends to be in the familiar terms of its constitutional

<sup>68</sup> Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 5–6; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, revised edn (Berkeley, 1991).

and administrative manifestations, of its social and economic role (welfare, economic policy and so on), or of ideas or experiences of the state. In these understandings the state is decidedly an 'it'. Much the same applies in regard to the chief conceptual schools of understanding the state. That is so, whether these be the liberal and pluralist ideas which envisage the state as the autonomous and neutral regulator of society and of its rights and obligations, or the Marxist and 'elite' notions which see the state as the projection or instrument of interests and classes.<sup>69</sup>

Those different approaches notwithstanding, there does nonetheless seem to be a general consensus about what I have called the 'itness' of the state (despite its variety of historical forms and its manifold functions). This ontologizing of the state does not easily survive the critical scrutiny of the positions that I have outlined. Therefore, should we think of the state not as a thing (even though it is assuredly produced as a reification), but as something like a site of passage of and between different powers — thinking here of power in a post-Foucault vein, and including Mukerji's distinction between personal and impersonal power, strategics and logistics? The accretion or clustering of these systems of power, or more simply powers, at the level of 'the state' since the sixteenth century and earlier forms a process that in academic discourse has come to be called the governmentalization of the state, something that the state may at times drive but of which it is very often neither the author nor the master. From a parallel viewpoint the state might be thought of in terms of relationships, in particular as a constantly shifting relationship between what we are used to calling 'state' and 'society'. It is in this vein that Mitchell, for example, talks of the 'state effect', the particular configuration of state and society being seen as the outcome of the transaction of powers which are themselves diversely located in the social.<sup>70</sup>

Taking the example of bureaucracy, it has proved productive to think about the state as a site where bureaucratic power

<sup>69</sup> See the useful summary of approaches in Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, ii, *The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760-1914* (Cambridge, 1993), ch. 3. The approach I take in the present article has a certain amount in common with that of Mann, although the differences should be apparent enough, especially the different understandings of power, materiality and the social evident here.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 6.

congregates or clusters, a site in which this form of power may neither originate nor terminate. Bureaucratic forms of organization, and the powers they call upon and elaborate, emerge in many places, for example in business, the military, and within religious institutions. These then ‘migrate’, as it were, to and from the state. Clustering there, they are redeployed and multiplied, but they may also lodge themselves so firmly as to outlive the state, or to function in ways that are parasitic upon it and inimical to it, as for example in some contemporary African states.<sup>71</sup> So, it might be better to talk not of state power per se but of bureaucratic power, emphasizing the adjectival over the nominative. This view has now, in fact, begun to be dominant in the social sciences, a recent reader in the anthropology of the state drawing precisely on some of the figures considered here, for instance Foucault, Mitchell, James Ferguson and Nikolas Rose.<sup>72</sup>

Thinking about power in this way is indeed to think of the state in a ‘relational’ way. However, if the process of analysing the state through these new means is to progress then it is necessary — much more than has hitherto been the case — to explore the ways in which micro-level pluralities of power do in fact cohere (or fail to cohere) into new forms and configurations at different levels and in different ways, such as the ‘bureaucratic power’ that I have mentioned.<sup>73</sup> How then do these powers in turn become stabilized and redeployed to form ‘the state’?<sup>74</sup> In a new book in progress, *The Soul of Leviathan: Political Technologies of the Imperial British State*, I take up these questions in terms of the recognition

<sup>71</sup> James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: ‘Development’, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis, 1994).

<sup>72</sup> Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (eds.), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Oxford, 2006). For works by Ferguson and Rose, see nn. 15, 51 and 71 above.

<sup>73</sup> Foucault himself (together with much of the literature which has followed his influence) on the one hand uses a conceptual logic that decentres the state, while on the other he employs the nominative form, ‘the state’. This illustrates the central difficulty of language in the new approaches I develop here: our reliance in everyday and academic practice on concepts and terms rooted in the very epistemological and ontological distinctions that themselves are under scrutiny.

