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Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History

Thomas Bender

The American cant of newness, so pervasive in the general culture, is all the more remarkable for its capacity to penetrate even specialized professional discourses. What a succession of "new" histories populate the profession's recent past: the new economic history, the new labor history, the new social history, the new urban history, the new political history, and other greater or lesser "news" too numerous to list. Although much intellectual excitement is associated with these newer modes of historical technique, they have provoked growing unease and discussion about the "problem" of synthesis. Beyond that worry is a deeper and ultimately fundamental one about the declining significance of history in the general intellectual culture of our time. History enrollments have dropped at universities, and history requirements have been reduced at all levels of education. Whereas history was once the common coin of intellectual and political discourse, today's journalists, writers, and intellectuals, to say nothing of political leaders, seem little inclined to attend to the work of our profession.

Those who express worries about the apparent erosion of the place of history beyond our professional peers have tended to argue or to assume some correlation between the loss of a public following and the advent of newer historiographical modes and themes. If that perception is correct, we cannot but ask: Is it possible to reap the positive achievements of the new history without assuming such an attendant and quite ironic liability?

Perhaps we should begin by taking a somewhat longer view of the new history in our time. It is worth remembering that the original call for a "new history" in America came long ago, in the first decade of this century. In their teaching at Columbia University and in their jointly written textbooks, Charles A. Beard and...
James Harvey Robinson rejected the formalism and tight political focus of their predecessors. They worked to extend the territory of professional history, with Robinson giving a name and a program to the movement in his book, *The New History* (1912). The new history, as understood by Beard and Robinson, was interdisciplinary, a study of civilization itself; it spoke, moreover, to the contemporary concerns of the general, educated reader and citizen. The culminating American work of the program they articulated was *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), written by Charles and Mary R. Beard. Reviewing the book in the pages of the *New Republic*, Lewis Mumford hailed it as an exemplar of the new history and as a standard against which future historians must measure their own work. If the next generation failed to write "a more sociological and synthetic history," Mumford reflected, it would not be "for lack of high example."

However remarkable that book was—Perry Miller characterized it as the "inherited capital" of his generation—it is even more remarkable for its singularity. After more than fifty years, it remains the only synthesis of American history based on the principles of the new history. Although the phenomenon would have puzzled the Beards, the "new" histories of our time pronounce themselves analytical, not narrative, history. The principles of the new history and the narrative form have become antagonists rather than ends and means. Before proceeding, therefore, we must reconsider narrative and what happened to it.

Often confusing narrative itself with a particular kind of narrative—old-fashioned political history—our profession has, with a few very recent exceptions, been wary of a return to that mode. Such worries—as well as some recent calls for narrative—have been based on some rather superficial understandings, often expressed in presumed choices: narrative or analysis; readable, or popular, versus professional history; events as opposed to social history. In fact, narrative crosses and confounds all of those supposed dichotomies. It is, as Paul Ricoeur has argued, the bringing together of many elements or parts into a synthetic, developmental, and interpretive whole. It is a process of assimilation, with a "plot" that in its development "grasps together" elements of varying importance, producing a whole that schematizes "intelligible signification." Such assimilation of parts into a narrative form constitutes synthesis, wherein historical interpretation triumphs over pure chance in the ordering of the parts into a whole.

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If narrative was once accepted as inherent in the historian’s craft, we are now nervous about it. Surely it has been unsettling to have some of the world’s most accomplished historians dismiss narrative. Yet, as Ricoeur has demonstrated, when one goes beyond the prescriptive statements of those notables to their actual historical work, one finds narrative. Even Fernand Braudel’s great book, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, first published in 1949, is a narrative history.

Our task is not to decide whether or not to narrate but, rather, to conceive of a plot that is adequate to our proliferating knowledge about society. The “event” or, to use Ricoeur’s terminology, “quasi-event” that we need to narrate our history as a whole is, it will be argued here, the making of public culture. And it is in making such narratives that we find the social role of the historian, who seeks, as the novelist Henry James and the historian Henry Adams understood so well, to create the images of society that become “the mirror in which society looks at itself.”

At the heart of historical narration is a process of emplotting, for it is in the developing plot that the parts find their relation to the whole. Plot thus becomes itself an interpretation of society and the way it works. The appeal of any synthesis depends less on its details than on the image of society that it crystallizes in narrative form. The creation and elaboration of such a working image of society through the rhetorical structure of a plot constitutes the cultural and political significance of historical synthesis—or interpretation. It is at this rather broad and almost metaphorical level that history enters the general culture—either as legitimation of the status quo or as a stimulus to social change.

