

## V. DEFIANCE

### *History in the Present Tense*

#### Where We Began

WITHIN THE VAST CORPUS of the social history accumulated since the 1960s, it's possible to find two distinct impulses or directions (though this is not the only way of telling the story). One impulse has been the desire to grasp the development of whole societies—sometimes discretely, by analyzing the forces shaping a single country's experience; sometimes internationally, by arguing about global or comparative change. The history of social structure—whether approached through class formation or through the study of social status, social inequality, social mobility, and social trends—is one context of such research, with its familiar emphases around employment, housing, leisure, crime, family and kinship, and so forth. Finding the long-run patterns and regularities of social organization and social behavior was an early passion of the social historian. The transmission from these to the great questions of early modern and modern political change provided the inspiration for many of social history's founding debates.

A second impulse has been toward studying particular locales. Village or county studies and studies of individual towns became the familiar building blocks of British historians for the big questions of Reformation and post-Reformation religious history, the origins and course of the seventeenth-century civil war, and histories of poverty and crime. Analogous tracks can be found in the historiographies of France, Germany, and other societies, too. For the modern era, the urban community study became the main practical medium for investigating class formation. The impact of Edward Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* certainly encouraged a strong "culturalist"

turn in such work, but the older materialist concerns—with wages, labor markets, apprenticeship systems, workshop regimes, mechanization and de-skilling—still remained, as did the quantitative study of strikes. Urban community studies also emphasized questions of social and geographical mobility. Such work converged on the stabilities and cohesion of working-class communities and their ability to sustain—or not sustain—particular kinds of politics.

With time, the closeness and reciprocity of these two kinds of impulse—between the macrohistorical interest in capturing the directions of change within a whole society and the microhistories of particular places—pulled apart. The two ambitions became disarticulated. Social historians didn't necessarily jettison an interest in the "big" questions, but they increasingly drew back to the intensive study of the bounded case, in which a particular community, category of workers, or event stood in for the "whole-society" argument. Such studies might deploy the full repertoire of the social historian's methods and techniques but held off from the aggregative account of what might have been happening at the level of the society as a whole. Indeed, the very logic of the community study tended toward the specificity of the local account, generalizing its relationship to larger social processes via claims of exemplification rather than aggregation.

In my own immediate field of German history, for example, these contrary impulses—the macrosocietal and the microhistorical—produced an especially strong polemical standoff. This resulted from the enormous popularity of *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) from the end of the 1970s, pioneered by a small number of innovative scholars within academic history, but with extensive resonance in a wider variety of popular and semiprofessional contexts, embracing oral histories, school projects, local compilations, memory work, museums, exhibitions, and so on. If social history in West Germany had taken off in the sixties by modeling itself as "historical social science," the new *Alltagshistoriker* now challenged this focus on impersonal forces and objective processes, calling instead for histories of popular experience that privileged the local, the ordinary, and the marginalized.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of this challenge, the older and only recently established generation reacted aggressively in defending their own project of a systematic and "critical" social science—or *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (societal history), as they called it. They upheld the paramountcy of struc-

tures and large-scale processes as the only level on which the trivial and isolated status of the local case could be overcome. They insisted on the use of quantitative and other social science methods. They reasserted the commitment to generalization and the production of social-scientific knowledge that could be called objective. Against them, the *Alltagshistoriker*, broadly corresponding to the “new cultural historians” coalescing during the 1980s in the United States, argued the importance of “historical miniatures” and small-scale contexts of historical research. Contrary to the social science historians’ claims, they insisted, these contexts formed the ground on which the full complexity of ordinary experience could be captured, requiring an interpretive and ethnological approach. The resulting debates raged especially fiercely during the 1980s, and although some *modus vivendi* may have been edged toward more recently, the battle lines have by no means been surrendered.<sup>2</sup>

This German debate sharply illustrated the gaps opening between the practitioners of different kinds of work. By the mid-1980s, the cutting edge of innovation was shifting away from social history to the so-called new cultural history, in its various forms. One aspect was again the opening up of new subject matters social historians hadn’t explored, such as the history of sexuality or histories of art and aesthetics, histories of popular culture, and histories of “strange” and exotic beliefs. Another aspect was a different interdisciplinary borrowing—no longer from the “hard” social sciences, but from anthropology, literary theory, and linguistics instead. Most important of all, social explanation and social causality were losing their hold on the imagination. Historians became ever more skeptical about the answers social analysis seemed able to deliver. “Materialist” explanations based primarily on the economy and social structure now seemed to oversimplify the complexities of human action. Previously attractive structuralisms now seemed “reductionist” or “reductive” in their logic and effects.

