David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

POST-1945 AMERICA: CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

This paper will survey challenges to the historiography of post-1945 America, particularly its cultural and social aspects. The following issues will be discussed: chronology, definitions, origins of social history, interpretive structures and perspectives, motivations, sources, and objectivity versus subjectivity. A brief conclusion will evaluate the current status of cultural and social history for post-1945 America.[1]

Cultural and social histories continue to shed new light on the complexities of American life that developed after World War II. New insights based upon thoroughgoing methodologies, many borrowed from the social sciences, have overturned standard interpretations of the data and have produced a richer but variegated view of modern American society. Even perfunctory descriptions of American life have yielded to holistic understandings that have been built on better, balanced evidence. As a result of these cultural and social approaches, historians have reconstructed with confidence a more complete picture of the immediate past.

In historical studies, chronology is necessary but often troublesome. Chronology affects meaning, and meaning affects chronology. The problem rests in how to divide or group historical events–*when* to begin and *when* to end. In the twentieth-century, the second world war, more so than the first world war, marked the great watershed for American society and its cultural expressions. But this is a military and political perspective that can be perceived even better by starting at the nation's break with isolationism from 1941 afterwards. This chronology,

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[1]"America" is used exclusively in reference to the United States.

based largely on America's posture in international affairs and its "Cold War" with the Soviet

Union, begins properly with the Truman Doctrine speech in Spring 1947 and terminates with the

breakup of the Soviet Union in Winter 1991.[2]

From a domestic perspective, a good argument can be made to push the start of modern

America to around 1920, the end of the industrial revolution in the United States, or as early as

the 1890s, the peak years of business, industry, and manufacturing.[3] For sure, this chronology

reflects an economic viewpoint, but the cultural and social consequences are tremendous. The

terminus of this earlier chronology would fall somewhere between the late 1950s (the start of the

space age with the Soviet launch of Sputnik I in 1957) and the mid-1970s (the start of the

high-tech era with the mass marketing of personal computers). The decade of the 1950s could be

seen otherwise as the beginning of the era of global communication technologies, or the post-

modern age, with a terminus still unreached.[4]

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[2]Mike Sewell, *The Cold War*, Cambridge Perspectives in History, eds. Richard Brown and David Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See also Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, revised ed. (New York: Basic, 1999).

[3]Peter N. Stearns and John H. Hinshaw, *The ABC-CLIO World History Companion to The Industrial Revolution* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1996), x. See also Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Perennial, 2002); and Thomas W. Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[4]For example, see Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

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In any case, chronology presents the historian with considerable problems, and most of these problems remain unresolved. Perhaps a clear-cut resolve is not needed, because the untidy nature of history highlights its ebbs and flows, its dynamics. Even an arbitrary but manageable history by the decades–the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and so forth–restricts how historical events are seen and creates misunderstandings. The continuities of the past never end at midnight on the last day of December in years that end with "nine." And no decade begins with the dropping of the ball in New York's Times Square at the first tick of the clock in years that end with "zero."

In reference to definitions, the terms "cultural" and "social" are general and have various nuances of meaning. In a basic way, "cultural" describes "the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations," whereas "social" describes "human society, the interaction of the individual and the group, or the welfare of human beings as members of society."[5] Therefore, "cultural" pertains more to beliefs, feelings, and thoughts and how these are expressed and preserved, and "social" pertains more to actions, groups, and relationships and how these are formed and sustained.[6] These two terms logically overlap but not strictly so. Culture also is used frequently in strict reference to the arts, literature, and music from which

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[5]*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (2000), 282, 1111.

[6]As a result, cultural studies depend heavily on the field of anthropology, and social studies rely largely upon the field of sociology.

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comes the valid sub-designation–"popular culture."[7] This narrow definition of culture is

appropriate, but in this paper the broader definition will be used.