The image of society, the principle of synthesis, embedded in Progressive historiography was, as Lionel Trilling pointed out in a famous essay, literally a plot, one easily grasped and of a piece with American middle-class beliefs. Society, in that view, was moved by the conflict of material interests, with the “people” on one side and with various and nefarious “special” interests arrayed on the other. And there was a direction to that history; the Progressives believed in the idea of progress. This deep belief and commitment gave movement, as well as drama, to their narratives.

Such an emplotment of the workings of society and history is no longer compelling. Faith in the idea of progress after the Holocaust and the Bomb has been difficult to sustain. Moreover, as historians we have become sensitive to a more inclusive and complex play of social forces than can be contained within the rather simple Progressive model. After World War II, with both the linearity and the dualistic

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7 Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, I, 224, 199.  
9 I am extrapolating from the stimulating argument of Frank Lentricchia, Criticism and Social Change (Chicago, 1983), esp. 1-20.  
coherence of the Progressive image of society and history thus undermined, historians found themselves unable to generate a narrative. Consensus history was, among other things, a response to that emerging difficulty. With its emphasis on continuity, the reenactment of “classic” patterns, consensus history was an alternative to narrative. It was a structural, rather than a narrative, synthesis.

Unable to embrace either narrative or its structuralist alternative, which washed out both conflict and change, postconsensus historians turned to what the sociologist Robert K. Merton was at the time calling “middle range” problems. They addressed issues short of synthetic reach but large enough and interesting enough to sustain books and careers. Those historians were happy, in other words, to make the trade-off recently urged upon French historians by François Furet. Enjoy the excitement of work in this range, Furet counseled. Do not fear too much the consequent “cost” of “the breakup of history into many histories and the renunciation by historians of their role as social authorities.”

If those changes in the mode of historical writing undermined synthesis, so did a parallel, even intersecting, pattern of continuity. As the logic of the new history unfolded, it gradually but definitely subverted the principles of the Progressive synthesis. Redefining history to include whole areas of social life not before thought to be a part of history, historiography reached out to embrace all aspects of society and culture, what the French philosopher and historian Paul Veyne calls “non-eventworthy history.”

For Beard and the Progressives, the first to make the move to broaden history, the new history had implied neither the transcendence of nationalism nor the dissolution of political analysis. Expressions and uses of power in public life remained for them the central core of the story. If kings, generals, and notables lost their monopoly in historical narrative, the purpose of the new history was not so much to dismiss as to surround those actors with the social, economic, and cultural collectivities and forces that were at once the condition and the object of their actions. Beard, a political scientist as well as a historian, never intended that political history be superseded by this broadening vision. The new history was to expand historical practice by incorporating social and intellectual history into political analysis. The last thing its early proponents intended was a separate history with the politics left out. Surely, Beard would have recognized what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese have called “the political crisis of social history.”

More than the logic of the new history drew historians to study the values and social lives of the diverse and fascinating groups that made up the panorama of American life. Larger forces in the general intellectual culture, including the dis-

14 François Furet, by contrast, is urging historians to retreat from the holistic implications of such a program, the dream of l’histoire totale, while still incorporating the social sciences and all social phenomena into the purview of historical analysis. See Furet, In the Workshop of History, esp. 1–23, 54–67.
covery of the people and regions of America in the 1930s, sustained that thrust.\textsuperscript{16} The roots of the profession's interest in the group basis of American life are, then, both broad and deep.

The potential for fragmentation inherent in this development was masked for a long generation by the rise of intellectual history, especially that branch of the field associated with the American studies movement in the early Cold War years. While the "new" social historians explored the diversity of American social experience, other "new" historians, taking their cue from another part of the new history program, began writing about the "American mind" or, more precisely, the "democratic thought" that was supposed to be at the core of American experience.\textsuperscript{17} Social diversity was subsumed into a "consensus" of American democratic values. During that period, fittingly enough, the influential sociologist Edward Shils, in collaboration with Talcott Parsons, formulated the notion of "consensual pluralism," explaining that social diversity was stabilized by shared symbols or central value systems.\textsuperscript{18}

Here we have an image of society radically different from that assumed by the Progressives. In place of an eminently narratable bipolar conflict grounded in material interest, consensus history presented a vast multiplication of differences in the service of structural equilibrium. Pluralism was everywhere, but inert, inconsequential. Different groups shared more than they contested, and they were absorbed into a pattern of immobile American values. Here, in what the French call the "third tier," not in the material base, was \textit{la longue durée} of American historiography.\textsuperscript{19}

The obvious tension between the heterogeneous social elements and the homogeneous intellectual ones made the search for a principle of synthesis, a narratable plot, daunting. Nonetheless, in 1969, Richard Hofstadter notified his publisher of his intention to undertake over the course of the next eighteen years a three-volume synthesis on the order of \textit{The Rise of American Civilization}.