Instead, it became important to concentrate on meaning and the forms of perception people make and display. Above all, language and the complexities of reading required attention, because in trying to understand past actions, historians have only very limited documentary traces available. Only extremely partial and arbitrary descriptions happen to have survived, forming a thicket of representations between now and then. Those surviving traces of the past are really

“texts” requiring interpretation. In other words, rather than being a social scientist collecting, counting, and measuring data and placing everything in its social context to explain it, the historian should become an anthropologist or ethnographer, a literary critic, a linguistic analyst, and so forth. Out of this shift in focus came the so-called linguistic or cultural turn, which proved as influential as the turning to social history twenty years before. This was especially clear among new graduate students entering the profession—in the subjects and approaches that got them excited, in the kinds of dissertations they wanted to write. Angry battles raged around all of this during the 1990s, field by field, in the journals and conferences and, of course, in relation to hiring decisions and the main directions history departments wanted to take.

In telling my own version of this story—of the complicated intellectual history of the shifting interests of historians between the 1960s and now—I’ve tried to avoid rehashing the details of the polemics assailing the public sphere of the profession from the later 1980s to the mid-1990s. Those debates—the discipline’s variant of the “culture wars”—raged with particular ferocity across women’s history and labor history, reaching a variety of climaxes, sometimes protractedly, national field by national field. Some individuals and certain books and articles tended to focus the passions. Joan Scott’s 1986 article “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” probably attracted more discussion than any other single intervention. An especially ill-informed squib from Lawrence Stone ignited one set of exchanges in *Past and Present*, and a more extensive airing of differences occurred in *Social History*.<sup>3</sup> Most journals registered the new divisiveness to some degree. National meetings, such as those of the American Historical Association or the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, staged important debates, as did the various area and interdisciplinary meetings, not to mention lots of smaller conferences field by field, and countless local seminars and other events. If *postmodernism* had initially been used as the all-purpose boo-word by the opponents of the linguistic turn, *postcolonialism* was starting to take its place by the early 1990s.

These polemics were always shadowed by politics. From the late-Reagan and late-Thatcher eras into the heightened divisiveness of the 1990s, they hummed with the wider enmities we call the “culture wars.” Their tones and terms were continuous in important ways

across other disciplines. Their fallout frequently spilled into a wider public sphere.<sup>4</sup> They came to a head among historians with the publication of Bryan Palmer's *Descent into Discourse* in 1990, which, in the midst of much careful explication, nonetheless ended by caricaturing the cultural turn into the self-indulgent pretensions of a left-wing intellectual cohort who'd lost their way. Spinning self-serving rationalizations to justify their own ivory-tower isolation, while seeking substitutes for a lost materialist faith, Palmer argued, these "linguistic turners" simply lacked the staying power for the new hard times. His book reasserted the standby sufficiencies of historical materialism and social history—the class-analytical version of the ascendant social history of the 1970s centered around the collective agency of the working class—against the new prioritizing of subjectivities, identity, and discourse. In disavowing the old master categories and the classic grand narratives, he charged, the new cultural historians were also vacating the need for a critical analysis of capitalism, abandoning the very ground of a history of society per se. Their alternative amounted to an abdication, a "hedonistic descent into a plurality of discourses that decenter the world in a chaotic denial of any acknowledgment of tangible structures of power and comprehensions of meaning."<sup>5</sup>

Palmer was right in one thing, for in the course of the 1980s, the Left's traditional class-political optimism clearly became exhausted.<sup>6</sup> My own argument in this book has sought to use the political transitions of the past four decades as an essential counterpoint for the changing interests of historians. Political purposes exert a constant pressure on how those interests can be thought. Those purposes sometimes nudge and harass, sometimes jolt and inspire, but always structure and inform the questions we ask—indeed, the very questions that occur to us in the first place. In that respect, the dispiriting political experiences associated with the crisis of a class-centered socialist tradition from the late 1970s, under the combined effects of capitalist restructuring, deindustrialization, class recomposition, and right-wing political assaults, have profoundly shaped how I've been able to think about the kinds of history I do. For me, the cultural turn was appealing because its implications translated across these different sites—not only my teaching and writing, but also my political knowledge and social understanding, including the everyday settings of personal life. If the work of Edward Thompson and Tim Mason, for example, had seemed empowering for an earlier time, that of Carolyn

Steedman and others helped me think about a new and emergent set of needs.

In those terms, “politics” and “history” remained locked together—sometimes in mutuality, sometimes in contention—no less in the 1980s and 1990s than they had been before. At the fin de siècle, the intellectual perspectives associated with the cultural turn acquired a pertinence for politics that matched the earlier passions of the social historian every bit of the way. Their necessity for the tasks of finding a politics better fitted for the prevailing social relations of the restructured capitalism of the impending new century was to my mind incontestable. Amid the palpable wreckage of statist socialisms of all kinds, furthermore, the appeal of such perspectives for anyone seeking a viable basis for left-wing renewal had to be informed by a knowledge of the damage done to older assumptions about class-political agency by all the social and political changes of the preceding three decades. As a primary and sufficient basis for understanding and acting on the world, those earlier ideas of the 1960s and 1970s no longer carried conviction, at least in their already available forms. Of course, that also became the space into which the plentiful variants of contemporary localist and identitarian politics tended to settle.

