Postsocial History

An Introduction

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The title of Miguel A. Cabrera's book serves admirably to define a definitive movement in historical writing. If, as he writes, the historians he describes have different intellectual trajectories and come from different traditions, so that they might not always see what they have in common as more important than what separates them, nonetheless their work has a definite identity, despite the evident differences. The term of his title, postsocial, catches well this identity, in terms of the search for a form of thinking and writing about the world that seeks to extend beyond the old understandings of the social, but yet at the same time retains that term "social" as a sign that to disown it entirely is to leave behind essential dimensions of understanding. Therefore, the term points forward without losing sight of the past, which for historians is no bad thing. It is a good name.

What the name stands for, elaborated in great detail by the author, is the attempt to move beyond established understandings of the social, evident in history, especially social history, and the social sciences more widely. As he shows, far from being a mere legacy of the past, these approaches are still extremely powerful. Such understandings, to put it briefly, tend to conceive of society in static, mechanical terms: the idea of society as a framework or structure is emblematic and as unproblematically given in the nature of things as a "real," autonomous entity, exerting its own pressures and influences upon other domains of life regarded as separate from it, chiefly "culture." What the book also helps us to recognize is the rather analogous move in what has been called "the new cultural history," despite its deep genuflection to the supposed autonomy of culture and
representation. Here "society" and the "social" are frequently smuggling by the backdoor, or else old-fashioned revisionism comes back in, simply denying any role to the social at all in its emphasis upon a voluntary acting human agent, or upon a voluntary action of representation itself. What is particularly interesting about the book is its success in nailing down this usually unacknowledged intellectual conservatism of the new cultural history.

The way forward, then, would seem to involve some idea of the social, yet to radically rethink this idea. The book is a contribution to this rethinking, one that has the very great merit of being not only about social theory, but also about what historians do, what they write, the arguments that they have. I can think of very few works that mediate the relationship between theoretical concerns and the practical writing of history, and this is decidedly one of them. It is therefore extremely timely in its appearance. Its timeliness also relates to the widespread rethinking of the idea of the social going on across a very big range of disciplines. This book is a contribution to that gathering debate, a unique and particularly interesting one, unique in the sense that it is relatively unusual for historians to theorize their own practice.

This rethinking of the social is pursued in terms of the agenda of the book: the author considers the "discursive" construction of social reality, unpacking the term and separating it from its solely linguistic associations; he then considers the constitution of interests and identities and explores the concept of social action. Central to all these concerns is his desire to avoid traditional theoretical interpretations of the world as neatly divided into various kinds of twos: society and culture, the objective and the subjective, the material and representation, and other familiar spirits of the past. In his desire to circumvent the failures of these old dualistic interpretations, this old dichotomous rendering of the world, he is at one with attempts to look at the social world anew. What in particular he brings to this new look is a relational understanding of the production of meaning in the historical past, the term "relational" referring to the necessity to situate systems of meaning within particular settings of the social but without losing sight of the recognition that meanings are always made discursively. While he does not explicitly develop here those new understandings of the social with which his project is in deep sympathy, nonetheless the agenda of the book creates the conditions in which historical writing can be linked again to new sorts of social and cultural theory. In particular, they can be linked to what we might call postsocial theory, in short the social being understood as in these new guises something fluid, mobile, practical, and about as unlike the old idea of the framework as might be imagined.
This new sort of social also involves the material, so that alongside the dualisms mentioned already would be those of society and nature, and the human and the nonhuman. Although the book tends to emphasize the creation of meaning among human actors, and therefore to emphasize representation rather than objects or things, it is part of the rainbow alliance of the postsocial, which would embrace words and things together as part of one world. In particular, science studies has much to teach cultural history here, and goes far to augment postsocial history. Which is to say that everywhere traditional understandings of what the limitations of our inherited, traditional vocabularies still directs me to call the social order are breaking down, when the social and cultural, and the economic and political, are no longer distinct, and distinctly useful theoretical demarcations of the world, and when we must embrace the operations of language and the physical workings of the world together in similar kinds of explanations. This book is an important contribution to this work of the postsocial, and therefore to the critical but constructive scrutiny of tradition.