<sup>74</sup> The view of the state taken here involves a move away from the traditional notion in political theory and the philosophy of power as the expression, in the form of the state, of domination and sovereignty. However, while sovereignty in this sense is rightly criticized, as what Foucault following Hobbes called ‘the soul of Leviathan’, sovereignty itself is still a central question. See Michel Foucault, ‘Lecture Two, 14 January 1976’, in Michel Foucault, *‘Society Must Be Defended’: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani, trans. David Macey (Harmondsworth, 2003), 29.

that the ‘powers’ of which I speak (bureaucratic, pedagogical, military, among others) are always an assemblage of the constituents that make them up. These constituents involve what might be called, first, big and little *tools* of power (and the little ones, like the pens, paper and handwriting of offices, not to mention the physical forms of offices themselves, are of as much historical importance as the big ones); secondly, *practices* or *techniques* like the self-representations and work practices of bureaucrats; and finally, *rationales* of governance such as various ethics of bureaucracy and social leadership more widely, together with the greater rationale in liberal polities of freedom itself. To understand power properly, we need indeed to start with these constituents from, as I say, the ‘bottom up’; though not in the old mould of ‘history from below’, not working from the micro to the macro, but operating multi-directionally as it were, seeking for points of articulation, for the configuration of networks, for points of stabilization, and also (by the same logic), for points of destabilization and disarticulation.

In order to make these points less abstract, I now discuss them with respect to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century British state, a state that was inherently imperial in character. In a great deal of the literature on the Imperial state the emphasis has been on ‘provincialising’ Europe and its centres of power, and so, correspondingly, on alternative models of empire based on the idea of the network and on the recognition of the importance of the local. However, the logic of the network model is that empire is central as well as local, and indeed that new understandings of the ‘central’ and the ‘local’ need to be found. The analytic fields highlighted in this article, in terms of the major theoretical and historiographical currents outlined, provide important elements of a new understanding. The important case of British India can be briefly considered in terms of the India Office, the institutional centre of British imperial rule. The fact that it was the institutional ‘centre’ in itself, as constitutionally established, is obvious enough; but what is at issue here is what a ‘centre’ is in the first place. By itself, institutional designation means relatively little; what matters is how metropole and colony, centre and local — the multiple actors and networks of empire — were brought into a qualified degree of stability. That stability was primarily but not exclusively produced by the material forms of bureaucracy, paperwork itself and the material environment of this work in

the shape of the office:<sup>75</sup> in short, what bureaucrats did and what they did it with, which usually seems to be the last thing that students of the state consider. In the space available I can do no more than outline this general question of the place and functioning of ‘centres’ in network-directed understandings of the state. 5

Formed in 1858, the India Office replaced the governance of the commercial East India Company.<sup>76</sup> It represented a new phase of colonial intervention in the form of direct political government after the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857. The materiality of paper and writing were especially important in India, given that Indian governance involved governance at a distance, indeed multiple distances, and so the India Office in London ostensibly governed all of ‘India’, not only the imperial administration as it were ‘on the ground’ — earlier in Calcutta and then in Delhi — but also the individual political units that made up the complex political formation that was India (Presidencies, Provinces, and so on). In India itself there were different governmental and administrative systems within different administrative levels and political units of so-called British India, often far removed from India Office control or indeed knowledge. These differences marked the whole edifice of British rule, down to the level of the individual District Commissioner and indeed that of the village itself as a political structure. Therefore, the supposedly head office in London often had relatively little if anything to do with the actual day-to-day governance of India. 10 15 20 25

This should not mislead us: the material powers that bureaucracy represented performed the state in such a way that the material forms and practices of administration itself (reports, minutes, the primary tool of the file itself, and so on) served to ‘centre’ the imperial state and in the process redistribute power. While there is much emphasis in the historiography of British India on the disjunctions of empire, the constitution of ‘centres’ recalls the basic, but sometimes lost, question of how the empire could work at all, in the sense of achieving direction and continuity in the midst of 30

<sup>75</sup> Patrick Joyce, ‘Filing the Raj: Political Technologies of the Imperial British State’, in Bennett and Joyce (eds.), *Material Powers*.

<sup>76</sup> For recent work on the East India Company, as well as Ogborn, see H. V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge, 2006); see also the standard works on the India Office: in its policy formation role, Arnold P. Kaminsky, *The India Office, 1880–1910* (London, 1986); and on its archives, Martin Moir, *A General Guide to the India Office Records* (London, 1988).

profound centripetal tendencies. ‘Centres’, to employ a short-hand term, can be envisaged as not taking only a solely institutional form (though the latter is obviously of importance in accounts of the state). Other forms are discussed in some of the works already considered, where the bureaucratic institution is not the chief object. That is apparent in Mitchell’s study of how the governance of the British Empire, and the governance of colonial Egypt in particular, was predicated on the creation of ‘the economy’ as a bounded, autonomous, systemic and self-regulating entity.<sup>77</sup> It was a ‘national economy’ — and a foundation for the creation of the ‘modern’ state of Egypt. From another point of view, Mukerji’s work on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France deals with how state power was performed within the French landscape.<sup>78</sup> Thus, in the one case the state can be understood to be ‘centred’ in terms of a supposedly unitary national economy, and in the other in terms of physical territory.