Backing away from the older socialist metanarratives of capitalist critique, many of these new radicalisms emphasized the primacy of fragmentation and difference, diversity and pluralism. This isn't the place for any extensive reflection either on the character of this contemporary political conjuncture within and among societies or on the new forms of Left politics struggling, inchoately and stutteringly, to be born. I simply want to mark the now empty space that both the political forms of the socialist tradition and the analytics of an ambitious social history used to command. For more than a decade now, the emergent forms of resistance against the consequences of globalization have been learning how to coalesce. At hand since the end of the 1980s have been new structural analyses of this emergent conjuncture—of post-Fordism, of postmodernity, and of the transnational restructuring of the global capitalist economy. Yet these different registers of analysis, the “local” and the “global,” are rarely thought of together as effectively today as they were under the earlier class-analytical dispensation. One of the few recent efforts at doing so, Michael Hardt's and Toni Negri's *Empire*, specifically refuses anything close to a concrete social history of a redeployed kind.<sup>7</sup>

But to call our understanding back (in an act of materialist faith) to an older conception of the social—and thereby to make harmless the complex and difficult questions this book has been seeking to raise—would be perverse.<sup>8</sup> “Social history” simply isn’t available anymore, whether in its most coherent and self-conscious materialist versions (Marxist, *Annaliste*, social-scientific) or in the more amorphous, but still aggrandizing, forms of the 1970s. In the form of the original project, “social history” has ceased to exist. Its coherence derived from the sovereignty of social determinations within a self-confident materialist paradigm of social totality, grounded in the primacy of class. But since the early eighties, each part of that framework has succumbed to relentless and compelling critique. In the process, its prestige as the natural home for the more radical, innovative, and experimental spirits dissolved, particularly for younger people entering the profession. The “new cultural history” took its place.

### What Kind of History?

When I became a historian, I really believed the world was changeable into a better place. I never fully expected this could mean socialism, although, occasionally, events in the wider world (Salvador Allende’s election, for example, and the Portuguese revolution and the liberation of the Portuguese colonies) made the pulse quicken. Sometimes, events closer to home did that—such as the occupation of the shipyards on Clydeside in 1971, the defeat of the Heath government in 1974, and the promise of the Italian Communist Party’s Eurocommunist strategy. But my own political hopes were really far more modest: belief in a propitious conjuncture, confidence in democracy’s recorded achievements, conviction that the boundaries could be pushed outward further and further. My own childhood and what I knew of my parents’ and grandparents’ generations hardwired my outlook to an ethic of improvement in that sense, a belief in attainable futures based on the expansion of collective provision and the strengthening of public goods—modest futures, but futures available for the visiting. In that sense, politics was about imagining a modestly expanding structure of possibility—finding the openings, building the coalitions, redrawing the horizons. And, of course, “Sixty-Eight” was a key part of this too, creating the knowledge that history does, after

all, move—that it moves forward, in fact, by sudden, unexpected, dangerous, and inspiring jumps. My political education contained a synergy of prosaic and utopian hopes, converging in the image of society's betterment. Now, I don't expect Jerusalem ever to be built.

To call my earlier outlook the optimism and naïveté of a much younger person, consigning it to an archive of misplaced idealism, would be a self-serving act of condescension. Such a knowing and complacent gaze backward would blithely ignore the vastness of all the actually occurring changes in the world since the 1970s, especially since 1989–91, changes whose effects render nugatory the optimism of an earlier kind. Using my own story as a foil, I've tried, in this book, to explore some of the uneven reciprocities between "history" and "politics" that played a part in bringing us "here" from "there"—"uneven" because, whereas historians may try to think through and process the meanings of events in the political world and, hopefully, translate them into better bases for action, those reflections rarely have much direct political effect. But for clarifying our political questions, at least, history supplies the ground where we need to think.

I became a historian because I thought history could make a difference. This was never a naive belief that doing history by itself could become a transformative act. But how the past gets recuperated does have consequences for how the present can be perceived. In this book, I have discussed historians who practiced an active version of history's pedagogy in this sense—Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, Sheila Rowbotham and Tim Mason, Joan Scott and Carolyn Steedman, and such social science historians as Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Charles Tilly. Their work inspired the successive moments of social history and cultural history. In a stronger notation, one can argue that the knowledge of past struggles, collective or individual, can itself shape resistance of the present tense. Depending on how the story is told, the past provides potential sites of opposition. It allows us to say: it didn't have to happen like this. And in the future it could be different.