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This is a book in historiography addressing theoretical developments in the field of historical studies over the past two decades. During these years, a time of notably intense historiographical debate, an incremental critical rethinking of the main theoretical assumptions previously underpinning historical explanation has occurred and in the process a new theory of society has begun to take shape among historians. Such, at least, is the conclusion I draw from my examination of recent historiographical developments. They evince a new theoretical outlook essentially different from predecessors; one that involves a qualitatively distinct way of understanding how society works, of explaining individuals' consciousness and actions, and of conceiving of the genesis, nature, and reproduction of social relations and institutions. This theoretical shift is giving rise to a new change of historical paradigm, a change that seems as far-reaching as that brought about, in its time, by the emergence and spreading of the so-called social history. Now, like then, much of previous historiographical common sense is collapsing around us, and many inherited historical interpretations, including the most firmly settled ones, are being revised, substantially rectified, or simply abandoned and replaced by others. Although still in its early stages, this historiographical mutation is already visible even to the least attentive observer, and its marks can be felt in many fields of study, be they recently created ones, such as gender history, or those of a longer-standing tradition, like labor history or the history of liberal revolutions. This book has been written, therefore, for the purpose of putting forward the terms in which this new historiographical rendering of social theory is being carried out, assessing its practical implications.
for historical analysis, and offering a preliminary as well as summary ac­
count of the new theory of society just now emerging.[1]

The last two decades have also witnessed an extensive, lively, and
highly valuable debate on the nature of historical knowledge. Indeed,
much recent historiographical discussion has focused on the epistemo­
logical status of historical writing, and the amount and richness of the lit­
erature generated are almost impossible for any one reader to tackle.
However, although acknowledging the great importance and stimulating
challenges of this particular arena of historiographical debate, I do no
more than heed its significant existence here. On this occasion, I am more
concerned with and exclusively driven by the practical purpose of ad­
dressing the more immediate problems of historical explanation that his­
torians face daily.

The origin of the new kind of history and its theory of society is to be
found in the decline of social history and, specifically, in the crisis of the
theoretical dichotomous and objectivist model which grounds social his­
tory. A growing and resolute doubt among historians has been cast on the
premise, so deeply rooted in the history profession, that human societies
are composed of an objective sphere (identified in general with the socio­
conomic instance) holding causal primacy and of a subjective or cultural
sphere deriving from the former. And, therefore, that, in other words, in­
dividuals' consciousness and practice are causally determined by their so­
cial conditions of existence. As I describe more thoroughly in chapter 1,
social historians have been forced, almost from the beginning, to come up
with different ad hoc conceptual supplements in order to respond to the
anomalies and explanatory shortcomings of their theoretical model and,
as well, in order to make new social phenomena and situations (of both
the past and the present) intelligible. This is what triggered a pronounced
internal evolution in the paradigm of social history, an evolution that still
continues today. From a certain moment in time, however, a significant
minority of historians began to suggest that in order to surmount such
anomalies and shortcomings, it was not enough to reformulate the central
tenet of social history. Instead, facing what proved to be increasingly ster­
ile as a tool of historical analysis, it was necessary to put this tenet itself
under critical scrutiny. At the same time, these historians began to react
against the secular dilemma between materialism and idealism, between
objectivism and subjectivism, or between social explanation and inten­
tional explanation in which historical scholarship had been trapped for
decades, as this too was found to be another serious hindrance to poten­
tial exploration of new explanatory possibilities. Thus, efforts within so­
cial history to make the causal connection between social structure and
subjective action more flexible, complex, and contingent eventually led,
over time, to casting doubts on the existence of not only such a causal con­
nection, but of the two instances involved in it as well. The outcome of this critical reaction has been the emergence of a new picture of social life, one that appears to be governed by a different causal logic, and to which I will turn my attention from chapter 2 onward.

Of course, if one enlarges the scope of the problematic under examination, the decline of social history and the ongoing theoretical reorientation in the field of historical studies are quickly recognized as only a part of a far more encompassing process of cultural, scientific, and intellectual change, commonly termed the crisis of modernity. In fact, recent vicissitudes over historical writing and the intensity, patterns, and terms of the historiographical debate in the last few years are only fully intelligible if viewed within this larger frame. In a certain sense then, the emergence of the new conception of society is no more than an outstanding chunk of this general process of change and, therefore, it could be said that this book is actually dealing with the effects of the impact of the crisis of modernity on the field of history. That does not mean, however, that the new form of history is just a reflection or a mere effect of so-called postmodern philosophy and that historians, as is sometimes exhorted, should therefore feel obliged to confront the present situation in defensive terms against this presumed external enemy threatening history and endangering its very survival.[2] Such a diagnosis seems mistaken, since historians have not been simply passive receivers, but, on the contrary, active participants, and because history and the social sciences in general is indeed a major protagonist in scenarios concerned with future conceptions of the world, society, or political practice. This is why taking up a defensive stance seems short-sighted and, quite frankly, debilitating, since it shuns active engagement in debate and thus reduces the chances for overcoming the historiographical impasse the decline of social history purports.

