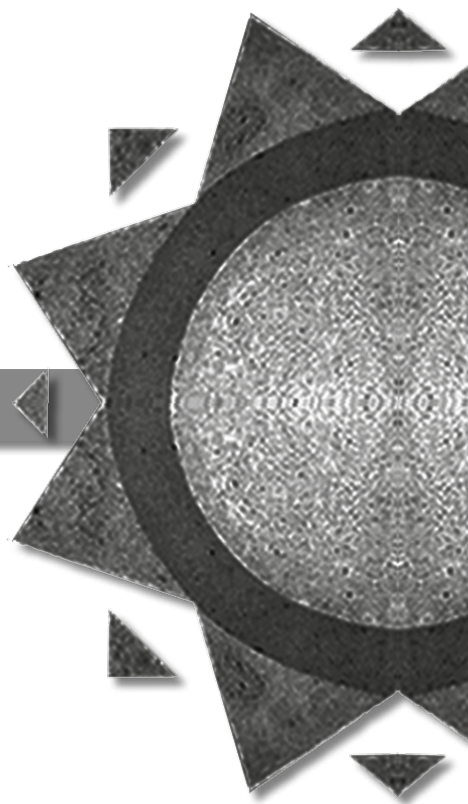


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WRITING HISTORY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES*

*ESCRIBIENDO HISTORIA EN EL SIGLO XXI: DESAFÍOS Y
RESPUESTAS*

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Abstract

In the first part I discuss recent changes in the field of cultural history. We seem to be living in an age of “turns”, in historical thought and beyond. Famous turns such as the social turn, the linguistic turn and the cultural turn, all located in the later 20th century, have been followed more recently by the global turn, the affective or emotional turn, the material turn, the cognitive turn, the spatial turn, and a number of others. Then I focus on challenges to cultural history and alternatives to it. Today, the “cultural turn” and the New Cultural History are no longer new. The great problem with novelty, especially as a slogan, is that it is a cultural asset that depreciates very quickly. What is new today is the “natural turn”. I should like to discuss this turn, including the challenges to which it responds as well as the challenges that it is posing to cultural historians, both young and old.

Keywords: Historiography, Cultural History, Natural Turn.

Resumen

Durante la primera parte discuto los cambios recientes en el campo de la historia cultural. Parece que estamos viviendo en la época de los “giros”, en el pensamiento histórico y más allá. Famosos giros como el giro social, el giro lingüístico y el giro cultural, todos situados hacia el final del siglo XX, han sido seguidos más recientemente por el giro global, el giro afectivo o emocional, el giro material, el giro cognitivo, el giro espacial, y otros más. Luego me enfoco en los desafíos a la historia cultural y sus alternativas. Hoy, el “giro cultural” y

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la Nueva Historia Cultural no son nuevos. El gran problema con la novedad, especialmente como un eslogan, es que es un bien cultural que se deprecia muy rápidamente. Lo que hoy es nuevo es el "giro natural". Discutiré este giro, incluyendo los desafíos a los cuales responde al mismo tiempo que los desafíos que pone a los historiadores culturales, ambos viejos y jóvenes.

Palabras clave: Historiografía, Historia Cultural, Giro Natural.

INTRODUCTION

A famous question was posed to historians some forty years ago by the Jesuit polymath Michel de Certeau: Where are you speaking from?

I am a British historian, formed in a particular generation. Just over 60 years ago I went to Oxford to study history. 60 years is long enough to notice some of the many changes to have taken place in the discipline. These changes include not only new discoveries but also new points of view that lead to new approaches – history from below, for instance, women's history, the history of the everyday, micro-history, global history.

For example, when I was a student, political history was still dominant in Britain, economic history was the new frontier, and a small space was available for social history and also for cultural history, defined as the history of the arts. At Oxford I was attracted by a third-year course on the Italian Renaissance. To take this course I learned Italian, visited Italy, and decided that I would become a cultural historian.

After I graduated, I began a study of the Italian Renaissance, examining it from a social point of view, asking what kinds of people became artists and writers, how they were trained, what kinds of people were interested in their work and so on. I published a book about this in 1972, inspired by the work of sociologists as well as earlier historians. Some early readers found the book somewhat shocking – partly because of the use of statistics, partly because a study of the social context of works of art seemed to reduce their importance.