My first answer to the question "What kind of history?" is a history that's engaged. Second, for me, writing an engaged history always presupposed something more than just history alone. For a socially and politically engaged historian of the late 1960s, that usually meant turning to social science, in what I have called the first phase of history's interdisciplinarity. That, in its turn, meant Marxism. I've no doubts here: having access to Marxism—to the generous and eclectic flores-

cence of thinking produced by the Marxist revival, in all its varied idioms and encouragements—made me into a far better historian. Beyond the default materialism and the bedrock belief in social determination, which proved unable to withstand subsequent critique, the Marxism of the late sixties and early seventies enabled more enduring commitments. It was all about the interconnectedness of things. It gave me the confidence to tackle big problems. Even more, it promised strategies for theorizing their bigness. It offered ways of joining small questions to large and important ones. It was fundamentally about interdisciplinarity. Marxism cajoled and incited one to the best interdisciplinary ambition, to the belief that all knowledges were useful, all of them could be put to work. Usefulness observed no limits.

As I've argued for the period under consideration in this book, history's renovative energy—its new influences, new approaches, and most inspiring works—always came from the outside. That energy sprang from broader intellectual departures (ferments of theory, philosophical interventions, changes of fashion, discursive shifts), which were effective across disciplinary boundaries and traveled promiscuously through the public sphere. It came partly from other disciplines—from the social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s; from literary theory, anthropology, and cultural studies in the years that followed. It also came from outside the profession. In Britain, the most creative historians often worked outside the universities, whether in adult education and, later, the polytechnics or beyond higher and further education altogether (except in the most tenuous of unofficial and part-time ways). Only after many years did the feminist pioneers of women's history find footholds in university history departments, if at all. Even if historians by formal training, new cultural historians could just as easily be found elsewhere—in the fields of cultural studies, sociology, and literature and in a variety of interstices and enclaves.

If we write the intellectual history of the discipline honestly—not just for the last four decades, but more generally—we'll find the new impulses coming from the outside. Though a discipline with an institutional infrastructure, professionalized credentials, and a consensus of methods and epistemologies, history became defined only fitfully and incrementally between the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. The boundaries separating it from other academic disciplines, from the lay interests of "amateurs," and from wider influences in the public sphere have been far more porous than the curmudgeonly

defenders of history's integrity can ever allow themselves to see. In any case, such know-nothing rejectionism will never actually manage to keep the intrusions of "theory" at bay, whether from the "Marxism" or "sociology" of the 1960s or from the "postmodernism" and "post-colonialism" of the 1990s. As I have argued through this book, if we really want to keep history alive and active, we should be welcoming this cross-border traffic rather than trying to close it down. Instead of policing the borderlands "in defense of history," we should be bringing history's defenses down.<sup>9</sup>

Why, then, should one stay a historian? What makes me a historian rather than something else? At one level, the question is academic (in both senses of that word). In practice, disciplines and departments continue to exist and won't go away, especially for purposes of hiring and tenure—even in a university like my own, where interdisciplinary programs and cross-departmental appointments have become so rampant. Backing interdisciplinary studies institutionally soon poses questions about the disciplinary "core," but to a great extent, these can be matters of pragmatics. Moreover, we know best we're historians precisely when conversing with others—with anthropologists and literary critics, with sociologists and political scientists, and certainly with philosophers and economists. The place where we do our distinctive thinking is the past, and the historian's mark has everything to do with time and temporality, with the associated modes of cognition and narrativity, with Carolyn Steedman's "basic historicity." This includes what Steedman calls history's "impermanence," its openness and changeability. The epistemology of the archive can be added, including the practical experience of dirtying one's hands with all those documents. Then come the pleasures of detection and pursuit, collecting and mastery. At the end, there's the exponential thickening of contextual understanding, what Thompson called "the discipline of historical context."<sup>10</sup> In all of these ways, I'd rather be a historian than not. But ultimately, an ambivalence remains—between knowing I'm a historian and knowing it isn't enough, between the security and the risks, between having a home and venturing out.

Finally, where do the clashing purposes of social and cultural historians, "postmodernists" and "materialists," leave us? What kind of history do they allow? The most acrimonious fights of the early 1990s seem to have abated by now, but a more important division tended to outlast them, that between the older prioritizing of large-scale

processes of societal development and change—Charles Tilly’s “big structures, large processes, huge comparisons”—and the new preference for more modest and individualized sites of social and cultural investigation.<sup>11</sup> As we’ve seen, the latter require a very different kind of analytic, one culturally, rather than socially, derived. As I’ve argued, the resulting shift came as much from cumulative logics of collective practice in the profession as from conscious choice; it came from more complex trends of contemporary intellectual life in the university, as opposed to deliberate discrimination or the systematic favoring of some kinds of research over others; it came from political developments and broader discursive shifts in the wider society. Whatever the process, the 1980s witnessed a growing tendency among many social and cultural historians—for example, the main constituency of such journals as *Social History* and *History Workshop Journal* (as opposed to the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* or *Social Science History*)—to disregard the more social-scientific kind of approach.