Since no figure stands more clearly between Beard and us than does Hofstadter, he deserves some specific discussion here. Hofstadter may have rejected Beard's simple conflict model of society, but he never freed himself from Beard's legacy—his first professional article and his last major book confronted Beard's interpretations of American history. He continued in the critical academic tradition pioneered by Beard, and we err to relegate Hofstadter too quickly to the ill-defined and ill-used category of consensus history. It is worth recalling how Hofstadter had come to understand consensus in America. The notion of consensus, he realized, was not a

\textsuperscript{16} For my broader understanding of the history of professional scholarship, I am indebted to John Higham, \textit{History} (Baltimore, 1983).


theory of society; rather, it was a historical circumstance to be explained. The question, he wrote in 1968, "is the extent to which agreement prevails in a society, who in fact takes part in it, and how it is arrived at." But it was as a "new historian" that Hofstadter continued and went beyond the Beardian legacy. A "new historian" of the older, Beardian sort, Hofstadter at the same time reached forward to the new histories of our own time. Hofstadter ventured out into the general culture to find the means of better explaining and narrating the ways of political conflict in American society. While he followed the postwar impulse to explore the diverse social groups and cultures that make up American society, he remained true to Beard's original impulse; he was not thereby drawn away from the story of political life in the United States.20

Politics, power, public life—concerns of both Beard and Hofstadter—remain a viable scaffolding for a synthetic national history. If professional historians are to write such a history, social history must reestablish a fruitful relation with politics, with the once condemned political history, much as Sean Wilentz has recently and self-consciously done in his study of democracy and class in the Jacksonian period.21

Before we can proceed too far with this line of argument, however, a prior question presses itself upon us. Do we want to reinvigorate national history? Is the nation a proper unit of analysis for a new synthetic history? Is not the promise of the new history, with its broad sociological foundation and its problem orientation, the transcendence of professional history's early association with the nineteenth-century nation-state? An embrace of the nation-state as a unit of analysis certainly reveals a professional conservatism. It also makes a political statement that cannot but leave one uneasy at a time when nation-states threaten to destroy the world. Yet with an awareness of some of the stakes, an argument can be made for history's traditional support by nation-states and for its acceptance of the nation-state as a subject.

Professional history has been institutionalized on the basis of national cultures as well as states. Anyone with a sense of history must recognize that such associations are contingent, but there is little evidence at the moment of the emergence of any new transnational cultural or political formations to sustain a history that will transcend nations. Even Furet, who audaciously proposes a problem-oriented history free from the notion of periods, free of temporality as a defining characteristic, acknowledges history's continuing tie to the nation-state. For him, as for Beard and Robinson, a new sociological history will use "society to shed light on nationhood."22 It can fairly be said that we need to understand our national inheritances better before we can free ourselves from them.

But my argument is not in fact directed against a reach for "total history," as the


22 Furet, In the Workshop of History, 1–2.
French call it, or a problem-oriented history that transcends the nation. One can only wish that more American historians were willing to assimilate history to social theory, as exemplified by David Brion Davis’s magnificent exploration of the meaning of freedom, dependence, and responsibility in modern society. But, except for the recent and brilliant work of Thomas L. Haskell, one finds few following in Davis’s ambitious footsteps.

No, the problem that worries me is of a very different order: the proliferation of intensely parochial, nearly hermetic discourses around a series of social units far smaller than either societies or nations. My particular argument, for a particular version of synthesis, is not absolute; it is contingent. It is an argument based on a sense of where historiography is now and what might reasonably be done now to enhance its significance, both within the confines of professionalism and in civic life. What I propose as an organizing principle is a national synthesis, but with “the nation” understood in a new way, as the ever changing, always contingent outcome of a continuing contest among social groups and ideas for the power to define public culture, thus the nation itself.

The introduction of the term “public culture” greatly expands the definition of “political” history, which must be broadened to comprehend power in public. The notion of public culture, at least as it is here being proposed, embraces a wide range of manifestations of power in society—from the institutional power of the state through the more subtle power to assign meaning and significance to various cultural phenomena, including the power to establish categories of social analysis and understanding. The public culture of a society is a forum where power in its various forms, including meaning and aesthetics, is elaborated and made authoritative. Because of its contested quality, the public is an inherently political collectivity, and this distinguishes it from mere social collectivities or cultural pastiches. Public culture, then, is a political concept that can provide an integrating narrative focus to the otherwise politically inert data and analysis of social history in a way not possible with a narrower definition of politics and political history.

