

BEYOND SCIENCES IN HISTORICAL THEORY? CRITICAL
COMMENTARY ON THE HISTORY/SCIENCE DISTINCTION

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Can and should the methodology of history be merged with that of social science? The conference session in which most of the papers in this issue were presented was billed as dealing with substantive issues concerning this issue of the interplay between historical research - and writing - and the sciences. This is an age-old topic, of course, concerning a fundamental issue discussed by the philosophers of history and social science of the past century or two. In the centre of the proposed discussions the organizers wished to place the following important questions:

Which science and which specific scientific methods have been, at different times, the positive model for history, or, as the case may be, a challenge to which historical research and writing must be beware?

How would a natural-scientific perspective, such as that of 'evolutionary psychology', change what historians say about historical processes?

Have non-European traditions of historical thinking experienced similar and comparable confrontations?

The papers here approach these issues in a wide variety of ways and to varying degrees. This old question of the history/science nexus involves issues about the relationships of historiography to philosophy of history, of historical methodology to historical theory, of historical methodology to social and natural science methodologies, and of theory to empirical explanation. There is a lack of common agreement regarding the appropriate terminology about and the significance of these relationships and concepts, which makes discussion more difficult than it could be. The term 'theory' is central to the lack of agreement, being used in at least three different ways (see next paragraph). These papers collectively reflect this lack of agreement.

Given the importance of the history/science issue, surely one of the biggest tasks (reflected in the questions asked by the organizers) for philosophers of history and historiographers is the critique of the pre-suppositions, content, and significance of social, psychological, and socio-biological theories for socio-historical enquiry. Only two of the contributors directly addressed this issue. Critique of the theory of knowledge is quite different - an epistemological task in a pure sense. 'Theory of history' is sometimes used in both of the other senses - as empirical or scientific theory and as theory of knowledge. I argue that it is the critique of theories of socio-historical phenomena, structure, and change (and I

shall be arguing that social and historical theory are in fact a single set of concepts and arguments) and its relationship to methodology of enquiry that enables philosophy (epistemology and ontology) to become directly relevant to socio-historical explanation. The two extant forms of philosophical critique of history (of knowledge and of explanatory concepts), although analytically separate, should have a close connection within the heart of socio-historical enquiry as such. The connection should be derived from the concern to improve empirical explanation in the same way that philosophy of science is relevant to scientific enquiry via its critique of the presuppositions of actual theories and methodologies of science. But the main thrust of philosophy of history in recent times has been directed to trying to shore up the separation of humanistic historical enquiry from all other forms of empirical enquiry. Even if that were achieved, however, it would not obviate the necessity for making *inter subjective* explanations that rely on general concepts and a commitment to the possibility of *explaining* the world. Moreover, that humanistic enquiry does not have to be separated, indeed should not be separated for its own survival, from social, psychological, and biological science, is not understood among the defenders of humanism. I shall argue in this Commentary that scientific enquiry is not necessarily inimical to humanistic enquiry.

From the point of view of the convergences of philosophy and empirical theory and of humanistic explanation and social-scientific explanation, the neo-Kantian, linguistic, and post-modernist legacy has been a regrettable diversion for history and its philosophy in recent decades for it has pushed historians, along with other humanists, in the direction of a residualist narrowing of their enquiries into those areas seemingly left behind, after the social sciences have 'imperialistically' broadened their territory into the traditional domain of history, rather than trying to fuse their enquiries with the social sciences. Much fusion has occurred but not often within academic history departments. There has been a tendency for the development of historical *knowledge*, in the sense of the general causal conceptualization and empirical grasp of events and processes, to be eschewed in favour of insightful or aesthetic *understanding* of human identity, consciousness, feeling, motivation, ideology, and mentality, as if these were quite different ways of knowing. The extolling of subjectivity, individuality, empathy, insight, and story telling about unique cases as the essential methodological approach, and the ignoring or rejecting of general theory, hypotheses, causal relationships, and the systematic collection and quantification of data, have served both to exclude a rapprochement with other modes of enquiry and to foreclose the possibility that social science could incorporate humanism within a wider approach to social scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, beneath the facade of idiographic representation there have always lurked unexamined and unacknowledged general assumptions and partially specified theorizations of causes about human motivation and action (often couched in the language of 'common sense'), without which historians have never been able to tell their stories persuasively. Of course not all historians have gone the exclusively idiographic and atheoretical way, as the flourishing of the social science history movement and many other similar developments attest.