But by this time cultural history was growing in importance and also changing its character. Historians in a number of countries were turning to the study of popular culture (in France, Italy, the USA and elsewhere as well as in Britain). I participated in this movement too and published a book on popular culture in early modern Europe, inspired in part by folklorists in Scandinavia (I made a research trip to Norway and Sweden).

By the time this second book was published, in 1978, cultural history was changing once again. Its territory, once confined to high art, literature and music, had already expanded to include popular art, literature and music. Now it was expanding still further to include culture in an anthropological sense, in other words a whole way of life. In the 1980s, I took part in the movement known as “historical anthropology” (although “anthropological history” would be a more accurate name)¹.

In other words, like my friends and contemporaries Natalie Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, Robert Darnton, Keith Thomas and Roger Chartier, I practice what is sometimes known as the “New Cultural History” (NCH for short). I have been practising this form of cultural history ever since, but without giving up the earlier forms, the histories of high culture and popular culture (and of course their interaction). I would describe myself as a pluralist, believing that these three forms of cultural history do not contradict but rather complement one another.

In the first part of this lecture I shall discuss recent changes in the field of cultural history. What counts as “recent”? In what follows I shall focus on the last 20 years. To me, the year 2000 still seems like yesterday, although some readers may be too young to remember the millennium. For historians, it is important to remember the differences between generations but also their coexistence.

I

We seem to be living in an age of “turns”, in historical thought and beyond. Famous turns such as the social turn, the linguistic turn and the cultural turn, all located in the later 20th century, have been followed more recently by the global turn, the affective or emotional turn, the material turn, the cognitive turn, the spatial turn, and a number of others.

I could offer you a panorama, attempting to include them all, but all these turns might make you as dizzy as they make me when I try to think about all of them together. In any case, in the space of a single lecture, it is always wise to focus.

My choice in what follows is to focus on the idea of fluidity, sometimes presented as a characteristic of post-modern culture, as in a series of books by a Polish sociologist, the late Zygmunt Bauman, on what he called “liquidity” – liquid modernity, liquid life, liquid love and so on. Fluidity is associated with a rejection of essences, and especially of the linked ideas of fixity and purity.

¹ Burke, Peter, *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy: essays on perception and communication*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

There is a widening gap between this academic discourse centered on fluidity and the political and popular discourses concerning national, ethnic or racial purity, cultural authenticity, and so on.

Take for example the history of knowledge, a relatively new field in which I have been working in the last few years. Like cultural historians in general, historians of knowledge work with the idea of tradition. However, they are abandoning what might be called the traditional idea of tradition, which regarded it as something fixed that can be handed down from one generation to the next like a ring or a necklace. They do not deny the existence of traditions. What is denied the claim that a tradition is, as the Catholic Church once saw itself, *semper eadem*, always the same, and so impervious to change and so to history.

Instead, historians of knowledge increasingly emphasize the changes that occur when traditions are adapted to new circumstances. They speak and write about cultural mobility, the circulation and exchange of knowledges, the active and transformative reception of ideas, and the importance of brokers or go-betweens between different cultures of knowledge².

Recent scholars also emphasize hybridization, the result of what might be called the collision between two orders or systems of knowledge, especially the modern western system and the many indigenous knowledges in Asia, Africa and the Americas. For example, a Swiss scholar recently published a book that, although it is written in German, is entitled "Pidgin-Knowledge". It focuses on the interaction between western doctors and indigenous healers in colonial contexts in India and Africa, since individuals on both sides of the encounter learned from the other³. This trend illustrates the increasing globalization of cultural history, sometimes taking the form of what the English call "connected history" or "entangled history", while the French call it *histoire croisée*⁴.

Another example of increasing emphasis on fluidity comes from social history. Key categories in social history that used to be assumed to be fixed, among

² Secord, James, "Knowledge in Transit". *Isis*. N° 95. 2004. pp. 654-672; Raj, Kapil, *Modern Science: circulation and the construction of knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650-1900*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007; Schaffer, Simon et al. (eds.), *The Brokered World: Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770-1820*. Sagamore Beach, MA, Science History Publications, 2009; Greenblatt, Stephen et al. *Cultural Mobility: a manifesto*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

³ Fischer-Tiné, Harald, *Pidgin Knowledge: Wissen und Kolonialismus*. Zurich, Diaphanes, 2013.