The old political history that social and intellectual historians rejected—the history of parties, elections, and administrations—probably deserves Jacques Le Goff’s epithet for it: “superficial.” But one can imagine as a historical subject the history power in the public realm, something that when narrated “evokes center and depth.” With such a sense of public culture, we approach the complex intermingling, at once contested and collaborative, of political, economic, social, and cultural life. These linkages and interactions elaborate “real social forms” that define and give legitimate authority to power. The constitution and practical operation of these forms, then, are the proper subject of a synthetic history.


Need for Synthesis in American History

Once one abandons a narrow definition of politics to incorporate into it symbolic forms of power and meaning, there is a danger of being drawn into the particular symbolic worlds of society's parts. When Hofstadter expanded the study of politics to include its symbolic aspects, making for, in his phrase, "a sort of literary anthropology" of "classes and groups," he did not allow that extension of the historiographical terrain to dilute the study of politics. Rather, he vastly enriched it. Since Hofstadter, however, it seems that our anthropological concerns have considerably eroded our discipline's traditional concern for the history of public life. What for Hofstadter were complementary interests seem for us choices.

The most innovative work done in the past fifteen years, whether by social historians or by intellectual historians, has explored the culture of groups in American society. But this work differs fundamentally from Hofstadter's in that it is not concerned, at least not centrally, with the relations of those cultures in the public world. Rather, it is devoted almost exclusively to the private or *gemeinschaftlich* worlds of trades, occupations, and professions; locality; sisterhood; race and ethnicity; and family. What we have gotten are the parts, all richly described. But since they are somehow assumed to be autonomous, we get no image of the whole, and no suggestions about how the parts might go together or even whether they are intended to go together. Monographic work, no matter how prolific, will not fall by itself into an interpretive synthesis, any more than bricks will fall into a facade. A principle of integration, an architectonic vision of the focal point and dynamic for the narrative, is necessary. The making of public culture can provide the narrative focus that we have been lacking.

But there is more to the task before us. Synthesis depends on professional conditions that encourage practical concern with the whole. Those conditions have changed since the writing of *The Rise of American Civilization*. Both the ideas and the institutional patterns of the profession that sustained the Progressive historians have failed to survive into our own time. While the logic of the new history, itself embedded in yet larger tendencies of modern culture, was undermining the notion of a narrative center, the loss of the idea of progress further complicated the task of historical narrative. Worse yet, the identification of the ironic mode with conservatism and consensus, surely a false attribution, has denied contemporary historical practice an alternative narrative strategy in our post-Progressive era. Another part of the explanation is cultural in a broader sense. We may have witnessed in the past decade or so a massive and generational loss of faith in politics and the public realm. Why study something at best epiphenomenal and probably trivial?

Those broad professional and cultural influences are sustained by sociological developments within the profession today. The social history of the profession since World War II needs to be written if we are fully to understand why we find it so

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hard to write a synthetic American history. But let me here emphasize one obvious development. The vast postwar expansion of higher education allowed, even forced, an extreme specialization that has worked mightily against the larger, synthetic view. What happened is related to scale, but scale does not itself explain it. Scale has allowed the emergence of subfields large enough to sustain within themselves scholarly discourse, a journal, even separate professional associations. The executive secretary of the Organization of American Historians has recently reported a remarkable fact: There are today over seventy historical associations, and their combined membership is almost three times the combined membership of the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians.28

Under such conditions it is possible, even probable, for American historians to identify socially and intellectually with restricted subgroups rather than with the American field or with the discipline as a whole. It is a disease of prosperity, of a historically unprecedented formal allocation of societal resources to historical scholarship. But it carries serious intellectual consequences. We have built in postwar America a discipline fragmented into a large number of separate but highly cultivated boxes. (Much the same, for the same reasons, was happening to course offerings in the university, where expansion and specialization fed each other in a way that avoided collegial conflict.)29

Much good has come of those developments (especially expanded opportunities for higher education), but they also produced an attendant misfortune. Interpretation, the consideration of how the boxes relate to each other to form a whole historical experience, proceeded slowly, if at all. However critical each subspecialty became in an internal and essentially technical sense, there was no motive for reflection about the place of each specialization within the larger discipline or the general culture. The sociological existence of each subfield gave it intellectual and moral justification. Each specialty became self-promoting, free from the obligation of having to relate itself to anything beyond itself. The danger, of course, is that the past may, perhaps has, come to look like the American university, a conglomeration of equally important and unrelated units of analysis.