Thus I contend that the main task for philosophers of history and historiographers should be to make a sustained discussion of the assumptions, presuppositions, theories, and methodologies of all kinds of history writing, including the broad social science history stream that is flourishing more than ever and which includes various forms of social structural history, economic history, geographical history, cultural history, environmental history, historical anthropology, political history, geopolitical history, historical political economy, Big history, world history, and all the other ways that social theorising (in the broadest sense) and historical enquiry are now being fused. There is a plethora of historical modes but they are all histories and, surely, all contributing to knowledge and understanding of past and present. Idiographic and nomothetic history need each other.

Three important linked questions for the methodology of both history and social science concern, firstly, the place of narrative as a basic norm of disciplinary practice in history and elsewhere; secondly, the critique of other pre-suppositions and general causal concepts about, rationality, social realism, teleological human and social tendencies, and human nature; and, thirdly, ideas of truth presupposed or defended. All these questions will be discussed in what follows.

The claim that narrative is a defining characteristic of historical writing and the use of it to separate history from social science in recent decades has been detrimental to historical practice when used to separate history from scientific theory and quantitative methods. On the other hand, a disavowal or neglect of narrative is detrimental to social science and, indeed, to areas of natural science. The explanatory significance of narrative becomes apparent once the sciences grasp the historicity of their domains. All or most of the great domains of science - especially cosmology, geology, biology, anthropology, and sociology - have historicity at their core. The full realization of this in recent times has necessitated the rediscovery of the centrality of narrative to explanation in all these domains. In social science, certain disciplinary areas, most notably economics, have suffered from a lack of historicity in their attempt to create a supposedly naturalistic science on explicitly ahistorical and universalizing grounds.

The ahistoricism of much of ultra-modernist and rationalist social theory in the 1950s-70s was an impetus for the shift in following decades from avowedly scientific history to avowedly anti-scientific, humanistic and cultural history. The paper by Fernando Sanchez-Marcos herein charts this shift in Catalonia and he very plausibly adduces several exogenous and endogenous reasons for this, including the general shift in western historical thinking away from Modernist general scientific theories, including *Annates* structuralism and Marxism, towards a concentration on identity, memory, and subjectivity; and developments in the politics, culture, and society of Catalonia that emphasized specific cultural identity. Two linked important questions that arise about this widespread intellectual shift, repeated around the western world are, firstly, the extent to which social influences of disciplinary cohesion and professional power structures and also intellectual fashions (or group mentality and inculcation) played roles, and, secondly, the

extent to which those sorts of influences served to obscure the value of alternative methodological and theoretical concepts that might be useful. For example, the description he seems to make or reports as being accepted of Marxism as a teleological metahistory profoundly misunderstands Marx's explicit rejection of that sort of presupposition and his attempt, inspired in part by Darwin, to construct a *non-teleological* theory of socio-economic evolution. This is an example of (perhaps ideologically induced) ignorance about the content of theories, how they can be specified and constructed, and the role they play. Similarly, the question of the explanatory power of narrative and its connection to general causal concepts in social science as well as history has to be appreciated better.

Daniel Fulda provides a discussion of the importance of narrative and its reception for grounding cognitive narratology as fundamental to the perceiving subject. He argues that while within Modernism narrativity has a low level of manifestation because the traditional Great Stories have lost their centrality to historical representation, narrativization re-emerges within the selective process of cognition that is made by readers of texts who read them *as narratives*. This would seem to be a claim that the cognitive narrativization of texts or artifacts is somehow universal and whether those texts or artifacts come from explicitly historical discourse or from scientific modes of enquiry this internal process is always present. If that is so, and I think we should be very receptive to that argument (and he's arguing that cognitive reception matters!) then the importance of that for all modes of enquiry is clear. There is indeed the tendency, just mentioned, in some parts of the sciences and cultural studies to converge in an interesting way on this issue.