Historiographical developments of the past two decades have strengthened that drift away from social history in the ambitious 1960s and 1970s guise—as the “history of society,” in the second part of Eric Hobsbawm’s famous couplet.<sup>12</sup> We have witnessed the dissolution of social history’s totalizing aspiration—of the insistence that all aspects of human life be situated in relation to social determinations, whether politics, thought and the exchange of ideas, sexuality and intimate relations, cultural meanings, the interior dynamics of institutions, economic processes, the international relations among states, or whatever. Yet, interestingly, the new forms of cultural history haven’t lacked their own logics of totalization, which can also be equally aggrandizing. These are most apparent, perhaps, in the broad domain of postcolonial studies, where some of the angriest and most intemperate of the polemics among social and cultural historians continued to occur in the course of the 1990s.

### From Cultural History to the History of Society?

The new totalizing wish takes various forms. First, in seeking to relativize or historicize the standpoint of “the West” in the epoch of colonization—by dethroning its self-arrogated superiorities, by rethinking the bases for global comparison, by dismantling Eurocentrism, by

“provincializing Europe”—post-Saidian historians sometimes imply an overabstracted and homogenized conception of the West and its internal histories.<sup>13</sup> Thus, we may certainly agree with Dipesh Chakrabarty that in the prevailing academic discourse of history, “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the one we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on.” We can also see the functioning of what Chakrabarty calls the “mythical” or “hyper-real Europe” within a set of dominant social and political imaginaries, as an idealized origin of thought and practice about the state, citizenship, and governmentality, whether for the colonies or the metropolis itself.<sup>14</sup> Yet at the same time, this insight hardly disposes of the immensely complicated histories inside European society that still need to be written. This particular abstraction (“Europe”) functions not so differently for the argument about comparative modernities than the earlier abstraction of “society” did for social historians two decades ago. In each case, certain big questions are enabled at the potential cost of leaving others unsaid. Subjecting this “Europe” to necessary critique still leaves unaddressed many other meanings of Europe, including the interior relations of very particular European societies.<sup>15</sup>

Second, “culture” itself easily acquires overtotalizing explanatory importance. Under Thompson’s influence, social historians themselves had long inclined to the classic anthropological sense of culture as the realm of symbolic and ritual meaning in a society’s overall ethos and forms of cohesion—or its “whole way of life,” in Raymond Williams’s notation. That sense became further extended by cultural studies toward “the whole complex of signifying practices and symbolic processes in a particular society,” or what Williams called the “ordinariness” of culture, as opposed to the high-cultural domain of aesthetics and the arts.<sup>16</sup> A kind of minimalist consensus has crystallized around the “production and construction of meaning” as the best way of thinking about culture’s relationship to social life. Yet the practice of the new cultural history can leave one uneasily wondering what culture is not. As Carolyn Steedman observes, many historians have come to rely “on the notion of ‘culture’ as the bottom line, the real historical reality.”<sup>17</sup> While embraced as an answer to the overobjectified materialism of the social science historian, “culture” can sustain its own logic of holism. As Steedman says (citing Dominick LaCapra), this implies

a trance-like reliance on the concept of culture . . . , where everything connects to everything else and “culture” is the primordial reality in which all historical actors have their being, do their thing, share discourses, worldviews, “languages,” where everyone (I repeat the joke because I enjoy it so much) “is a *mentalité* case”; and where it is not possible to write the exception: to write about the thing, event, relationship, entity, that does not connect with anything else.<sup>18</sup>

Third, the concept of “empire” is also acquiring analytical—or perhaps epistemological—equivalence with the older category of “society.” The concept’s current popularity implies a number of historiographical referents. One might be the post-Orientalist and postcolonial impulse exemplified by the Subaltern Studies project (discussed in chapter 4); another could be the new recognitions accorded “race” in the thinking of historians of Western Europe and North America; a third would be the impact of contemporary globalization, which encroached steadily on historians’ awareness during the 1990s—until the appointment of the Bush administration in 2001 marked the arrival of a more directive and unilateralist form, driven by the United States. Thus, from at least the early 1990s, a set of intensively grounded arguments about imperialism’s importance—meaning both the acquiring of colonies and the informal dynamics of the West’s coercive and exploitative impact on the rest of the world—have been slowly transforming the questions British historians bring to the study of national history; and comparable challenges are more recently developing in French, German, and other national historiographies.<sup>19</sup> This has particularly become true for the United States. Since the mid-1990s, programs in American studies and in American Culture have become entirely suffused with recognitions of empire’s importance.<sup>20</sup>

This reviewing of national histories through the lens of empire has predictably drawn much hostility from a variety of political standpoints, whether from older-style imperial historians or from those working on society, culture, and politics at home.<sup>21</sup> But we don’t need to share that negative response in order to worry that some versions of the argument about empire run the risk of subsuming too much complexity inside its overabstracted framework. It becomes important precisely to delimit the explanatory reach of “empire”; oth-

erwise, we can easily replicate the syndrome created earlier by the overinvested materialist category of “the social,” from which the cultural turn was originally an escape. Properly acknowledging imperialism’s general imbrication with the social relations, popular culture, and polite thinking of the metropolis has certainly become one of the key challenges for current historiography, particularly with respect to the histories of race. But we need not gather everything beneath this same unitary framework before we can accept that empire’s consequences became constitutive in key ways for the main languages of national affiliation in the Western metropolis.<sup>22</sup>