For some time the field of American history has been divided into embarrassingly short time periods as well as into the subfields of political, economic, intellectual, and social history. But even more ominous is the rise in recent years of a new kind of division within social history. Specialization now focuses on social groups within society. These subfields, because they represent real populations in the American past, are easily assumed collectively—and in a simplistically cumulative manner—to constitute American history. So we have the history of women, blacks, labor, immigrants, and so on as special fields of study. Each is studied in its own terms, each with its own scholarly network and discourse.30

The dream of social history, in fact, aspires for more. The goal, as E. J. Hobsbawm

29 This paragraph and the two that follow it are drawn from Bender, "New History," 619–20.
30 For an early and prescient protest against such specialization see Herbert G. Gutman, Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History (New York, 1976), xii–xix.
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has articulated it, is to write a history of society, and we may fairly assume that this is to be a history that relates society's various aspects. What has happened in the American field, however, is the development of groups of specialized practitioners in nearly closed discourses about "their" group. If the new social history has spawned a vast amount of sympathetic and remarkably inventive inquiry into the life of communities, immigrants, women, blacks, and workers, we have gained little in our understanding of the relations of place, race, ethnicity, gender, and class in the formation of American society or, for that matter, in the development of individual Americans.

But that is not all; the problem is intellectual as well as sociological. The distinctive quality of recent accomplishments in the field of social history, particularly the ethnographic turn in the field, immensely complicates the task of writing a synthetic history. Reacting against the quantitative emphasis of the field in the 1960s, with its characteristic if not universal contempt for subjective meanings, social historians have in the 1970s and 1980s looked toward anthropology. Increasingly influenced by the ideas and language of cultural anthropology, historians have striven, with considerable success, to achieve a deeper and fuller elaboration of the cultures of various groups removed from us in time, to provide, in Clifford Geertz's term, a "thick description."

All of this has muted the conflict between intellectual and social history, a painful rivalry for status and influence that divided the discipline in the 1970s. In taking note of the apparent ascendancy of a culturalist perspective in the 1980s, the intellectual historian William J. Bouwsma has suggested that intellectual history as a field is no longer needed. Its project has succeeded; we are now all intellectual historians.

But even if the emerging sympathy for culture promises to end the schism between social and intellectual history, the cause of synthesis is not similarly advanced by these developments. It may even be set back. As ever deeper explorations into the interior meaning shared by groups achieve greater and greater ethnographic integrity, they become more and more self-contained. It becomes harder to grasp their connection with larger social units, particularly with the public realm, that arena in which groups struggle with each other for a place in the making of American history.

The translation of cultural analysis from anthropology to history has been important and exciting work, but it turns out to be bedeviled by an unanticipated

32 Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York, 1973), esp. 3-30.
34 William J. Bouwsma, "From History of Ideas to History of Meaning," in New History, ed. Rabb and Rotberg, 279-91. Not all intellectual historians are so comfortable with the ascendancy of a culturalist perspective. See, for example, Dominick LaCapra, Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language (Ithaca, 1983), esp. 25-71.
problem. Anthropology has not, until its rather recent contact with history, concerned itself with the public realm, a limitation evident in Geertz's work, to which historians have especially turned for guidance. Geertz's fundamental and profoundly important contribution to his own discipline of anthropology has been to shift the focus of cultural studies, and by implication the meaning of culture itself, from the realm of internalized values and personality to the larger world of society and collective symbols. Although most commentators on his work do not make a distinction between the public and the social, it is the latter, not the former, that is central to his anthropology, as he focuses on culture as a source of unity rather than as a medium of conflict.

For the analysis of the public culture of modern societies, of which the United States is exemplary, the undifferentiated and uncontested notion of culture displayed in Geertz's work, most notably in his widely cited essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," is as problematical as it is stimulating. Geertz's apparent indifference toward the patterns of discord and conflict out of which a public culture in a highly differentiated society is constituted and his disinclination to explore variant readings of public symbols by groups defined through class, ethnicity, gender, and such preclude analysis of public culture. Instead of pointing toward the exploration of a public realm that is an arena of power and relational difference, the anthropology assimilated by historians, like earlier myth analysis, strives toward representation of an assumed consensus.