Nevertheless, the supposedly *sui generis* nature of historical discourse still has many advocates. Constantin Fasolt argues that the fundamental method of historians is the use of evidence or sources so questions about the designation of certain sets of objects as evidence about the past and how those objects are distinguished from other objects are crucial issues. He argues that it is the responsibility that some person had for the object that makes it evidence. Objects that do not have this link of personal responsibility to thought and action, such as ones that are thought to have divine or natural causes or are the products of primordial custom, are not historical evidence. Thus, he argues, individual agency, individual liberty, and individual responsibility turn out to be embedded in the most fundamental aspect of the historian's method. It is not the conclusions that historians come to that matter as much as the method of turning to evidence defined in this way. This is a 'sacred ritual' whose purpose is to maintain the faith that human beings are free and independent agents. A turn to imagination or ideas of multiple identities undermines this 'sacred ritual', in Fasolt's account.

While I broadly agree with the argument that it is methods that matter more than actual results, which is the same in natural science, several questions must be asked of his main claim. Why is it not possible to first try to find evidence of individual responsibility for events and processes and from that conclude that the

available evidence tells us little so we then have to invoke other kinds of causal arguments about historical processes, specifically natural causes? Does his argument mean that there cannot be histories of natural processes in which humanity plays no or little part? And what is the place of large-scale sets of evidence about *collective* social processes, such as economic change or social structural change or environmental change, for which no individual responsibility can be found? Indeed, can his argument allow that there are actual events and processes for which no individual responsibility can be found? Are there no collective processes and systemic entities that have histories beyond individual responsibility? Does the imagination and theorization of general causal processes play any role in historical enquiry? And, furthermore, does what counts as evidence come to us in some unmediated way? The nature of evidence seems to be a far more complex matter than he allows.

Pim den Boer's paper defines historiography as «self-conscious critical reflection on the past in written language». He gives a brief and interesting potted history of such historiography from the Ancient Greeks and argues against mono-disciplinary perspectives. Only at the beginning of the 19th century was historiography viewed as a master science but by the late 19th century history lost out to positivism and scientism. After the Great War historiography assumed a new nationalist orientation and so paved the way, he argues, for the second war. This is a valuable hypothesis that directs attention to trying to understand the role of ideologies and cultural ideas more broadly in the decision-making processes of ruling elites and classes. But we need to know much more, of course, about the significance of ideologies and cultures for political decision making and how we might more accurately gauge that. As he rightly points out, mono-disciplinarity will not get us far, as social science history has fully grasped. The problem he raises is an empirical one, not one for philosophical discourse.

Similarly, in his discussion of the relationship of philosophy of history and philosophy of science to historical practice, Jonathan Gorman says that we want what he calls «theory of history» to reflect truthfully what historians actually do but there cannot be a simple correspondence between philosophical assertion and historical practice. In writing the history of historiography, as with any historical account, historiographers have to make choices about which questions to ask, about what counts as answers and to make assumptions of a quasi-philosophical kind. History is not at ease, he concludes, with its own theory. Here 'theory' is used in the sense of theory of knowledge and its changing epistemological commitments rather than in the sense of 'theory' used in the sciences. While I agree that philosophy of history has much to learn from Kuhn (and many other philosophers of science) about how to study the history of historiography, the question of what it is that historiography should be doing and its relationship to *empirical* theory is a problem that can be solved only within empirical *enquiry*, and empirical enquiry needs empirical theory. In other words, the history of historiography is an empirical topic like any other kind of socio-historical topic and is need of some kind of theorisation.

This is a topic taken up by Rolf Torstendahl in his examination of the implicit regulatory structure or norms of the history discipline. Knowledge production in all disciplines has a normative basis, which governs the accepted validity of research findings and the professionalisation of disciplines. There is a danger, he rightly argues, of the history discipline splitting fundamentally over the linguistic, aesthetic, empathetic turn such that the minimum demands of the discipline will no longer be shared by all historians. If this happens, will it mean that the 'residualist' idiographic historical writing will merge with aesthetics such that fiction and history will become eventually one and the same? There is some evidence that this is already happening with the rapid growth of popular history writing and television and film 'histories' of the sort often billed as «the true story of...» that merge fictionalized modes of writing and film with biography, journalism, and history. Many of these texts and programs have no scholarly apparatus that can be checked by other scholars but rather take the form of semi-novelised or dramatised treatments of historical topics. And even if there were scholarly apparatus the merger with fiction could still be apparent. 'Creative non-fiction', now so popular, often blurs, like tabloid journalism does, the boundaries between knowledge, opinion, prejudice, and aesthetic judgment in a way that can remove any credible claim to being non-fiction. This development threatens to undermine the credibility of so-called 'popularised' writing about scientific and historical subjects that retain their firm grounding in scientific knowledge and modes of discourse¹. Creativity *per se* is not the problem, indeed it is necessary, but the blurring of fact and fiction is.