Of the varying "types" of history, social history has an interesting background. It did not

evolve out of the field of historical studies solely but developed as a result of new methods of

research and new circumstances for inquiry. In the early 1960s, the quest for quantification

represented an earnest attempt to return to the empiricist roots of the modern historical enterprise

but with modification from other disciplines. This adaptation came about rather quickly and

stirred a revolution in historical research methodology and critical analysis of historical texts. It

began in economic history and soon found its way to political history. The early ventures in

quantitative methods by economic and political historians were basically, by social-science

standards, unsophisticated. Social scientists actually led the way and had written more

behavioral history on economic and political subjects than had the historians. But historians

caught up as more and more scholars, research institutions, and universities adopted the

procedures.

Some labeled the use of social-science approaches by historians as a movement of protest

from scholars who were dissatisfied with the results of conventional history. This "new trend" in

American historiography drew out varied responses. Thomas Cochran cautioned, "No one has

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[7]See "American Culture" (chapter 14) in *American History Desk Reference*, The New York Public Library Project, eds. Marilyn Miller and Marian Faux (1997), 421-462.

yet developed a model in which all the variables can be quantified."[8] Others applauded

optimistically, "The prediction does not seem absurd that . . . by 1984, a significant proportion of

American historians will have accepted [Henry T.] Buckle's two basic propositions: (1) past

human behaviour can be studied scientifically; and (2) the main business of historians is to

participate in the overall scholarly enterprise of discovering and developing general laws of

human behaviour."[9] The integration of the social-sciences with historical research meant for

many the formal realization of a new sub-discipline–social history.

Until the 1960s, social history functioned as a hybrid with either economic or intellectual

history. As social history gravitated toward cultural concerns, it resisted the "tested and tangible

facts" of hard data in favor of "moods, styles, and other evanescent substances."[10] Social history

that strictly dealt with "tested and tangible facts" seemed more and more trivial to traditional

historians and came to be called "history with the politics and the ideas left out."[11] In time,

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[8]*The Inner Revolution: Essays on the Social Sciences in History*, cited in Don K. Rowney and James Q. Graham, eds., *Quantitative History: Selected Readings in the Quantitative Analysis of Historical Data* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey, 1969), 122.

[9]Lee Benson, "Quantification, Scientific History, and Scholarly Innovation," cited in Rowney and Graham, *Quantitative History*, 126.

[10]Jacques Barzun, "Cultural History: A Synthesis," cited in Rowney and Graham, *Quantitative History*, 179.

[11]H. J. Perkin, "Social History," *Approaches to History: A Symposium*, edited by H. P. R. Finberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 51.

criticisms subsided and the new social history gained respectability and came to be seen as a true sub-discipline "whose object is the study of society in all its complex relationships."[12]

But social history appeared to many to be the necessary type of history for the times. "In spite of its difficulties and demands," H. J. Perkins believed, "the neglect of social history is only apparent." He viewed the emphasis on social history as egocentric and a part of the prevalent *Zeitgeist*: "Every age has its own interest in the past, its own version of the perennial question of Milton's Adam, 'How came I thus, how here?' The interest of our own age can only be described as social. . . . 'Social questions,' Beatrice Webb confided to her diary in 1884, 'are the vital questions of today: they take the place of religion.' In the 1960s they take the place of everything."[13] By the end of the decade, Rowney and Graham could summarize: "Social groups, social structures, social conditioning factors, social mobility, career-line analysis, to mention some of the more common borrowings [from sociology], are terms so widely used that a graduate history study would have to be unsophisticated indeed not to have a nodding acquaintance with most of them."[14] But problems with the methods and results of social history, as well as cultural history, still troubled many in the historical profession.

Interpretive structures continue to give cultural and social historians difficulty. The methods work well to get to the data, because that is exactly what the different approaches are

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[12]Mario S. Depillis, "Trends in American Social History and the Possibilities of Behavioral Approaches," cited in Rowney and Graham, *Quantitative History*, 179.

[13]Perkins, "Social History," in Finberg, ed., *Approaches to History*, 79, 81-82.

[14]Rowney and Graham, *Quantitative History*, 180.

designed to do. But the challenge lies in the interpretive framework or the "big" meaning applied

to the details. This problem of generalization, inherent to all inductive approaches, seems to

plague the entire field and mimics the complaint of the early resistors of social history. In spite

of the difficulty, historians and social scientists have intensified rather than given up the effort.