Very recent historical scholarship, however, is beginning to reveal a public realm that is not a given but is, rather, a product of historical processes, one made and remade in time. The process of making and remaking supplies a focus for a new historical synthesis. How do different groups contribute to that making? How are groups defined in their relation to that culture? How do groups gain (or not gain)
legitimacy? How do they participate (or not participate) in the creation and distribution of public meaning and institutional power? The key to such synthesis is an understanding of difference in America that is relational, that does not assume a discontinuity in social and individual experience. From such a perspective, it is possible to bring together the rich harvest of recent scholarship on groups into a history; it will thus amount to more than a series of collective memories.  

The present historiographical moment is pregnant with possibilities. If The Rise of American Civilization remains a useful benchmark, even a point of orientation for us, it is not a model. After all we have learned about the multiplicity of group cultures that have been so much studied in recent years, a simple narrative of the public dimension, even if enlivened with bipolar conflict, would today seem rather "thin" description. What is presently so exciting is the emerging prospect of a new synthesis that will bring together the public and the gemeinschaftlich dimensions of history in a single, complex narrative. The concerns for public culture so important to Beard and his generation can be brought into an analytical relationship with our more recent studies of the culture of smaller and socially homogeneous groups.

At the center of such a synthetic narrative, as a focus and as an analytical device, we must develop a historical notion of public culture, at once an arena for the play of cultures and interests in society and the product of that play—the constituted definition of power and meaning. It is this public culture, however differently we value it, not a series of distinctive group experiences, that reveals and establishes our common life as a people and as a nation. Understanding our peoplehood demands not an assumption of sameness but, rather, a relational sense of the differences that mark and make our society. Such a shift in historical understanding implies a shift in the rhetorical strategy of historical writing. Monographic studies of various groups need to be consciously oriented to the larger historical process of interaction in the formation of public culture. Rather than condemning, rejecting, or devaluing continued specialization, my aim is to suggest a reorientation in its conceptualization in the interest of a relational understanding of the parts. It is by understanding parts in their relation to other parts, as opposed to conferring upon them, whether by intention or through inadvertence, a false autonomy, that history becomes whole, a synthetic narrative.

To reframe historical writing after this fashion has immediate and significant cultural and political implications. It seems to strike at the cultural and political agenda of those historians who have shifted the focus of historical scholarship to the recovery of the histories of various subordinate groups. One can understand why historians of such groups—women, blacks, immigrants, and others excluded from significant involvement in the public realm—might be inclined to view a history of the public realm as morally obtuse. It has in the past devalued the lives of such groups. In re-

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41 We know painfully little about the transactions between the public and the private worlds. Short of an assumption of thoughtlessness, deceit, or hypocrisy, we have no way of reconciling the differences that often separate private and public beliefs. See T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," American Historical Review, 90 (June 1985), 585–87.
sponse, then, some newer historians have stressed the strength and dignity and human agency one finds within the contexts of family, neighborhood, and sisterhood. Certainly, it is not my intention to deny the omissions of earlier historiography, nor can the agency of subordinate groups be doubted. But a fuller explanation of the structure, context, and meaning of that agency is required. What is being proposed here is to establish the relations of various self-defined, externally defined, and structurally defined parts to each other and to the public culture that is constituted from their relations. Only then, when exclusion and subordination are established as relations in public, can meaning, significance, causation, and the question of justice be adequately addressed. Such a history will be more likely to provoke the corrosive sort of questions always associated with historical moments ready for social change.

This essay offers a reconceptualization of our history that stresses the interplay of various groups, usually characterized as homogeneous, whether defined socially (for example, ethnic groups) or as private worlds (for example, the family), and the larger, heterogeneous, and contested political and cultural realm of the nation. How do the worlds of private life, the group meanings and interests of smaller social units, affect and effect the configuration of public life? How does the character and quality of relations with public life affect private life and the life of social groups? The present task is to begin establishing the relationship over time of the interclass, multiethnic, and multicultural center, what I call public culture, and the smaller, more homogeneous gemeinschaftlich groups of the periphery. Such a perspective compels attention to patterns of power and meaning in society and the processes of their continuation or interruption and reorganization. A focus on public culture and its changing connections with cultures smaller than the whole offers an image of society capacious enough to sustain a synthetic narrative.