In contrast to these discussions of historical methodology, Martin Stuart-Fox's paper discusses the use to historians of scientific theory and methodology. In making clear distinctions between methodology, theory, and research methods, he argues for a necessary convergence between historical methodology and scientific methodology. He argues that this actual and necessary convergence is obscured by the historian's tendency to couch hypotheses in narrative accounts. But that tendency and the intentionality of actors does not override the essential methodological similarity with science. He then argues for the relevance of evolutionary theory to historical explanation. I broadly agree with this but differ somewhat from him on what such a theory has to address and on the role of narrative in science. I think a Neo-Darwinian theory of social history first has to ask four questions, questions that are in effect addressed by Darwinian theory of biological history:

Are there and if so what are the genotypical and phenotypical social counterparts to biological genotypes and phenotypes?

Are there and if so what are the socio-cultural counterparts of generative mutations or innovations?

¹ Good examples are Stephen J. Gould's numerous essays in *Natural History* and his many other important accessible books and Richard Dawkins' many important books.

If there are what are the mechanisms for generative innovations such that they might somehow cause macrosocial change?

If there are such generative innovations that can have macrosocial effects, what are the selection mechanisms and processes for the spread of social innovations that have such effects?

In trying to answer these questions through research and the development of general theoretical concepts of historical processes, narrative is an essential component, just as it is in natural history writing.

Evolutionary social theory has always been closely intertwined with socio-biological conceptions and theories of humanity and society. Social Darwinism in the 19th and early 20th Centuries and early forms of sociobiological theory in the 1970s and 80s were discredited by their teleological and/or reductionist strategies that failed to comprehend the full complexity of Darwinian theory (just as some avowedly Marxist historical writing bore little resemblance to the full complexity of Marxist theory) and the emergent nature of social reality and its independent evolutionary trajectories that are not reducible to biological conceptions of human sociality. That is, sociality and social evolution are emergent and supervenient vis-à-vis the biological character of humans. But humans do have a biological nature that obviously always plays some role in human behaviour, especially with regard to the limitations on and certain fundamental imperatives of behaviour. Humans as a species have a *species nature* and this nature plays a role in such subconscious and conscious features as language and knowledge acquisition and retention, sexual relationships, family composition and relations, altruism and selfishness, cooperation and competitiveness, cultural memory, aesthetic appreciation, material acquisitiveness, and so on. This is not to deny the relative plasticity of human mentalities, consciousness, and motivations and the resulting great variability of culture, belief, memory, motivation, desire, ideology, and social organization. So, while the species nature clearly includes a neurophysiological nature, are we justified in moving from that fact to an explanatory strategy of critiquing memory-constructs (or recollections) on the basis of the very limited knowledge we have of the neurophysiological determination of the psyche and of memory?

Johannes Fried argues that historians have to be aware of the deforming nature of memory and (while he doesn't say this directly) the universality of the complex connection between memory and neurophysiology. Do we need to go this far in order to deconstruct and criticise the content of recollections? Without any real knowledge of the neuro-memory connection that is embedded within recollections, historians and social scientists are still quite capable of criticising recollections and the documents that contain them via the widely shared and quintessential method of source critique. Central to this method is the technique of triangulation of evidence, that is, the examination of the sources of information about events, organizations, structures, and processes, from as many points of view as possible and attempting to strip away the layers of memory and reconstruction to try, as far as possible, to arrive at a reliable set of information and a valid account and explanation. Knowledge of neurophysiology will not help us with that.