For example, Chana Lee uses biography to develop a sociopolitical history of the Civil

Rights Movement, a cultural history of life in the Mississippi Delta, and the radical consequences

of nonconformity to the white segregationist code. Michael Bertrand attempts to extract from

popular rock-and-roll culture political and racial meanings of southern youth rebellion against

settled racial beliefs and customs. And, Elaine May gleans from the Kelly Longitudinal Study,

redefines social phenomena in political terms, and infuses America's squabbles over domesticity

during the Cold War era with broader cultural identity.[15]

Jessica Weiss similarly uses case studies from the Institute of Human Development

archives, as well as popular magazines, to look at themes of domesticity among America's new

middle class. Jerry Lembcke, a sociologist, traces the mythological formation of spitting on

Vietnam War veterans and analyzes its cultural and political uses in post-Vietnam society. Eric

Schlosser, a journalist, takes his own personal investigations about the fast food industry, along

with contemporary opinions, and creates a vigorous critique of cultural icons that have reshaped

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[15]See Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Michael T. Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000); and May, *Homeward Bound*.

American society.[16] For these authors, the work of narrative and interpretive framework go hand

in hand.

But the problem of interpretive framework extends to the issue of perspective, primarily

the author's perspective. Credibility and reasonable objectivity are at stake. The historian *must*

know his or her subject to do it justice. Therefore, a certain "intimacy" must exist. But how

close is close enough, or too close? Personal psychology and the temperament of the author

certainly can be factors. Depending on the circumstance, social and political motivations can

either help or hinder. The questions seem endless, and often the answers can only be guesswork.

At the very least, though, the questions about fairness, perspective, and interpretive framework

should be raised.

For instance, can Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn, directors at the National

Center for History in the Schools, give a fair, unbiased assessment of the conservative critique of

the National Standards for history education in the nation's secondary schools? Can Ruth Rosen,

herself an activist and feminist, be open-minded about the pitfalls of the women's movement in

America? Can Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, eyewitnesses who aligned with the antiwar

demonstrators during the Vietnam conflict, detail with credibility and reasonable objectivity the

turbulent and divisive events of the 1960s? Can Michael Katz, a noted and well-to-do university

professor, really write with compassion and empathy about the nation's poor who struggle for

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[16]See Jessica Weiss, *To Have and to Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom & Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*.

their daily existence? Or, can Thomas Hanchett, a non-resident of North Carolina, speak with

authority about the urban development of one of North Carolina's cities? Even if the answers

may be elusive, the questions still should be asked.[17]

A related concern addresses the rationale for an author's study–its motivations or even its

agendas. The reason or *why* of cultural and social research clearly influences the thesis and

possibly may color its development. This is not bad necessarily, but it should be recognized and

assessed. Motivations often can be multiple or complex. And, authors can confuse readers about

their intentions either unknowingly or deliberately. The key is to admit the reality of bias and to

determine its impact on the work.

To illustrate this, Dan Carter takes a biographical approach in his elucidation of Governor

George Wallace's life and career. He does so to show how Wallace as "alchemist of the new

social conservatism . . . compounded racial fear, anticommunism, cultural nostalgia, and

traditional right-wing economics into a movement that laid the foundation for the conservative

counterrevolution that reshaped American politics in the 1970s and the 1980s."[18] This stated

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[17]See Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage, 2000); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2000); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael B. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001); and Hanchett, *Sorting Out the New South City*.

[18]Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 12.

purpose by Carter approximates a decided political and racial motivation–both cultural and

social–for his book. So where does *Politics of Rage* belong in terms of its historical genre? Is it

a biography, a political history, or a socio-cultural work? The reader must probe hard for

Carter's "real" motivation in writing, because he does not opt to state his rationale clearly. The

title, like the contents, suggests a complex motive. Carter seems interested in more than just the

life of George Wallace. He writes to address issues of New Conservatism and political

transformation in America during the 1960s and 1970s. The genre, therefore, is seen best as a

composite-type work, perhaps a socio-cultural biography.

