

## “The Cultural Turn” and the American History in the 21st Century

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How can historians impact the study of American history in the 21st century? More specifically, what kind of contributions can history after “the cultural turn” make? Examining several representative pieces, this paper provides a sketch of the forthcoming historiography.

Recent studies have expressed doubts about the value of cultural history, questioning whether it can address the larger issue of structural change in American society. However, in my view, those concerns do not grasp the essence and scope of the cultural turn. Rather, it is possible and more fruitful to further develop cultural history and integrate it more seamlessly into the writing of history.

### 1. Fall of Cultural History, Rise of Capitalism History?

Cultural history has challenged the reign of social history since the 1980s. However, it was V. Bonnell and L. Hunt, in their 1999 book *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, who popularized the term among historians.<sup>1</sup> A number of scholars joined the discussion, examining the meaning of cultural turn for historical studies in the 2000s.<sup>2</sup> And almost immediately, criticism of this trend appeared.

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1. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Avery Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Also see James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley, *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Lawrence B. Glickman, “The ‘Cultural Turn,’” in Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds., *American History Now* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 221–241.

2. Barbara Weinstein, “Developing Inequality,” AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 113, no. 1 (February 2008): 1–18; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “The Task of the

A basic yet quite common misunderstanding is that cultural history is concerned only with language. In this view, after the linguistic turn, topics like discourses, celebrations, rituals, and images occupied too much historical attention, replacing the more “significant” topics of politics and economy.

Moreover, some theory-focused historians have questioned the very *existence* of the linguistic turn. Certainly, historians are no longer able to treat documents as evidence of plain facts. Yet, they say, such critical analysis of primary sources has been the art of modern historical studies from its beginning. In this sense, those critics find no turn in historiography.<sup>3</sup>

Daniel Rodgers is one of many scholars who argue that the field of cultural history was in fact born out of neo-liberalism. According to Rodgers, when one assumes the existence of the “market” and its function, one has no basis on which to rethink and historicize the “market.” Deprived of interest in political economy, he concludes, these historians “retreated” to the study of cultures.<sup>4</sup>

In the same vein, members of a recent *American Historical Review* roundtable explore whether historians’ indulgence in culture can explain the longer transformation of history. While they praise the ways scholars have challenged existing historical studies, many of the discussants find that the cultural turn offered no substantial proposals to replace current history writing. They claim that although cultural history aptly illustrates micro dynamics, in the absence of addressing structure, it cannot explain longer and broader changes over time.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most active proposals has come from within “the history of

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Historian,” AHA Presidential Address, *American Historical Review* 114, no. 1 (February 2009): 1-15; “AHR Forum: Geoff Eley’s *A Crooked Line*,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 391-437; “AHR Forum: Revisiting ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,’” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1344-1430; “AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 573-661; “AHR Conversation: Historians and the Study of Material Culture,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1355-1404; “AHR Forum: The State in South Asian History,” *American Historical Review* 115, no. 2 (April 2010): 405-483; *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003): 576-611; *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 1 (January 2004): 94-117; *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 2 (May 2004): 201-224; James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O’Malley, eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present and Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

3. “AHR Forum: Historiographic ‘Turns’ in Critical Perspective,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012). Especially, Judith Surkis, “When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 700-22.

4. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

5. Emmanuel Akyeampong, Caroline Arni, Pamela Kyle Crossley, Mark Hewitson, and William H. Sewell, “Conversation: Explaining Historical Change; or, the Lost History of Causes,” *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 4 (2015): 1369-1423. Also see Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

capitalism.” This new field calls for addressing obvious-yet hitherto somewhat neglected-issues relevant to the people living today. Frankly speaking, economics and politics have not necessarily been popular fields during the last few decades. However, just as Alice Kessler-Harris of the AHA warned in her presidential address, it is time for historians to grapple with “capitalism” since it has affected so many aspects of people’s experiences.<sup>6</sup> Touting a shift from the study of “culture” to the study of more substantial political economy and “material,” a number of scholars are now promoting the history of capitalism.