My aim here has been to identify, at a fairly abstract level, past historiographical trends and a particular present opportunity for the resumption of the task of synthesis. No doubt, it is true that a new principle of synthesis is more likely to be discovered as the product of practice than to be created by manifestos. Yet calls for synthesis, if sensitive to current practice, have their place. Identifying what seem to be emerging tendencies and possibilities can, by according them recognition, advance them, somewhat after the fashion of Merton’s notion of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Since the historiography of the nineteenth century is both highly developed and the most severely fragmented, recent efforts in that field to recover a larger ground for synthesis are encouraging. Four studies, all very different, all representing rather different historiographical vectors, come particularly to mind as fruitful attempts to orient the study of groups to the making of public culture: Mary P. Ryan’s Cradle of the Middle Class; Jean H. Baker’s elegantly conceived evocation of the political

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culture of Northern Democrats at midcentury; Iver Charles Bernstein’s rich and widely ramifying dissertation on the New York City Draft Riots of 1863; and Eric Foner’s brief but stunning comparative analysis of emancipation and Reconstruction.44

For all their differences, the four studies share an interest, fundamental in the conception of each, in the formation and reformation of public culture, both in the realm of formal politics and in the realm of civic meaning. Those issues are at the center of their narratives even when, as in the case of Foner’s Nothing But Freedom, this concern with public culture gives structure to the narrative without ever being named. The studies also bear collective notice for their tendency to blur historiographical genres. Although Ryan identifies herself as a social historian and Baker identifies herself as a political historian, they have so opened up the range of discussion by their particular orientation to public culture, specifically by their exploration of relations between the public and the private lives of identifiable social groups, that neither social history nor political history—both of which have been characterized by a good deal of what J. H. Hexter once called the “tunnel method”—can contain their work.45 The process of blurring is carried even further in Bernstein’s and Foner’s work, which shows them to be neither social nor political nor cultural historians; they are all at once.

Ryan, attracted both by the possibilities of ethnography and by the ideal of “total history,” has written a history of women and the family, a history of “social reproduction,” that moves beyond individual homes and kinship networks to the making and then the uses of public culture in its relation to changing patterns of privatization. Occasionally she conflates the social world (the world of homosocial relations and benevolence) that existed and was even expanded within the doctrine of separate spheres with the multiclass, multiethnic, formally political world of the public accessible only to men. However, the essential point of her narrative is both the remapping of social life and the making of a public realm that was relatively inaccessible to women, whose activities and influence were within informal social “channels” that “lined the borders of the public sphere.” Her exploration of the “social geography of gender” is contained within a larger narrative structure attentive to patterns of increasing privacy and sharpening of social boundaries that “developed in tandem with the enlargement, remoteness, and increasing formality of [the] public sphere.” Because she extends her concern to the larger culture and the relation of women to it, we can see more clearly the social boundaries of gender, something that enhances our understanding both of women’s experience and of the development of public culture in America.46


46 Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, xi–xii, 74, 150. Many of these same points could have been addressed by discussing Mary Kelley, Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America (New York, 1995).
Politics was a central medium of public culture in nineteenth-century America. (That, of course, is one reason some women considered the vote so important.) But Ryan does not take much notice of formal politics, thus missing an essential component of the making of public culture. Baker, however, fully understands that the process by which family values are translated into political and public ones (and vice versa) is a constituent fact of both social and political history. Her Affairs of Party offers a new political history that reaches to become a history of public culture. Putting what she calls "public concourse" at the center of her story, she examines the way in which family, communities, schools, and parties gave shape to—and were shaped by—civic culture. Although her focus is on only one subculture (Northern Democracy) in the larger and fragile public culture of mid-nineteenth-century America, her narrative always recognizes and connects itself to the larger configurations of interplay and continuity.

A much fuller analysis—in a somewhat more constricted arena—is provided by Bernstein. Using a dramatic event, the Draft Riots of 1863, to identify the various social and political groups (including some outside the city) seeking representation in New York City for their values and interests, Bernstein proceeds, with remarkable sophistication and awareness of the complexity of metropolitan life and politics, to reconstruct the contingent equilibrium of their relations in 1850, their instability in the 1860s, and their restructuring in the 1870s. Sensitive to the complex play of social experience, cultural expression and aspiration, and political practice, Bernstein probes the way public culture, what he calls the "political order," worked in New York. With that broad and relational understanding of the interplay of parts and the construction of the whole, he is able to make well-grounded historical judgments about shifts in the distribution of power and definitions of justice.