These fresh totalizing logics deserve some pondering. The problem with the ambitious social histories of the 1960s and 1970s was their tendency to occlude certain kinds of difficulty. While being immensely complex and sophisticated for some purposes, they tended to be too simplified for others. Quite aside from the deeper critiques of the materialist analytic and its model of social determination, those available forms of class analysis were proving manifestly ill-equipped for dealing with class restructuring at the end of the twentieth century, whether in the deindustrialized post-Fordist economies of the metropolis or in the global arenas of transnationalized capitalism, where the working class of production was more and more to be found. Likewise, the social historian’s desire to integrate the history of politics and the state was very unevenly realized. As I’ve argued, social history found it especially hard to deal with questions of ideology, consciousness, and subjectivity.

“Cultural history” (in the varied respects explored in chapter 4) provided ways out of this several-sided impasse. In this fundamental sense and in the many particular respects I’ve tried to explore, the cultural turn was hugely enabling. The initial debates and challenges were unsettling; thinking oneself out of familiar and valued intellectual standpoints was sometimes agonizingly hard; translating the new critiques into workable projects wasn’t always easy. But for the reasons I’ve tried to describe, the move out of “social history” was both necessary and fruitful. With the loosening, during the 1980s, of the hold of “society” and “the social” on the analytical imagination—and of the determinative power of the social structure and its causal claims—the imaginative and epistemological space for other kinds of analysis could grow. The rich multiplication of new cultural histories ensued.

But there were also costs. The large-scale debates reaching their cli-

max three decades ago—over state making and comparative political development, the social bases of absolutism, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the origins of capitalism and the industrial revolution, the comparative study of revolutions, the logics of collective action, and so on—no longer exercise historians in the same way. The earlier impetus carried over into the 1970s—for instance, with the Brenner debate or the grand designs of Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein.<sup>23</sup> Combinations of modernization theory and neo-Braudelian vision inspired other attempts at capturing the structural transition to the modern world, from such authors as Charles Tilly and Keith Thomas.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, a large body of historical sociology continues to be organized around those problematics and indeed seems to have claimed this ground as its distinctive terrain. Such work elaborates its theoretical ambitions around grand narratives of an unapologetically classical kind, in some cases even seeking to rebuild social theory by writing the history of the world.<sup>25</sup>

Some historians remain fully engaged on that level of generality, addressing the biggest questions of cross-societal comparison on the largest possible scale. Ken Pomeranz's study of the divergent developmental paths of the Chinese and European economies since the later eighteenth century is one extraordinarily rich example; Victor Lieberman's comparative analyses of commerce and state formation in Southeast Asia are another; Chris Bayley's synthetic account of the global origins of the modern world could be a third.<sup>26</sup> But it's no accident that each of these works has an extra-European vantage point. With a few exceptions, such as Eric Hobsbawm, European historians rarely participate in those discussions anymore. In its European heartlands, the large-scale or comparative study of whole societies moving through time ("societal history," in that sense)—which provided the founding inspiration for so much of the social history of the 1960s—has lost its hold on the imagination.

It's not clear why "taking the cultural turn" should require ignoring this different order of questions. Doing so has serious effects. Not only are the social sciences continuing to generate large bodies of historical work predicated around exactly these concerns—state formation, nation building, revolutions, the development of whole societies, the relationship between markets and democracy, all the sundry aspects of "modernization" and "development"—but in the post-Communist era of globalization, this corpus of work remains as intricately embedded

in policymaking as ever.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, unless critical historians can find ways of joining this fray—by offering persuasive frameworks for understanding the contemporary dynamics of international conflict and societal change—the latest pack of recklessly and hubristically aggrandizing master narratives will continue enlisting popular imaginations, shaping the political common sense, and generally sweeping the globe.

In their very simplicities, those recharged master narratives are being both straightforwardly instrumentalized for political purposes and pressed into more elaborately legitimating service. But they also consist in less consciously secured patterns of belief and consent. With the advantages of our new “postculturalist” sophistication, we’re immeasurably better equipped for subjecting this discursive architecture to effective critique. But the continuing purchase of neoliberalism’s distressing ascendancy in the public culture rests on potent simplifications and grand reductions that aggressively conflate “politics” and “society,” “values” and “interests,” “democracy” and “markets”—closing the gap between the bedrock legitimacy of a capitalist market order and any remaining space for pluralist disagreement. Unless the ruling ideas can also be challenged and contested at this level of their efficacy, left-wing historians will be stranded without a public voice, whether watching powerlessly from the sidelines or clinging, knowingly but fearfully, to the wings of Benjamin’s Angel. There’s no reason why contesting these new master narratives has to entail leaving the ground of the cultural turn or reverting to a now unworkable idea of “the social.” Why isn’t it possible to think and talk in different ways for the purposes of conducting different intellectual, pedagogical, and political conversations?