## 2. What is “Cultural History”?

One can be sympathetic with those critics who wish to be relevant to their contemporary societies. Without question, capitalism is one of the most significant systems today.

However, this perception alone does not necessarily convince me to abandon the wealth of the cultural turn, and shift from cultural history to something material. I would argue that attention to “cultural” process is crucial for enriching and fully developing history writing. Indeed, the study of capitalism can benefit from the cultural turn. Cultural history and material history are actually in tandem.

### Historical Studies after the Cultural Turn

Overlooked in this historiographic discussion are the insights provided by the “cultural turn” for a general understanding of history. The questions posed by the turn are fundamental: What is society? What and who constitutes it, and by what means? How does it run and change? By asking these questions, the “cultural turn” allows us to understand a society and its dynamics.

Too often, not just historians but social scientists, technocrats, politicians, and everyday people assume the existence of a fixed society, in which the direct power of politics, economy, and institutions organizes society. Cultural anthropologists challenge this view. Clifford Geertz claims that instead, it is “culture” that makes and runs a society. Shared perception of norms; who has membership; whose authority is acknowledged and upon what basis: these are the key components that form, maintain, and even change a society.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, many historians already welcomed and accepted the “cultural turn,” this cultural perception of a society. As they both learned from and struggled with

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6. Alice Kessler-Harris, “Capitalism, Democracy, and the Emancipation of Belief,” *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (2012): 725–40.

7. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

Marxism, E. P. Thompson, Herbert Guttman, and many others re-defined who were “workers.” Instead of assuming the labor class a solely a function of economic structure, these earlier historians paid attention to the daily exchanges of people at particular time and locations.

One can easily find similar trends in studies of race, gender, and sexuality. For example, David Roediger’s work on “whiteness” demonstrated how the seemingly natural category of race in fact was invented via a cultural process. The lexicon of “race” was re-discovered after 1865, when the abolition of slavery meant that the free laborer status of poor immigrant workers from Europe was no longer guaranteed.<sup>8</sup>

History after the “cultural turn” cannot simply be a marginal history of culture stacked with mere rhetoric. Lynn Hunt’s classic work on the French Revolution explored the implication of the “cultural turn” for understanding the larger politics of the society. Rhetoric, rituals and performances played crucial roles; they allowed the French people to question, understand, and authorize the reasons for why the King had to be removed and the regime had to be changed, and to construct the new republic. If they want to paint a comprehensive picture, historians cannot dismiss “culture.”<sup>9</sup>

### Re-reading Histories of Capitalism

In this light, the so-called “shift” to the history of capitalism needs to be reexamined. Simply put, it is not necessarily a “shift.” The best histories of capitalism often utilize the fruitful insights of the cultural turn. To put this differently, it is not productive to erect a binary frame between a to-be-criticized cultural history and a to-be-praised capitalism history. Rather, let us find the quintessence of the new field.

For today’s talk, Sven Beckert’s two books, *Monied Metropolis* and *Empire of Cotton*, provide us valuable case studies to show what is possible *with* and *without* the cultural turn. Beckert has been one of leading advocates for the history of capitalism, particularly since he published his widely read survey article in the AHA’s *American History Now* in 2011.<sup>10</sup>

Beckert’s 2001 *Monied Metropolis* is one of the earliest works in the field. Yet,

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8. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

9. Lynn Avery Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

10. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton a Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014); Sven Beckert, “History of American Capitalism,” in Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr eds., *American History Now* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 314–35; Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

as the subtitle “*New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896*” hinted, Beckert is not writing a plain history of political economy. He focuses on actors, the “bourgeois”; but importantly, he does not assume who they were. Paying attention to steps of “consolidation,” he looked at a series of cultural processes in which bankers, merchants, and rising manufactures in New York struggled to identify who they themselves were. Economic structure did not simply solidify these rich people into a ready-made class of capitalists; rather, Beckert describes their negotiations with each other throughout the age of the Civil War, labor strife, and slave emancipation. The beauty of *Monied Metropolis* is not its attention to political economy, but its integration of social and cultural histories, as Beckert identifies rich and elite New Yorkers with their diversity, internal struggle, and transformation into a single class of the “bourgeois.”