Chen Quineng has presented an informative paper about the advent of 'New History' in China and discusses the influence of western ideas. His question is highly relevant: can Chinese historiography develop a new, independent tradition? This implies, of course, that historical methodology and theory is western-specific. I want to ask, even if certain methodologies and theories have been invented in the west, or anywhere else for that matter, does it necessarily mean that they are intellectually and culturally specific to the locale of their invention? Until recently we would say that that could be so. But science presents itself as transcending cultures and traditions. This, of course, is a basic question for philosophy of explanation and for historiography - what are the reality, power, and ubiquity of assumed universal aspects of humanity, sociality, culture, belief, and social organisation that makes *intercultural knowledge* possible? A social science history approach to Chinese history is surely as viable as it is for any Western society.

Social science history in its several forms takes an implicit or explicit stance on behalf of scientific truth-seeking in historical enquiry in the sense that it defends objectivity in accordance with certain scientific principles and has an implicit or explicit commitment to a critical realist (and thus scientific) conception of the objects of enquiry as being structural or systemic social entities rather than being focussed on individual memory, consciousness, motivation, or belief. Social science history is thus a deliberate return, with the aid of new concepts and new theories and new philosophical understandings of methodology, to some of the concerns of scientific history of earlier times as epitomised by *Annates*, Western Marxist historical writing, so-called Old Economic History, and Historical Sociology. This movement thus re-emphasises the problem of truthfulness in historical enquiry and so Jeff Malpas's careful articulation of the question of the meaning of truth and its necessary distinction from belief, opinion, and fiction is welcome. But what he has to say may not be palatable to some historians for there is an unfortunate 'slipperiness' in the way in which many relativist, linguistic, and postmodern arguments about historical methodology claim that truth is either irrelevant or is reducible to something else while at the same time claiming that their form of relativism is to be preferred to other methodologies. On what basis can there be an argument for the superiority of an historical account or explanation or methodology if there is no independent concept of empirical adequacy and truth? The meaningfulness of truth-claims depends crucially on the capacity of humans to have access to and so grasp the actuality of the world beyond their selves. The *possibility* of discovery has been the driver of scientific enquiry for centuries. Why should the realm of (past or present) human consciousness, social behaviour, events, motivation, and evolving social relational structures be, in principle, closed to such truth-seeking enquiry?

All of these issues are ones of scientific theory in the general sense of 'science' as objective empirical enquiry into the nature and causation of phenomena. Humanistic enquiry has tended not only to avoid issues of causation but to do so on the basis of an implicit, sometimes unexamined, presupposition of the almost limitless variability and plasticity of human subjectivity, motivation, and

consciousness, thus necessitating a commitment to empathetic understanding of individuals and their beliefs and cultures by other individuals rather than the development of general theories of human phenomena. But how can one person really understand another without sharing concepts and being part of the same general structure of social relations, language, and knowledge? The reality of social relational structures, general concepts, and socially-shared knowledge about the world beyond consciousness is presupposed by the very humanness of humans. The commitment to strictly empathetic understanding is an implicit ontology and epistemology and is also theoretically elliptical in the sense that it is a half-baked generalisation that is a (at times teleological) dogma which is not open to examination by the general thrust of humanistic enquiry. There is no apparent reflexivity in such a position, in contrast to a truly critical scientific approach to the nature of human existence which always questions its own foundational assumptions and commitments.

This brings me back to the issues I raised at the beginning regarding the definitions and scope of historiography, philosophy of history, methodology, and theory. These terms are used in a variety of ways, as this collection indicates, and it's not always clear that they have the same meaning. Historiography usually means the meta-study of historical writing, sometimes being interchangeable with the study of the philosophical assumptions, especially the epistemology and ontology of historical discourse. At other times it means a branch of the history of ideas, in this case ideas about historical writing. Philosophy of history, in the well-known Walsh definition, has two meanings - the analysis of historians' philosophical presuppositions about historical explanation versus speculative meta-presuppositions or theories of historical processes in society. Methodology of history usually means the enquiry into the detailed methodological presuppositions held (usually implicitly) by historians. Theory is the most confused term, as we have seen. It can mean the scientific generalisations that are used to explain particular events and processes as embodying or as instances of general, law-like processes and structures in the world. But it is also used to mean theory of knowledge about how particular discourses explain the world.