Occasionally, for example, even the most fervent advocates of the linguistic turn, while arguing around the dinner table about the widening extremes of social inequality, might find themselves reaching for analyses of income disparities, the restructuring of labor markets, and even the distinctive forms of the labor process produced by the new information and service industries. They may yet find themselves generalizing about the effects in societywide terms. Developing a similar case in the classroom, they might even see the advantages, “strategic” or otherwise, of making suspiciously structural arguments about “society’s” overall trajectory across longer periods of time—for instance, since the 1950s or since the earlier twentieth century and

even the later nineteenth. Our grasp of these arguments is all the better—more subtle, more sophisticated, more effective—because of everything we’ve learned through and since the cultural turn. Naturally, in such hypothetical debates, we’d want to talk about the discursive strategies involved and deconstruct the meanings they contain, particularly for the gendered and racialized dimensions. In that sense, we’re hugely better equipped. But we may still want to talk about class, about capitalism, about the structural distribution of inequalities, about the varying political capacities available to different social categories of people depending on their access to resources, and so forth.

In other words, a further answer to my question “What kind of history?” is that it all depends on the kinds of debates, the kinds of purposes, that happen to be in play. In my own experience of the exigencies of the time, the kinds of politics associated with the linguistic turn—those interpellating it, those surrounding it, and those it helped enable and sustain—were both unavoidable and a decisive good. They were always intimately entwined with the accompanying new forms of cultural history. History’s priorities became refocused by decentering the discipline’s established subject matters; by claiming the neglected contexts of the personal, the local, and the everyday; and by allowing historians to better face questions of political subjectivity. But why should the earlier concerns of social historians be forgotten, as opposed to fruitfully reengaged? Why should embracing the possibilities of microhistory require leaving macrohistory entirely behind? Outside the immediate scholarly domain, those other forms and levels of analysis are completely unavoidable: they’re encountered in arguments over the dinner table, in classroom obligations, in public disputations (from Op-Ed page to television studio and beyond), in the framing of public policy, and in the writing of popular histories. Others will certainly stay active on these fronts, whether new cultural historians care to or not.

Of course, some historians are trying to combine social and cultural history with forms of generalizing abstraction about “society” in the overarching contextual sense. Studies that show it can be done include Carolyn Steedman’s current work on servants and service during the era of Thompson’s *Making*, Catherine Hall’s studies of the consequences of the dialectics of nation and empire for the nineteenth-century histories of citizenship, and Leora Auslander’s melding of the his-

tories of state formation and everyday life through a study of French furniture and furnishing.<sup>28</sup> In practice, moreover, the “new cultural history” has generated far more pragmatics and a considerably richer eclecticism than its wilder enemies or the more generalized mutterings of the profession had ever been willing to allow. Far more than any extremist advocacy feared by such opponents—let alone the irresponsible junking of the historian’s evidentiary rules and practices or the moral surrender of the historian’s calling and the collapse of the discipline’s “core” (as the worst anticulturalist jeremiads wanted to claim)—many were looking for creative ways of combining the new incitements of cultural history and the hard-won, but now established, gains of social history. Particularly in the work of the younger generations—those now publishing their books and working on their dissertations—the differences between social history and cultural history imply less an opposition than an opportunity.

### Conclusion

My first point in concluding this book concerns the urgent need for a basic pluralism. I’ve deliberately avoided any detailed explicating of the various debates surrounding the big shift from social to cultural history that forms the subject of this book. Those battles lasted roughly a decade following the mid-1980s, often taking bitterly over-polemized forms. Through them, “postmodernism” became a catchall name for a miscellany of culturalist influences, from Foucault, poststructuralism, and literary deconstruction to cultural studies, postcolonialism, and forms of feminist theory. Many social historians accused postmodernists of apostacy—of abandoning social history’s calling and its implicit politics. Shouting back, self-described postmodernists accused their critics of clinging to obsolete concepts and approaches, especially materialist conceptions of class.<sup>29</sup> For a while, the discipline threatened to separate into mutually hostile camps, with convinced materialists and structuralists facing culturalists and “linguistic turners” across a hardening binary divide. Similar theoretical and epistemological polarities were repeated across other disciplines, variously linked to wider political debates.

By the later 1990s, passions had cooled. Desires for theoretical purity or some finality of resolution—by asserting the rival virtues of

poststructuralist influences versus the established patterns of structuralist history, or modernization theory against postmodernist critique of grand narratives, or Weber against Foucault—were not getting us very far. Social history's amorphously aggrandizing desire for primacy in the discipline, so marked in the 1970s, was actually being superseded by a more eclectic repertoire of approaches and themes, for which the new cultural history had become the broadly accepted description. More to the point, the boundaries between different kinds of history became extraordinarily more blurred. Many social historians continued as before, reproducing the distinctive autonomies of their work, methodologically and topically. But many others now moved increasingly freely across the old distinctions between the social, the cultural, the political, the intellectual, and so forth, allowing new hybridities to form.