The reasons why the crisis of modernity has affected history so deeply are easy to identify. Since historical science and the conceptual frameworks with which it has worked were forged within or rather, are essential components of a modern social worldview, the crisis of modernity is bound to provoke a collapse of established historiographical paradigms and a denaturalization of the analytical concepts of both social and traditional history. The crisis of the modern worldview has brought forth an awareness that these concepts, and the theories of society they underpin, are not mere representations or labels of social phenomena or processes that really exist but, rather, historically specific forms of making social reality something intelligible or meaningful. Historians were previously unaware because they themselves remained part and parcel of and worked within the modern conceptual universe. Thus, the crisis of modernity has triggered a sort of conceptual disenchantment and a loss of theoretical innocence that seem to be irreversible. For as Patrick Joyce
shrewdly notes, once innocence is lost, it cannot be regained.[3] Once concepts have lost their representational status and, consequently, their theoretical aura, central notions of social analysis such as individual, society, class, nation, revolution, or politics can no longer be used in the same sense, with the same epistemological certainty, or with the same analytical function as before.

But this is not all. Apart from the collapse of a particular body of concepts, the crisis of modernity has also entailed a correlative collapse of the very epistemological foundations they rested upon. If modern categories are not representations of an objective social reality, but rather effects of a certain meaningful arrangement of such a reality, then their practical efficacy—that is, their power to guide social action for so long—cannot be attributed to the fact that they reflect either human nature or objective laws of social life. It should be attributed to the capacity of the categories themselves to generate and become embodied in social practices, relations, and institutions. If this has really been the case, then historical scholarship must immediately assume its implications for the study of society. The first of which is that the historical formation of concepts not only becomes a primordial subject of inquiry, but, even more importantly, it constitutes the very foundation of social theory.[4]

Thus, the theory of society that is currently taking shape within historical studies has come to rest on new assumptions. It assumes individuals are not autonomous subjects (as they are for traditional history) and calls into question the view of social reality as an objective entity possessing the power to causally determine the meaningful practice of individuals (as social history claims). If the latter were the case, then the concepts that people use to apprehend and make sense of their social world and to arrange their practice would be cultural or ideological reflections of such a world. However, as both the crisis of modernity and historical inquiry itself are making clear, such concepts are not mere representations of the real working and development of human societies, but rather specific ways of conceiving of them. To speak so is to say the following: language is not simply a means of communication but a pattern of meanings, and therefore does not limit itself to naming real phenomena but actively constructs them as meaningful entities, that is, as objective ones. The meanings that people confer on social context and their place in it, as well as the ways in which they define themselves as agents, are always dependent on the conceptual lens through which such a context is apprehended, and not on the context itself. Ideas, forms of consciousness, or identities are neither rational or intellectual creations nor expressions of the social sphere, but the results of an operation of meaningful construction of reality. What this implies, as a theoretical corollary, is a new concept of social action, different from that of both intentional and social explanatory mod-
els. Human practices are neither rational actions nor socially determined ones, but the effect of the mediation of a certain way of conceptually constructing social situations and relations. Previous theoretical approaches had explained human action in terms of either the free-will decision of agents or the determination of social circumstances. With the advent of the new theoretical paradigm, human action has instead come to be explained in terms of the meanings that agents confer on social context when they apply the conceptual pattern prevailing in each juncture. Thus, the old dual theoretical scheme (reality/ideas) has been left behind and replaced with a triadic scheme (reality/language/ideas) in which language is a specific domain of social life that works as an active mediation in making the meanings that underlie practice.