⁴ Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, "Connected Histories: notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia". *Modern Asian Studies*. N° 31. 1997. pp. 735-762; Werner, Michael y Zimmermann, Bénédicte, "Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity". *History and Theory*. N° 45. 2006. pp. 30-50.

them “class”, “tribe”, “caste”, “ethnicity” and “gender”, are now viewed as more flexible or fluid, both in the use made of them by historians today and also in their employment by the people whom historians study in the past. In the case of India, for instance, “caste” used to be seen as a category or system of categories that went back thousands of years, but it was recently argued that the system was transformed if not created by the British⁵.

In the case of colonial Spanish America, categories such as *mestizo*, *mulato*, *pardo* and *zambo* turn out, according to recent archival research, to have been in flux. For instance, the same individual might appear to different observers to belong to different categories, and even to identify himself or herself in different categories at different moments or in different situations⁶. As a Mexican attorney wrote in 1802, some individuals appeared to be “amphibians”, “being *indios* for the purpose of tribute, and *españoles* to contribute in all other matters”⁷. *Casta* paintings, which once appeared to represent a fixed social order, now look more like a collective wish-fulfilment on the part of the upper class that commissioned these works.

The relatively new emphasis on fluidity, in everyday life as well as in history and the social sciences, takes two main forms: a concern with hybridity and a concern with performance.

The 21st-century concern with hybridity is visible or indeed audible in a number of domains: in the growing interest in mixed languages, for instance, in hybrid music, in miscegenation and in transgender and transsexual individuals. These topics, all of which used to be marginal in historical studies, if they were present at all, have all been moving towards the centre. The trend might be summed up as the awareness that we are all *mestizos*, to some degree and in some ways.

This point was famously made in the case of Brazil quite a long time ago by Gilberto Freyre in his classic study *Casa Grande e Senzala*, published in 1933. In this book Freyre emphasized the presence of African culture inside all Bra-

⁵ Dirks, Nicholas B., *Castes of Mind: colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁶ Burns, Kathryn, “Unfixing Race”. Greer, Margaret, Mignolo, Walter and Quilligan, Maureen (eds.). *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empires*. Durham. Duke University Press. 2007. pp. 188-202. C.f. Vinson III, Ben, *Before Mestizaje. The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 2, 63, 202, passim. On “tribes” in West Africa, see Amselle, Jean-Loup, *Logiques métisses: anthropologie de l’identité en Afrique et ailleurs*. Paris, Payot, 1990.

⁷ Quoted in Vinson III, *Before Mestizaje*, p. 67.

zilians, even the pale blonde ones. Freyre's emphasis on mixing was followed by the French historian Lucien Febvre, one of the founders of the so-called *Annales* School. Febvre, who wrote the preface to the French translation of *Casa Grande*, had also written a history of France of an unusual kind, describing the French as a mixture of peoples and French culture as a mixture of elements that had come from very different places – the Renaissance from Italy, coffee from the Middle East and so on.

This book had a rather curious fortune. It was commissioned by UNESCO as part of their concern with the idea of race and the practice of discrimination, a project that involved Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roger Bastide and the Brazilian sociologist Florestan Fernandes. Febvre's study, written in 1950, in collaboration with a young historian, François Crouzet, was rejected by UNESCO and the manuscript was lost. It was rediscovered much later in a suitcase and finally published in 2012 under the title, *Nous sommes des sang-mêlés*.

The relevance of this book to the situation in historical studies today is suggested by the fact that in 2017 a collective volume was published under the title *Histoire Mondiale de la France*, emphasizing, like Febvre, the cultural exchanges that underlie and shape the nation⁸.

Here in the New World you are of course more aware of hybridity than Europeans like myself. So I shall move on and devote more time to the second aspect of the concern with fluidity: performance.

Some commentators refer to the recent "performative turn", in anthropology and sociology as well as in historical or cultural studies, rejecting an earlier trend to view cultures as so many texts or scripts that anthropologist can read over the shoulders of the "natives"⁹. A famous example is the rich reading of cock-fights in Bali by Clifford Geertz, perhaps the most famous anthropologist in the second half of the twentieth century¹⁰.