“Fragility” is one of the book’s keywords. Without presupposing “capitalists,” Beckert successfully *historicizes* diverse bourgeois of different backgrounds who face others, such as workers and African Americans, in distinctive experiences. Even those rich and powerful New Yorkers were not able to seize the city as they wished. The bourgeois in financial circles, commercial business, and manufacturing had to adjust their relationships while facing workers. Without inventing a new political culture, without the consent of people in New York, the “bourgeois” could not rule the city.

### Structural Transformation and Culture

In order to evaluate *Monied Metropolis*, it is worth reading William Sewell’s *Logics of History*. Ironically, Sewell is now a quite harsh advocate of the anti-cultural history campaign. But his work itself forwards another thesis.<sup>11</sup>

Criticizing historians’ over-dependence on social scientific theories, Sewell proposes to articulate the concept of “culture.” His question is how historians explain a historical change. A macro narrative of social science might describe a society’s trajectory. Yet for historians, especially historians after the cultural turn, a society and its transformation are more complicated and consisted of various and interacting actors. In a web of cultural codes, they make and experience numerous events. It is a fantasy of social scientists to imagine that an entire, monolithic community experiences a single event in the same way, transforming a society from state A to state B. In reality, numerous small events-whose consequences are unknown at that time-occur, and the sum of such uneven affairs somehow causes a transformation of society/history.

According to Sewell, the “temporality of social life” and the “contingency” of actual “events” are the source of change. In his opinion, theory-timid historians

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11. William Hamilton Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

actually have an advantage because they are good at studying this holistic cultural process, not an imagined single macro story but an actual site in which an event happens and causes chain reactions.

In this light, *Monied Metropolis* is not merely a meticulous documentary of wealthy New Yorkers. What I appreciate most is its challenge to “teleology.” Beckert, along with the best recent scholars in this field, does not simply endorse seemingly existing subjects, categories, norms, and societies. Replacing a teleology that narrates an almost natural and inevitable development of a past, in this case “capitalism,” these works are sensitive to those on-going struggles and dialogues that sometimes maintain and sometime transform a society. While explaining how the past results from events, their approaches at the same time reveal the past’s fragile and moving condition, which is open for historians and readers to question, revive, and intervene in so-called history. By recovering these dynamics of history, rather than presenting a static picture of the dead past, they enrich history writing.<sup>12</sup>

### A Failed History of Capitalism

In contrast to *Monied Metropolis*, Beckert’s recent book *Empire of Cotton* is disappointing. Although quite powerful, this is merely a work of global history, which would suggest which direction historians should go.

In the context of American historiography, this book clearly demonstrates the importance of understanding slavery not just as a peculiar institution in North America, but as a modern and global form of business. American histories of capitalism should not and cannot confine their views to industrialization with studies of wage laborers. Frequently using the term “war capitalism,” *Empire of Cotton* aptly illustrates that in reality, “capitalism” works beyond the market. Un-free forced labor has been a part of the system to find a worldwide, low-cost labor force. Recently, there has been growing interest in histories of worldwide slavery, and *Empire of Cotton* resonates with this boom. As such, it provides a valuable contribution to the global history of capitalism.

However, for Japanese readers as well as for international historians, *Empire of Cotton* offers nothing new. Global historians in Japan would welcome input from an American historian. However, they are already familiar with Eric Williams, Sydney Mintz, and Immanuel Wallerstein, all of whom have argued that slavery was not a pre-modern phenomenon, but a modern product of global capitalism.

What happened to the Beckert who wrote *Monied Metropolis* in 2001? In my

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12. Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Julia C. Ott, *When Wall Street Met Main Street: The Quest for an Investors' Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

view, what is missing from *Empire of Cotton* is the insight of the cultural turn. According to the Beckert of 2014, the protagonists all were stable. The state and the capitalists were dominant; there were no cultural contests. Grounded in their economic and political power, they marched through the history from past to the present. Beckert is telling a surprisingly linear story.