So far, I have expressed myself, in reference to both the present-day state of social history and the emergence of a new theory of society, with a certainty that many readers probably find not only excessive but even groundless as well. Is the crisis of social history really so profound as to allow the claim that we are witnessing a new change of paradigm? After all, idealist historians have never ceased to criticize the tenets of social history and in recent years this criticism has even intensified and so-called revisionism is particularly vigorous at the moment. Can one really insist, moreover, in claiming that the ongoing historiographical debate is more than just another episode in the old quarrel between materialist and idealist history? That it has gone beyond the boundaries of that quarrel and laid the foundations of a new kind of history opposed to both social and intentional explanation? Since these are crucial issues in any diagnosis of the present-day state of historical studies, I do try to be somewhat more precise about the exact sense in which my words should be taken before actually turning to my more confident claims. First of all, this diagnosis of recent theoretical developments in the field of historical studies is not being put forward for the first time here. On the contrary, it has been not only previously held, more or less explicitly, by many authors, but has even been a subject of reflection and discussion for some time for a significant portion of the history profession. To cite just one example, Geoff Eley has maintained that the crisis of social history is fostering the opening up of an "imaginative and epistemological space" from which unusual forms of historical analysis are emerging. He even goes so far as to identify the ongoing theoretical shift as an irreversible move from a history based on the notion of social causality to another based on the notion of "discourse."[5] It is true, though, that the new theory of society remains widely unheeded and that its presence is not always immediately perceptible to the observer, as its features are not as clearly defined as those of social history or of traditional history. In fact, most of the authors who have dealt with recent developments in historical studies either view
these as merely a somewhat more sophisticated prolongation of social history or they even encompass them in a somewhat voracious revisionist return to idealism or subjectivism. One has to keep in mind that the frontiers of the new form of history are still in flux and its theoretical framework riddled with ambiguities or gaps, and lacking clear contours. On the terrain of research practice, in particular, the break with preceding forms of history is partial and hesitant and the dividing line between them is often blurred, and on most occasions, the components of the new conception of society appear mixed up with those of previous conceptions. Such hybridity thwarts easy recognition of elements that are in open conflict with long-existent paradigms and that just might allow us to get around impasses into a new historiographical and theoretical territory.

Furthermore, the new theory of society often lies only latent in the works of the very authors bringing its emergence forth, and many historians who have actually contributed to current historiographical change seem to ignore any significant discontinuity between their theoretical outlook and that of social or new cultural history. And I have to admit that I suspect most of the authors whose works I consider conducive to the emergence of a new theory of society would probably feel misrecognized, think my reading of their writings tendentious or excessively forced, and dismiss the conclusions I draw as groundless or overstepping their actual positions. I should also point out that there is no particular historical work or individual author fully embodying the new kind of history, and anyone looking for an explicit account, a sort of handbook, will search in vain since, as far as I know, no such a work exists. Finally, although a few labels, some better than others, have been in circulation and do unequivocally point to this new kind of historical paradigm, so far no name enjoys anything like widespread acceptance.

However, none of the above, no matter how problematic, is meant to suggest that the new theory of society is a nonentity or that it is merely a passing mirage. It only means, as I have already said, that this theory is emerging, that it is still in initial stages of formation. A close historiographical examination reveals not only profound and extensive erosion in the explicative model of social history, but the crystallization of a potential alternative to it as well. Thus, albeit still embryonic, there is enough stuff there to announce a new theory of society available to history scholarship. Despite the weaknesses and concomitant objections heeded above, there is before us such an accumulation of fresh elements in the field of historical studies that, taken into account as a weighty whole and assembled as if they were pieces of a puzzle, strongly indicate, in my opinion, a new historiographical landscape. As well as they shape a new theoretical framework for analyzing and explaining historical processes and social phenomena. This series of elements includes everything from symptoms
of dissatisfaction, intuitions, and suggestions for critical reconsiderations to completely new concepts and empirical assertions and from theoretical reflections, controversies, and localized rebellions to reinterpretations of historical phenomena and expressly alternative proposals. Many examples of these are to be found in this book.

The crucial point, from a historiographical perspective, is that the appearance of this set of elements scattered in a multitude of works by various authors has set up minimum conditions for going beyond the limits of preceding paradigms and for overcoming, as well, that choking secular dilemma between objectivism and subjectivism, allowing, thus, an alternative to social history that is not a return to the theoretical horizon of idealist history. In my opinion, the authors tackled and drawn upon here have, intentionally or not, led the discipline of history into unexplored territory and sketched the contours of a new agenda for historical research. Authors whose works contain elements that transcend the limits of preceding paradigms include historians like Keith M. Baker, Patrick Joyce, Zachary Lockman, Mary Poovey, Joan W. Scott, William H. Sewell, or James Vernon and historical sociologists like Richard Biernacki, Anne Kane, or Margaret R. Somers. Until a better term is available, I refer to the new kind of history their works produce as Postsocial History.\[6\]