Critical to all these developments was the production of abstraction. Bureaucratic institutions deal with and themselves generate the abstractions of administration and governance (through the means and in the form of files, etc.). The administrative systems these make up (for example filing systems) and the knowledge they produce are in turn related to the way in which, during the nineteenth century, the state became increasingly ‘technical’. We think of the technical in terms of how the operations of power have historically become linked to science and technology as commonly understood. The development of processes of abstraction, objectification and calculation/standardization is closely related to the development both of science and technology and of modern power, especially in the form of the state. By ‘technical’ a broader ‘technicization’ of power may be denoted, present in everyday bureaucratic office technologies, but also in the very idea of a professional and dedicated bureaucracy — in which, in Britain in the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, politics and administration came to be differentiated, so that administration itself became ‘technical’. In both senses of the technical, the modern state has come to depend on abstraction as the basis of what in this

<sup>77</sup> Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, *passim*.

<sup>78</sup> Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles*; Mukerji, *Impossible Engineering*.

context can only be called its techno-power. For instance, the ever-increasing capacity to scope, measure and calculate generated statistically defined populations and things which were in their nature abstract.

In this, writing itself was of fundamental and perhaps surprising importance, in that the quotidian technology of the state during the period of its great mid to late nineteenth-century emergence was hand (low rather than high) technology, rather like the development of the contemporaneous 'Industrial Revolution', which in large measure depended on hand power, strength and skill.<sup>79</sup> As Ogborn observes of the East India Company factory of the eighteenth century:

The aim was to construct a controlled space for writing and calculation which would seek to ensure the accessibility of the books, the orderly conduct of accountancy, the absence of the selfish interests of factory chiefs, and all that depended upon it. Understanding this specific and small-scale geography of writing and writing practices as an ordering of the relationships between power and knowledge in the making of global trade, means recognising the social and cultural relationships that lie right at the heart of the economic arrangements of mercantile capital.<sup>80</sup>

Something similar was evident in the nineteenth-century India Office, where the writing and calculation that went on in just such controlled spaces ensured the direction, continuity and perceived unity of the state. This happened at a systemic level, in terms of new paper-based means of the co-ordination of the multiple jurisdictions and powers that made up the imperial connection with India. Examples were uniform cross-institution filing systems, and increasingly precise and exhaustive archiving systems operating across and within dispersed geographical entities, both of which helped to put in place enduring if always unstable new information systems. Therefore, the engines of change in terms of imperial history become the files themselves together with the often obscure individuals who engineered their continual reinvention. It is these things and these people that need to figure in new narratives of historical change.<sup>81</sup> Government 'at a distance'

<sup>79</sup> On the contemporary acceleration of state development, see C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004), esp. ch. 7.

<sup>80</sup> Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, \*\*\*.

<sup>81</sup> Joyce, 'Filing the Raj'; also Patrick Joyce, 'Postal Communication and the Making of the British Technostate', Centre for Research in Sociocultural Change, working paper, no. 54 (Aug. 2008), online at <<http://www.cresc.ac.uk/publications/>

(cont. on p. 206)



in British India in turn invokes the idea, present in the work of Latour and others, of ‘action at a distance’. Material objects and processes, for example ‘immutable mobiles’ such as navigation devices and maps (not to mention files, forms and reports), serve to co-ordinate and command dispersed entities, making them objects and sometimes instruments of governance. In this way, ‘centres’ can be understood as what Latour calls ‘centres of calculation’. Empire is one obvious entity that is always dispersed in this way, and so we can speak not only in familiar fashion of a ‘Paper Raj’, but also in a much more radical sense of a whole paper empire.