Again, the many rituals, from coronations to executions, that were studied by historians, in the 1980s and 90s in particular, were often presented as if they followed a "script", whether in the literal sense of a book in the possession of a master of ceremonies or in the metaphorical sense of a fixed programme¹¹.

⁸ Boucheron, Patrick *et al.* (eds.), *Histoire Mondiale de la France*. Paris, Seuil, 2017.

⁹ Burke, Peter, "Performing History: the Importance of Occasions". *Rethinking History*. N° 9. 2005. pp. 35-52.

¹⁰ Geertz, Clifford, "Deep Play: notes on the Balinese cockfight". *Daedalus*. N° 101. 1972. pp. 1-37, reprinted in his Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, Basic Books, 1973.

¹¹ Well-known examples include Robert Darnton's discussion of a procession in eighteenth-cen-

More recently, however, in the last two decades in particular, there has been a reaction against the idea of fixed texts and scripts, in both the literal and the metaphorical sense of these terms.

At the literal level, new studies of European manuscript culture in the Middle Ages and later have shown that scribes did not simply copy the text they had before them word for word. On the contrary, they often felt free to omit some passages and to insert others. Even studies of the early printed book have argued that printed texts were less fixed than scholars used to believe, since they were revised again and again in the course of printing a single edition¹².

More important, though, is the reaction against the metaphor of “text” and “script”. Studies of ritual, for instance, now reveal a sharper awareness that on a given occasion, “something can always go wrong”¹³. Even on the most successful occasions, there are always deviations from the programme, differences between the script that a ritual was supposed to follow and “what actually happened”. The very idea of ritual has been criticized as itself too fixed, and some anthropologists and other scholars are replacing it with the idea of different degrees of ritualization¹⁴.

The idea of performance, replacing text and script, has become central in recent works of sociology and anthropology as well as in different fields of history. For example, three perceptive books, all by North American anthropologists, study the performance of ethnic and national identity, by means of festivals, plays and music. One, *The Festive State*, is concerned with Venezuela and the other two, *Performing the Nation* and *Performance and Politics*, with Tanzania¹⁵.

ture Montpellier in “A Bourgeois puts his World in Order: the city as a text”. Darnton, Robert. *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York. Basic Books. 1984. pp. 107-144. This book of essay grew out of a seminar at Princeton in which Geertz and Darnton collaborated.

¹² Johns, Adrian, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 10, 31, 91, 172.

¹³ Schieffelin, Edward, “On Failure and Performance”. Laderman, Carol and Roseman, Marina (eds.). *The Performance of Healing*. New York. Routledge. 1996. pp. 59-89, at 60.

¹⁴ A pioneer in this respect was the anthropologist Jack Goody in an article “Against Ritual”. Moore, Sally F. and Myerhoff, Barbara G. (eds.). *Secular Rituals*. Assen. Van Gorcum. 1977. pp. 25-35. Cf. Bell, Catherine, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1992.

¹⁵ Guss, David M., *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism as Cultural Performance*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000; Askew, Kelly, *Performing the Nation: Swahili music and cultural politics in Tanzania*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002; Edmondson, Laura, *Performance and Politics in Tanzania: the nation on stage*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007.

Individuals are now viewed not simply as having an identity, or more often, a number of different identities, such as nobility, masculinity, and nationality, but also as performing them. Indeed, they are now seen as required to perform these identities, for instance by wearing certain clothes, speaking and gesturing in a certain way, and switching codes (as the linguists say) according to the different situations in which they find themselves.

We usually perform the role of the person we are – or think we are – but, on occasion, we perform that of the person whom we would like to be. Social historians have become more and more interested in attempts to “pass”: studying examples of coloured people passing for white, of members of the bourgeoisie pretending to be noble, of women dressing as men and joining the army or the navy, and so on¹⁶. In one remarkable and well-studied eighteenth-century example, a Frenchman calling himself George Psalmanazar arrived in England and attempted to pass himself off as a native of Formosa (now Taiwan)¹⁷.

“Passing” means crossing cultural and social frontiers that are not firm although they are not exactly fluid. Examples such as these suggest that historians need to work with what might be described as a fluid notion of fluidity, replacing the binary opposition between fluid and fixed with the idea of more or less fluidity or fixity in a given situation¹⁸.