The central body of this book is intended to give an account of the main features and theoretical assumptions of postsocial history. Although for the reasons explained above, on many occasions I can only offer general outlines or fleeting sketches, and, on others, I merely point out the gaps that only future developments can fill. Just the same, my presentation of the new historiographical paradigm may give the impression of being too schematic, abrupt, and lacking nuance and of giving short shrift to the complexities and modulations of social life. Such a brief work cannot pretend to fully explore or exhaust each and every implication or all the related issues. My purpose in writing this work is to highlight only the major theoretical premises of the emerging conception of history and to underline, as well, contrasts with preceding paradigms, all in order to foster reflective attention to current historiographical change and thus, hopefully, propitiate more effective discussion of it. If, eventually, the path cleared by postsocial historians proves fruitful for social analysis, there will be time enough to embody what is just a conceptual skeleton here, with future flesh, blood, and pulse. It would be useless to deny, likewise, that, as any historiographical book, this also involves an undertaking of theoretical elaboration, even if only minimally. The simple fact of identifying, selecting, and connecting a set of fragments that have, until now, remained scattered and not always expressly related implies per se an act of theoretical construction. Moreover, at certain times, I inevitably have to refer to some of the still unexplored implications of the decline of social
history and the simultaneous resistance to the tendency to take refuge in traditional history. And in doing so, some of the trends already present in the terrain of historical practice will be carried to their logical conclusions. In any case, I try to keep the task of theoretical elaboration to the minimum necessary to guarantee a coherent exposition. And I also try to carry out such an undertaking with maximum caution, that is, staying within the limits authorized and permitted by the actual state of historical scholarship.
The Background: From Social History to the New Cultural History

In order to properly understand the concerns of postsocial historians and appraise the significance of the new theoretical approach, one must bear in mind the previous historiographical stage from which they stem. Thus, before proceeding to bring the main features of the emerging paradigm into sharper focus, I briefly recapitulate the internal evolution of social history in this chapter.

At the beginning of the 1960s, social history was already a well-established and prestigious academic endeavor in such pioneering countries as France and the United Kingdom and a blossoming one elsewhere. Although traditional history maintained its hegemony in quantitative terms, the new historiographical paradigm took root, gained ground, and grew into the most dynamic and innovative area of the discipline. At that time, two major schools or traditions—historical materialism and the *Annales* School—predominated, even though many social historians do not fall into either one or the other. The external manifestation of this reorientation of the discipline toward social history was a gradual move away from high politics, the star of traditional history's gaze, and a shift in analytical interest toward social and economic phenomena. However, such fresh concentration on socioeconomic matters actually ensued the adoption of a new theory of society by social historians. In open conflict with the subjectivism and factualism of traditional history, social historians brandished an objectivist theory of society based on the notion of social causality that triggered a marked transition from an explanatory para-
digm founded on the concept of subject to one founded on the concept of society. In traditional history, subjectivity is underived, understood as a preconstituted center on which social practice rests, and historical agents are thus considered individuals possessing an autonomous rational conscience whose actions are fully explained by the explicit intentions that motivate them. From this viewpoint, society is an entity that is qualitatively no different from the sum of the individuals who compose it and, therefore, conscious intentions enjoy the rank of causes and, to an even greater extent, constitute the very grounds of social science. Social analysis consists primarily of an undertaking of comprehension or interpretation for the purpose of reenacting the thoughts and mental universe of social agents. In sharp contrast, social history disallows subjectivity in the sense of rational creation. To speak of subjectivity in social history can only refer to a reflection or expression of the social context in which human beings are placed. The causes of actions have nothing to do with autonomous individual agency, and given the social nature of the causes of actions, human beings may even remain unaware of them. The notion of social subject within a dichotomous and objectivist scheme, one granting primordial causality to social factors not individual agency in the production of meanings, has ruled a substantial share of historical research for decades and remains in force today even though important internal modifications have loosened the causal link.

This and the next paragraph continue to outline significant features of the social history paradigm before turning to a necessary examination of those modifications. The basic theoretical premise of social history is that the socioeconomic sphere constitutes an objective structure, in the double sense that it has an irreducible autonomy, including an internal mechanism of operation and change, and that it is the bearer of intrinsic meanings. Individuals' subjectivity and the cultural realm in general is, for social historians, no more than a representation or expression of their social being and, therefore, meaningful actions are causally determined by the material conditions of existence and by the position people occupy in social relations. The structural nature of economic conditions and the social relations rooted in them are also what mold the social edifice as a whole. On some occasions, this structural quality is also attributed to other factors, as occurs in some phases of the Annales school with demographic fluctuations and geography, but the theoretical principle remains the same: in all cases, society is conceived as a systemic unit made up of a series of vertically arranged strata and governed by a causal hierarchy that guarantees a basic fit between the upper and lower strata. The familiar distinctions between base and superstructure, between structure and action, or, in the annalist case, between levels or temporalities are due to this dualistic scheme. Such a theoretical scheme justifies the ambition to
write a total history, that is to say, a history that approaches the different realms of social life as pieces of a whole whose intelligibility comes from just one of them.