Operating on a systemic level, bureaucratic materialities served to fabricate the institution of bureaucracy itself, and to produce the ‘affect’ of the bureaucrat. Again, a similar process to that of the East India Company is evident, except that now the state itself rather than capitalism came to the forefront. Ogborn notes:

It is also the case that if the ‘logic’ of capital was felt by those engaged in these forms of exchange as a ‘logic’ — as an impersonal, inexorable, and determining force — then that was exactly the effect achieved by the separations, hierarchies, and controls instituted in the factories’ writing offices as the sites of local practices of abstraction and standardisation performed upon chains and compilations of inscriptions and reinscriptions . . . It was within these restricted public spaces, and only within them, that the English East India Company could turn their concerns into an objective and controlling profit-seeking force external to their servants’ private interests, into the ‘logic’ of capital.<sup>82</sup>

As well as the logic of capital, there was in the nineteenth century the ‘logic’ of the state and bureaucracy, a logic that gradually became equally powerful, and was also experienced (to varying degrees, of course) as ‘impersonal, inexorable, and determining’. Ogborn does well to abbreviate ‘logic’, for what is involved here is not some overweening, transhistorical logic, either of capital or the state, but more the operation of different logics of practice — if logic is still not too strong a word. What is involved are embedded patterns of practice driven by the exigencies of their own operation, in which the ‘material’ and the ‘cultural’ are one. Such logics were highly qualified in their operation, unstable and

(n. 81 cont.)  
papers.html>. Here I analyse the new postal systems that were central to the communications revolution of the time, of which bureaucracy was one expression.

<sup>82</sup> Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, \*\*\*.

anything but inevitable. They are as much apparent in the seventeenth-century French state (in the ‘impossible engineering’ of the French canal system, for instance) as in the nineteenth-century British one; in both countries they led to new state forms and new perceptions of the state around the emerging figure of the proto-technocrat and his form of knowledge.<sup>83</sup>

The constitution of ‘centres’ worked at a symbolic as well as at a systemic level, however, anchoring the state in the new bureaucracy and consecrating it in a new fashion. One major aspect of this was the symbolic performance of the India Office itself, with respect to the different ‘publics’ involved in Britain, India and the Empire. Equally, performance was directed to bureaucrats themselves, in the twin senses of how they might govern others and also how they might govern *themselves* in order to govern others. In previous work I have begun to examine how the new administrative regime of the British state consequent on the reforms at mid century (themselves pioneered in East India Company days) ushered in the performance of transparency and ‘publicity’ by various means, particularly the form of the examination for different grades of the civil service.<sup>84</sup>

The abstract and the technical are in turn also closely linked to the means by which unity, legitimacy and authority were attributed to an overarching ‘state’, an entity which was in fact often a highly dispersed set of practices of government. Therefore, the ‘state’ in its modern sense became increasingly possible to envisage, and to act upon (and indeed against), as it became increasingly technical and abstract. This is precisely the point pursued in Mitchell’s work, where the naturalization of the technical is seen as central to the naturalization of the state, precisely in the form of the state as a unified totality. In ‘the rule of experts’, power took on the ‘delegated’, dispersed and hidden form of the technical — in experts, in their expertise, and in their techniques and technologies. In the realm of administration the reformed bureaucracy of nineteenth-century Britain represented just such a rule.

<sup>83</sup> Mukerji, ‘Unintended State’; Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, ‘Abstraction, Materiality and the “Science of the Concrete” in Engineering Practice’, in Bennett and Joyce (eds.), *Material Powers*.

<sup>84</sup> Joyce, *Rule of Freedom*, chs. 2–3.

IV

CONCLUSION

Jürgen Kocka describes what distinguishes social historians from other kinds of historian as follows: amongst other things,

They reject all forms of strict methodological individualism. They are not primarily interested in single biographies and specific events, but rather in collective phenomena. They try to reconstruct 'the social' including social inequality. They do not accept that the past can sufficiently be understood as a context of perceptions, experiences, discourses, actions and meanings, alone. They insist that conditions and consequences, structures and processes have to be taken seriously and brought back in. They try to combine understanding and explanation.<sup>85</sup>

With all this we can agree: there is an essential continuity to social history. At the same time, however, it is equally true that every one of the categories listed by Kocka stands in need of rethinking. This rethinking need not, of course, be in the shape of the theoretical influences mentioned here — but whether any successful refiguring of the social in social history can take place without serious engagement with them is doubtful. The means of rethinking the social have also been described in the light of what has been called here the 'theoretical imagination'. That involves a critical engagement with theory, a critical engagement of history with other disciplines, and especially a new alignment with the social sciences, which have been largely lost to view with the rise of cultural history (in the 1970s, history, if not quite the 'queen of the human sciences' which it was for the *Annales* School, had a degree of power in the social sciences which it has subsequently lost).