It is possible, as Foner demonstrates so gracefully in Nothing But Freedom, to present a large and complex narrative with great economy. In 110 pages of text, he is able to bring into complementary relations a generalizing, problem-oriented comparative history (emancipation), national history (Reconstruction), and rich local social history (the Combahee, South Carolina, labor conflicts in the 1870s). Each requires a different scale of analysis and a different historical time. But what holds it all together is Foner's firm sense of a central political fact: black suffrage. Both the broad comparative history and the local social history find their narrative point in that fundamental innovation in America and postemancipation history. Foner reveals how closely intertwined are cycles of public power and the conditions of work and free life, and in his account of the Combahee strikes, he brilliantly il-
luminates the interplay of the nation-state, local politics, social life, and the relations of production in the making of public culture.\(^\text{49}\)

None of these works, of course, was written within the context of the agenda being presented here, and none of them precisely accomplishes what is being called for. But attention is warranted for two reasons. First, they may reflect an important development in the contemporary historical sensibility that deserves encouragement. Second, to call attention to certain of their qualities gives a concreteness to the emerging possibilities that seem to be beckoning a new kind of history, one seeking more complex narrative strategies based on a concern for the relation of the parts, smaller and homogeneous groups, to the larger and heterogeneous center.

If this clutch of studies indeed represents a new direction in historical studies, a word of conceptual caution is in order. What will make this synthesis dynamic and honest to recent scholarship is the recognition that there is always a "problem" of public culture. It is a contest over what Martin Heidegger called the "public interpretation of reality," a battle that includes the possession of meaning as well as formal instruments of power. Particular social groups seeking power and recognition "want to make their interpretation of the world the universal one."\(^\text{50}\) The thrust by the powerful to define for themselves and for others a public culture that looks very much like their group values writ large presents the interpretive, analytical, and moral problem of the study of public culture. Historians cannot take the public world on its own terms. It must be interrogated; we must inquire into its making, seeking to establish the various degrees and terms of participation of various groups in the public world. Unlike the older pluralism, dominant in American social science in the 1950s and early 1960s, such a history would not assume that all relevant groups are represented in public. It would be concerned to know why some groups and some values are so much—or so little—represented in the public realm.

My aim here, let me repeat, is not to devalue monographic studies in favor of synthesis. Rather, my point is to encourage a reconceptualization of such studies, making possible a relational understanding of those works and of their various subjects, much as Barbara Jeanne Fields is doing for the history of Afro-Americans in slavery and freedom with her emphasis on the larger contexts and relations of black life.\(^\text{51}\) My argument is that the recovery of the notion of the public, with an emphasis on its making, provides a practical and morally informed way of facilitating such work.

This is not to suggest that anyone immediately set aside his or her current work and sit down to write a vast work of synthesis. Yet I do believe and mean to argue that we owe such a work to the profession and to the public. For a generation we have shirked that obligation—or opportunity. History is not a technical discipline;


we cannot do our civic service as Walter Lippmann’s insider-experts. Rather, we must take our cue from John Dewey and engage the public culture of our time.\textsuperscript{52} If we are to justify the social resources allocated to history—and cumulatively, for all their inadequacy, they are substantial—we must as individual historians communicate, at least occasionally, directly to the public, offering our interpretations of how our society and nation works.\textsuperscript{53}

If we are to redeem that public debt, we would do well to get ourselves at least moving in a direction that makes such public gestures natural extensions of our work. Recent scholarship, with its intense specialization, fragmentation, and preoccupation with groups, has not been entering general intellectual or political discourse in the way it did during Beard’s and Hofstadter’s generations. One cannot but concur with the conclusion of Herbert G. Gutman, who, after noticing the ignorance of historical writing at the American Writers Congress in 1981, blamed historians for failing to produce a successor to \textit{The Rise of American Civilization}. The social history he had done so much to stimulate and to develop had not, he concluded, “produce[d] a new synthesis. And that is why its potential audience remains so small.” What Gutman hoped for was “a new synthesis . . . that incorporates and then transcends the new history.”\textsuperscript{54}

Such work needs a center, a point of orientation for the various parts and a focus for narrative energy. The notion of public culture and its making can supply such a center. With at least a preliminary sense of the public and its terrain, we will find it possible in detailed studies, as well as in an eventual work of synthesis, to begin that process of “tacking” between the center and the peripheral parts that will enable us to develop a theory of the relation of the parts, an interpretive understanding of how American society works.\textsuperscript{55}

An interpretation of American society that is expressed in the dialectic of the center and the periphery is, of course, a work of constructive imagination. But it is not ungrounded; it is based on actual historical work, on past and current historiographical trends. It seems to offer the opportunity of combining the strengths of the older tradition of the new history, with its concern for the public as both subject and audience, with the new and exciting modes of historiography that are transforming the discipline in our own time.


\textsuperscript{53} E. J. Hobsbawm, \textit{The Age of Capital, 1848–1875} (New York, 1975), xiii.

\textsuperscript{54} Gutman, “Missing Synthesis.” 554.