The causal mechanism through which the socioeconomic sphere exercises its determination over the cultural or subjective sphere is understood by social history in the following terms. In general, the different positions that individuals occupy in the economic terrain translate into social divisions that, in turn, crystallize in forms of consciousness, identities, systems of beliefs, and values, and in legal bodies or political institutions. Specifically, the relations established in the socioeconomic sphere define the objective interests of individuals and, therefore, the actions these individuals take are due to a more or less conscious purpose of satisfying such interests. It is this social anchoring of interests that enables the distinction to be made between on the one hand objectively adequate behaviors and, on the other, deviate and anomalous behaviors that are the fruit of a false consciousness, that is, behaviors originating in an ideologically distorted image of reality.

Of course, this brief and selective characterization of social history's theory of society slights its rich complexity and heterogeneity but that is not my purpose nor a necessary task since numerous studies provide excellent and thorough discussions. Here I only break down the objectivist or materialist paradigm of social history into its basic components in order to highlight those most relevant to subsequent discussion and critical reconsideration from the 1980s onward. And in order to approach the critical rethinking of the last twenty years in a fully effective way, one is obliged to begin with those modifications, mentioned above, of the paradigm from within, that is, to begin to talk about what was an extremely significant internal evolution within social history itself. Since social historians operate within a dichotomous framework, this evolution has consisted of a gradual loosening or flexibilization of the causal link between social context and consciousness, that is, a partial rectification of the previous objectivist unilaterality allowing a relative autonomy to the cultural (or political) sphere and granting individuals an active role in the production of meanings. This evolution includes a reconceptualization of social relations with assistance of notions like the Thompsonian one of experience or the Chartierian one of representation. The result of this subjectivist or "culturalist" turn in social history was the appearance of what is called sociocultural or new cultural history which brings into relief a theory of society that profoundly reformulates the dichotomous and objectivist paradigm of classical social history, although without actually transcending it. Thus, before considering the terms of the crisis suffered by this paradigm and calibrating the implications this spells for social analysis, there is a need to look at this internal evolution of social history,
as this is the starting point from which postsocial history will begin to emerge.[1]

Even in the 1960s and more so from the 1970s, the explanatory model of social history experiences regular critical review requiring appreciable transformation. At the same time and as part and parcel of such critique, social historians (both historical materialists and annalists) took a growing interest in studying culture. This shift in orientation, marking a transition from classical social history to sociocultural history (or as Roger Chartier, a protagonist in this reorientation, likes to say, from the social history of culture to the cultural history of the social), bespoke a growing dissatisfaction concerning the theoretical pattern of classical social history. As Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob write, it was the "disenchantment" with explaining everything in economic and social terms that drove many historians to reconsider the nature and the role of culture, defined as society's repertoire of interpretative mechanisms and value systems. Of course, this emphasis on culture was accompanied from the beginning by the conviction that the cultural was not a simple function of the material but that, instead, "people's beliefs and ritual activities interacted with their socioeconomic expectations,"[2] and that, therefore, one should look at the effects of this interaction for an explanation of the conduct of individuals and, in general, of the way society works. As Lynn Hunt herself had already said in a previous publication, by focusing increasingly on culture, these historians started to challenge "the virtually commonsensical assumption that there is a clear hierarchy of explanation in history (that is, in all social reality), running from biology and topography through demography and economics up to social structure and finally to politics and its poor cousins, cultural and intellectual life."[3]

For this reason, as Raphael Samuel has noticed with ironic shrewdness, historians started to spend more and more time on subjects that an earlier generation of scholars would have reserved for rents, prices, and wage rates. That is to say, they transferred their attention from social structures to cultural practices, from "objective" reality "to the categories in and through which it was perceived, from collective consciousness to cognitive codes, from social being to the symbolic order."[4] Another feature of this theoretical reorientation was a cooling of relations with sociology and the embracement of anthropology from which historians began to cull methods, subjects, vocabulary, and concepts. While sociology had provided some of the conceptual and methodological instruments for studying social and economic structures, the preferential subject of classical social history, anthropology, became a point of reference and a crucial supporting discipline when untangling the terms of the contribution of cultural practices to the configuration of social relations started to preoccupy historians. Also, as must be recalled, this opening up to culture im-