As a consequence, while it elegantly shows the global development of slavery and capitalism both within and beyond the market, *Empire of Cotton* ends up presenting a teleologic narrative. Beckert tells a saga of static capitalists. He points to external social sciences to explain the rise and spread of the institution, instead of looking internally from history. As William Sewell would lament, there are no dynamics of history here.

This is an example of the unfortunate shift from “cultural history” to global political and economic history. Carelessly giving up the cultural turn, it degenerates theoretically to the conventional history of political economy. And it is a poor choice to join a teleological bandwagon of the global history.

### **3. Envisioning American History in the 21st Century after the Cultural Turn**

It is crucial to avoid pivoting to the history of capitalism. Historians must not discard the cultural turn, no matter how bothersome its theory is. If they do not pay attention to the cultural processes through which people negotiate norm and authority, scholars will be unable to find and understand the dynamics of history. Rather than dichotomizing cultural and capitalism histories, one can and should integrate them.

I urge scholars to go even further beyond the history of capitalism. Beckert’s *Monied Metropolis* is a case in point. Although it successfully bridges social, cultural, and economic histories, from today’s point of view, its picture is quite simple. It posits two axes: the struggle amongst rich people, and confrontations between the bourgeois and the workers. It is beautifully nuanced, yet written within a conventional framework of labor history. Consequently, Beckert eventually situates the victory of capitalists over laborers in the end of the 19th century. Tracing a long and winding road of the bourgeois in Gotham City, Beckert concludes that the capitalists’ reign began in the 1890s.

Perhaps he is merely proving the dominance of the rich. 20th century American history appears to support this view. Capitalists were indeed powerful and dominant, after all. But is it not Beckert himself who posed a question about the supposedly inevitable category of history? He asked who were the “bourgeois,” because various capitalists in New York City had to “consolidate” themselves out of fluidity and uncertainty. From the very late 20th and contemporary 21st centuries, we have also discovered American capitalism is in crisis. In retrospect, did we not overlook something?

*What if Beckert expanded his scope?* I wonder. He was aware of race issues,

but they often remained in the background. What if he considered gendered politics, using them to shed light on benevolent friendly visitors, settlement workers, and social workers in New York? It was not only working-class men and capitalists who noticed the dysfunction of an industrial city. Experiencing insecurity and the threats of poverty, disease, and high infant death rate, a much broader sort of people were questioning the legitimacy of contemporary society. Ethics, religions, social sciences, and medicine all were tested in the cultural debate over who should take command of a rapidly changing republic.

If one looks solely at the world of economics, the dominance of business tycoons might appear to have been inevitable. But in reality, the whole of political culture was questioned in 19th-century New York. As they experienced multiple crises, people had to reconsider what “society” itself was: who was a member; who should be in command and on what basis; and who “the individual” is: if it was not the “self-made man” living in the classic American Republic, then who were “the people”? Who were Americans-not just in terms of political economy, but also in terms of race, gender, sexuality, religion, ethics, and knowledge? These questions problematize the traditional founding categories of history writing: society, the individual, and human beings. They reveal the necessity for economic historians to work collaboratively with a much wider range of specialists. A simple shift to the history of capitalism is inadequate; historians must go beyond.

Today’s crude survey allows me to think twice about what kind of American history I teach and study. I find scholars are beginning to envision a different kind of American history, re-examining of the basic categories of history writing.

20th-century American historiography was powerful and influential because it provided a “universal” story. Whether they were portraying an ongoing struggle or an achieved goal, these American histories presented a narrative of universal individuals and their freedom; in short, a representative story of modern history.

Yet, given the cultural turn, today’s historians are shifting focus. They are already quite familiar with the reconsideration of racialized, gendered, class-based people. Capitalists are not to be assumed but to be explained. Now we know that even the basic categories of society, subjects, and humanness all ought to be reconsidered. In other words, historians have begun to question the universality and teleology of modernity.

This is a blessing. American historians after the cultural turn have just begun to rethink their basic assumptions. They are discovering alternative approaches to grasp a troubled 21st century. This is a movement worth joining.