What have not been taken up so far are the references in the introduction to politics and the political, and to how the 'old' social history for all its problems carried a political charge. In many ways it did that precisely *because* it was theoretically engaged and challenging, its aim being to renovate the house of history, challenging theoretical foundations which were (as they always are), linked to political foundations.<sup>86</sup> The same can be said for the emphasis here upon what is called the theoretical imagination. It too has the capacity to re-engage with the political in part through a recognition that power and the political are embedded

<sup>85</sup> Kocka, 'Losses, Gains and Opportunities', 28.

<sup>86</sup> Patrick Joyce, 'The Return of History: Postmodernism and the Politics of Academic History in Britain', *Past and Present*, no. 158 (Feb. 1998).

in theoretical, disciplinary and historiographical dispositions themselves. Therefore, the kind of theoretical awareness advocated here is no less central to the idea of a *critical* history than the old social theory present in a former social history was. But, as has been seen, the nature of the theoretical has itself changed over the period, because of the turn to the concrete, to description, and to the local, and away from the developmental, the grand historical, and the politically prescriptive. 5

However, the theoretical positions I outline frequently carry a message more directly political than that of a theory-aware critical history alone,<sup>87</sup> so that there is in them, as there could be in a revived social history, a direct connection between the politics of the present and the politics of academic, intellectual activity.<sup>88</sup> Now, this political message — born out of the engagement of contemporary social science with the emerging realities of contemporary society over the last few decades — will not be congenial to everyone: its political agendas are broadly post-individualist and post-human, and do not sit well with many currently obtaining notions of the social. However, as the great governing political and historical narratives of the 1960s and 1970s have been displaced by a much more fluid and changing political and economic world, new sorts of politics as well as of academic theory and practice become necessary to engage with this new world. It would therefore appear necessary that social history engage no less with the politics than with the theory of new positions. 10 15 20 25

During the years since the 1960s and 1970s, the ‘political’ itself came in important measure to be redefined in identity terms, with cultural history itself (particularly in the USA) being closely linked to a politics which was and to some extent still is identity politics, especially the politics of race and gender. The political situation of these years likewise produced the context in which 30

<sup>87</sup> For the example of science and technology studies, see John Law on what he calls ontological politics, in his ‘Sociology and STS’, and see also the introduction to this special centenary anniversary number of the *Sociological Review*. The field of governmentality studies is itself surely indispensable to the elaboration of political positions, a concern with how we are governed being a necessary precursor to understanding how we might be better governed. This is especially so in the governance of and through freedom that marks liberal societies.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Thrift’s theoretical approach, outlined above, is avowedly political, as is that of Latour, for which see, for example, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

academic identity itself, to some extent, took on a political and ethical character, so that political identities came to be expressed in academic life itself, in the character of being an academic, and in the practising of a discipline as such.<sup>89</sup> But today we are moving towards a new political dispensation, in which the politics of identity may have less force, and the fate of capitalism and liberalism more. In the light of a collapsed world economy and an endangered planetary ecology, and in the light also of the re-engineering of the interface of the natural and the social apparent in modern science, the writing of history seems itself to be in the process of change, moving beyond the employment of history in order to find out who we are and who we might be, and towards something else. The cultural turn has indeed turned, and there is no going back (the much talked-about end of the cultural turn is to this extent a misnomer, for we are still in it). The something else that historical writing is moving towards is unclear, although it will probably not be the same thing as that learning from history which marked a good deal of the old social history. Nonetheless, as has been said, the old social history provides an invaluable legacy. However, the argument here is that justice cannot be done to this legacy unless we continually pose the question ‘What is the social?’.

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<sup>89</sup> Patrick Joyce, ‘The Gift of the Past: Towards a Critical History’, in Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan and Alun Munslow (eds.), *Manifestos for History* (London, 2007). The position developed here is one of a number of Foucault-influenced notions of ‘critical history’ in the book (see especially the contributions by Joan Scott, ‘History-Writing as Critique’, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘History and the Politics of Recognition’; also Hayden White’s ‘Afterword’). In this afterword, White lines up the post-Foucauldian critics on one side and the philosophically narrativist critics on the other, adjudicating in favour of the poetic route to a critical history rather than the theoretical. While I have nothing against poetic routes as such, in the light of current political circumstances the limitations of the philosophically and politically naive narrativist route seem apparent.