The basic task for philosophers and methodologists of history should be to analyse and criticise the logical, explanatory, and hermeneutical presuppositions and structures of historical enquiry and historical writing in order to help generate some greater degree of community of meaning and understanding about the nature of humanity and society as historically changing entities. In making such critical analyses of the discourse of historians, it should be argued that the past/present/future trichotomy makes little sense ontologically or methodologically. Not does the history/social science distinction make much sense. Rather, the world or domain of human social and cultural behaviour, production, and organizations is one of a continuous evolution that intricately links past and present and can be confidently understood as broadly determining the future because of the continuities and temporal persistences of the structures of the social world. In this conception, historicity and temporality are essential and fundamental dimensions

of the social world, necessitating all social enquiry to be fully cognisant of their significance². That much social enquiry is not so cognisant is not a reason for dividing social scientific enquiry into the present world that we inhabit from that of the past. While the ways of knowing and understanding the present may be somewhat different from those of past situations in which we do not live or have no personal memory, this is not sufficient to demand a different methodology. The past is another country but so is much of the present.

What is the actual relationship of philosophy of history and historiography to historical enquiry? Do practising historians of economies, political processes, geopolitical systems, cultures, ways of life, find philosophy and historiographical enquiry of much interest and use? I would suggest that they do so only in the sense that it is of interest to know something of the role of unexamined philosophical presuppositions in forming historical arguments. Historiography is of course a branch of historical enquiry in the sense that it examines the history of historical writing and historical methodology. That is an empirical enquiry. Insofar as historians find philosophy of history of use it is largely as a source of general concepts and critiques of theories. It is theories in the scientific sense that is or should be of greatest interest to historians. In this way, philosophy of natural science has a direct relevance to natural scientists because it deals directly with issues raised by scientific explanation and, in doing so, provides critique that is relevant to scientists and has a close relationship with their work. Over recent decades, the connection that empirical enquiry has in, say, biology, with philosophy of biology has become closer. This is epitomised by the corpus of work of the late Stephen Gould. The same is happening in the more scientific areas of social enquiry, such as social psychology, anthropology, archaeology, and even economics. In these sciences there is a growing level of debate between philosophers, theorists, and researchers such that they see the benefits of dialogue for the overall scientific enterprise. Issues about scientific realism, the role of ontological commitments, the specification of theories, the connection of social to biological aspects of humanity, and the relevance of evolutionary theory, are all animating enquiry in these fields. But in the areas of socio-historical enquiry that deal with histories of families, patterns of everyday life, individual and group identities, small-scale social interactions, and 'common sense' belief systems, there seems to be much less connection between theorists and historians and philosophers. In these fields the basic, usually unexamined, commitment is to the supposed idiographic nature of human subjectivity and intentionality. 'Common sense' often plays an ad hoc and unhelpful role in idiographic explanation. There is almost no attempt to generate quantified data; arguments rely upon rather subjective assertions, vague generalities, and holistic concepts about identity, beliefs, memories, cultures, and societies. General concepts of and debates about the general issues of the socio-psycho-bio nature of humans, of human agency,

² This argument has been spelt out in detail in C. Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History* (Oxford, 1986); and C. Lloyd, *The Structures of History* (Oxford, 1993).

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human identity, social structure, and social evolution, are little in evidence. What a pity, for all these topics are of great importance.

The persuasiveness of historical research and writing is so much greater when the methodologies and theories of social science history are brought to bear. Two of the best exemplars of how that can be done are the work of Clifford Geertz and Robert Brenner, both of whom have shown how to combine general theories, quantitative analysis, empathetic interpretation of events, insightful understanding of individual motivation, and social organisational and class analyses. The mistaken view that Geertz is an exemplar of the linguistic turn fails to grasp the centrality of general theory and structural analysis to his work. The mistaken view that Brenner represents scientistic Marxism fails to grasp the centrality of interpretation of individual consciousness and motivation to his work³.

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³ See especially C. Geertz, *Islam Observed* (New Haven, 1968); Id., *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973); Id., *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society*, with H. Geertz and L. Rosen (Cambridge, 1979); Id., *Local Knowledge* (New York, 1983). The synthetic social scientific and humanistic approach in Geertz's work is summarised in C. Lloyd, *Structures of History*, Chapter 3. Robert Brenner's seminal contributions include *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Cambridge, 1993). The social science history context of Geertz and Brenner is discussed in C. Lloyd, «History and the Social Sciences», in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, S. Berger, H. Feldner, and K. Passmore eds. (London, 2003).