Lest producers of cultural and social histories be charged with making tertium quids, it is

important to remember the inclusive or comprehensive nature of these studies. How could they

be otherwise when tackling broad topics like fast food and television culture, or, in the case of

Rebecca Klatch, the society of New Right women.[19] Lynn Spigel's study, *Make Room for TV*,

acknowledges the difficulty of such cultural work: "The reconstruction of viewing experiences

. . . is an elusive project . . . we will never be able to present a complete historical account of

subjective experiences like watching television."[20] For most cultural studies, she confesses, the

amount of data is too broad and too expansive. But what can be learned from such a study is

worth the effort. In spite of problems with subjectivity and incompleteness, Spigel boldly claims

to interpret gender roles, middle-class ideology, and modern technology of the post-1945 era by

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[19]See Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*; Spigel, *Make Room for TV*; and Rebecca E. Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

[20]Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 187.

looking at popular uses of television. On the basis of her data, she inductively builds her models

for understanding post-1945 America.

The opposite approach comes from Rebecca Klatch, a sociologist, who undertakes a

typological study of the women of the New Right–a conglomerate of "social" and "laissez-faire"

conservatives.[21] Her types apparently account for the whole of the movement, since she defines

no middle ground. She simply rules out any middle ground on the basis of rigid, set categories.

By doing this, she proceeds deductively and aligns her data with her models. The "certainty" or

"objectivity" achieved by this method works well for sociological analysis but is problematic for

historical reality. Her New Right contains no tertium quids, but with such an omission she

distorts the full picture of an important American political "society."

Those who opt for concrete models, like Klatch, minimize one of the greatest obstacles

for researchers of cultural and social phenomena–the diversity of the stuff to sort, assimilate, and

interpret. Those who opt for less concrete models, like Isserman and Kazin, tend to maximize

the complexity of the data's melange. But the greatest obstacle to cultural and social studies is

also its greatest beauty. This is seen best in the multiplicity of resources available to any

researcher. For the observant person, or even one who pays little attention to humans and their

societies, resources are ubiquitous. There is no lack of stuff to study from written documents,

material artifacts, and people themselves.

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[21]Klatch, *Women of the New Right*, 4.

Modern cultural or social historians should be embarrassed by their wealth of resources. Ancient, classical, and medieval historians have no such luxury, and colonial, revolutionary, and antebellum scholars of American history cannot boast so great a pool of data. But with this abundance comes a price to pay, namely, lack of completeness and subjectivity. Never will the work be totally finished, only partially so. Never can the work be totally objective, only reasonably so.

One early protester of social history saw this all too clearly: "What is the field of the social historian? . . . [It is] nothing more and nothing less than the history of society . . . [with] its wayside hazards. On the one side there is, since nothing human happens outside society, the whirlpool of exhaustiveness, of totality, the desperate, plunging end of those 'still climbing after knowledge infinite.' On the other side prowls the devouring monster of social science."[22] This echoes the two thorny problems with social history–presentation or methodology and sources. Perkins calls the first the "rank-and-file dilemma" which, quoting J. H. Hexter, is like Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle in quantum physics: "The historian cannot simultaneously pursue all the aspects of a complex society *and* show the whole society in motion. He cannot write both narrative and topical history at the same time. But somehow he must try."[23] The second problem of sources concerns the difficulty with a wide variety of possibilities. The

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[22]Perkins, "Social History," in Finberg, *Approaches to History*, 51-59.

[23]Ibid., 74-76; see also J. H. Hexter, "A New Framework for Social History," *Journal of Economic History* 15 (December 1955): 423.

demand on cultural or social historians to be researcher, archaeologist, statistician, *and* literary critic is great.

Cultural and social studies of American history today are as varied and complex as when new methodologies took hold of the historical discipline. Arguably, they are more so. Social scientists like sociologists produce a substantial portion of the literature, but many historians have dedicated themselves to the task. The quest for understanding must be seen as filled with ambiguities and deficiencies; however, the quest for trying to understand whose social systems and entire cultures, or even parts of each, is very exciting. Whether this can be done, given the problems inherent to inductive reasoning (like over generalization) and the information glut of a post-modern world, is rather unlikely. Perhaps the best outlook remains that of the optimistic but skeptical eclectic.

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