To a very great extent (in my view), the earlier, overheated polemics reflected the internecine agonies of a particular cluster of generations, consisting of those of us who were educated and trained in the 1960s and early 1970s and who were formed politically under the sign of 1968. In contrast, apart from a few students of the 1980s who were directly associated with some of the principals, younger people seemed markedly less excited about joining these battles. Students trained in the 1990s were interested less in the programmatic advocacy of one authorizing form of theory against another than in finding ways of combining social and cultural history, concretely and imaginatively. As I've mentioned, there were certainly more senior figures who were thinking their way through to a similar place—Carolyn Steedman and Catherine Hall, for example. But examples of recently published first books demonstrating such hybridity have become legion. These new studies specifically refuse the polarized division between the "social" and the "cultural," vesting recognizably social and political topics with a cultural analytic, responding to the incitements of cultural theory, and grounding these in as dense and imaginative a range of sources and interpretive contexts as possible.<sup>30</sup> On this very practical evidence, the division between "social" and "cultural" was always a false categorical separation. As I argued at the end of chapter 4, there's no need to choose.

My second point in this conclusion is that some confidence needs to be regained in the possibility of grasping society as a whole, of theorizing its bases of cohesion and instability, and of analyzing its forms of

motion. The uncertainties surrounding the available terms of social and political theory by the end of the 1970s—above all, for theorizing the relations joining state, politics, and ideology to economy and social formation—may have driven such thinking among historians underground. But they haven't prevented sociologists and political scientists from continuing to do such work, often with strong historical claims. Moreover, neither skepticism about the persuasiveness of grand narratives nor critiques of Enlightenment thinking require altogether abandoning the project of societywide analysis or societal history. For my own part, I've continued thinking in terms of capitalism, class, the nation, social formation, and so forth. But I am far more cautious and uncertain about exactly what these grand-theoretical concepts can allow me to discuss and explain. I have a far clearer understanding of the degree to which all these terms—*nation*, *class*, *society*, and *social*—come heavily laden with contexts and histories of meaning, which historians need to uncover, specify, and locate. More than anything else, perhaps, the linguistic turn has allowed exactly these categories of modern social understanding to become historicized, so that such terms as *class* and *society* have become historically locatable and contingent.

My third point is that things change. In my lifetime, I've seen two huge reorientations of historical studies, which I've tried to describe here. Both were driven by interdisciplinarity. The popularity of social history was marked originally by the intellectual hegemony of the social or behavioral sciences, usually framed by some version of modernization theory—although it was increasingly inflected by an independently minded Marxist or Marxisant radicalism by the 1970s. Then, in the 1980s, the “new cultural history” and cultural studies became the natural site of innovation. I see absolutely no reason why the “cultural turn” should be the end of the story or the final chapter in some whiggish romance of ever-improving historiographical sophistication. Something else, I'm sure, is lying in wait. Furthermore, just as there are ways in which the earlier commitment to the “history of society” could be recuperated, certain features of the new cultural history “looped back,” by the mid-1990s, to social history's founding influences. This was true, to a great extent, of Edward Thompson (particularly in his more “culturalist” eighteenth-century essays), but it applied most of all to the oeuvre of Raymond Williams. Whether via the influence of Said, the Subaltern Studies

historians, and other postcolonial thinkers or through Steedman's running critiques and reflections, Williams's fundamental themes retain their active importance.<sup>31</sup>

My fourth point is that politics matters, in a doubled sense. On the one hand, the impetus for both shocks of innovation in my lifetime, the social history wave and the new cultural history, came from broader political developments extending way beyond the academy *per se*. Again, I see no reason why such political impetus should not recur, especially given the extraordinarily momentous and dangerous political time we've recently entered. On the other hand, each of the superb historians I've discussed at the end of chapters 2, 3, and 4—Edward Thompson, Tim Mason, and Carolyn Steedman—spent a large part of their careers outside the university, involved in one kind of public activity or another. That synergy of political and intellectual commitment, generated in the borderlands, invariably incites the best historical work.

If optimism, disappointment, and reflectiveness were the main registers of the radical historian's sensibility between the 1960s and the 1990s, perhaps defiance is the appropriate response for our new contemporary moment. For more than a decade now, we've been encouraged to see ourselves at "the end of history," in a world only describable through neoliberalism's redeployed languages of "modernity," through the relentlessly totalizing pressure of market principles, and through a new set of brutally demonizing rhetorics about good and evil in the world. But the effectiveness of grand narratives can't be contested by skepticism and incredulity alone, least of all when new or refurbished grand narratives are so powerfully reordering the globe. Grand narratives can't be contested by pretending they don't exist. That's why we need new "histories of society." In their respective times, both social history and the new cultural history were insurgent forms of knowledge, and the relevance of historical studies for the future will certainly require renewing an insurgent spirit again.