Returning to Gilberto Freyre for a moment, I should like to say that although he was writing eighty or ninety years ago, his work is still inspiring, especially for the way in which he undermined simple binary oppositions. The oppositions are very clear in the titles of many of his books – *Casa Grande e Senzala*, *Sobrados e Mucambos*, *Ordem e Progresso*, *Aventura e Rotina*, etc. Nonetheless, it turns out that the author undermines or if you prefer this term, “deconstructs” these oppositions, paying attention to spaces in between them and movement between them.

Turning now to political history, recent studies of revolts and riots also reflect this trend. They refer again and again to the “theatre” of revolt, or, following

¹⁶ Dekker, Rudolf and Van de Pol, Lotte, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe*. London, MacMillan, 1989; Sánchez, María C. and Schlossberg, Linda (eds.), *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race and Religion*. New York, New York University Press, 2001.

¹⁷ Keevak, Michael, *The Pretended Asian: George Psalmanazar's Eighteenth-Century Formosan Hoax*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2004; Lynch, Jack, “Forgery as Performance Art: The Strange Case of George Psalmanazar”. Cope, Kevin (ed.). *1650–1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*. N° 11. 2005. pp. 21-35.

¹⁸ Cf. Engelke, Matthew, *Think Like an Anthropologist*. London, Pelican Books, 2017, 101ff, on the idea of honour as “fixed-yet-flexible”.

the historical sociologist Charles Tilly, to the “repertoire of contention”. In the early modern period, this repertoire, generally violent, included burning the effigies of unpopular individuals, destroying or sacking their houses, marching with loaves impaled on pikes as a protest against the price of bread, and so on¹⁹.

This repertoire has gradually changed over time. In the 19th century, it was tamed or “civilized” thanks to the invention of the “demonstration”, in other words a meeting, in principle peaceful, to demand changes in the political or social system – annual parliaments, an 8-hour working day, votes for women, and so on. Participants marched carrying placards and shouting or chanting slogans, and arrived in a public place to listen to speeches. More recently, in the 21st century, the repertoire has been extended to include the occupation of public spaces such as squares, in Cairo, Kiev, London, New York, Hong Kong and Madrid, where the slogan was “toma la plaza”²⁰.

What happens in these public spaces is neither fixed nor fluid but somewhere in between. I like to use terms such as “semi-scripted”, or if you prefer, “semi-spontaneous”. The point is that the repertoire always offers room for improvisation. Indeed, improvisation is often required when rioters, for instance, respond to attacks by the forces of order.

To take a different kind of example, a pioneering study of the “theatre of justice” in 18th-century London concentrated not on the stage but on the audience, on the reactions of the crowd to the ritual of execution, sometimes in favour of the individual condemned to die and sometimes against. The author of this study noted the “unexpected turns” which produced “a theatre of far greater fluidity” than earlier historians believed²¹.

The idea of performance has reshaped political history, as the last few examples suggested. It has also influenced relatively new approaches to the past, among them the history of emotions. The “affective” or “emotional” turn of the last few decades is well known: the rapid rise of the history of the emotions,

¹⁹ Tilly, Charles, *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; Tilly, Charles, *Regimes and Repertoires*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

²⁰ Alexander, Jeffrey C., “Revolutionary Performance in Egypt: the 2011 uprising”. Alexander, Jeffrey C. *The Drama of Social Life*. Cambridge. Polity. 2017. pp. 39-90. On the trend in general, Conquergood, Dwight, “Poetics, Play, Performance and Power: The Performance Turn in Anthropology”. *Text and Performance Quarterly*. N° 9. 1989. pp. 81-88.

²¹ Laqueur, Thomas W., “Crowds, Carnival and the State in English Executions, 1604-1868”. Beier, A.L., Cannadine, David and Rosenheim, James M. (eds.). *The First Modern Society. Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1989. pp. 305-355.

including its institutionalization in academic centres. This affective turn has generated controversy.

One of the main problems is the following: Are emotions simply something that we feel, or are they also something that we do? Can we be said to “perform” anger, love, generosity, courage and so on?²² For example, William Reddy, one of the leaders in a field that he calls “the historical ethnography of emotions”, identifies what he describes as “emotives”: that is, emotional “utterances” (in inverted commas) that are taken from a “repertoire” associated with a particular emotional “regime”. A declaration of love, for instance, is not, or not only, an expression of the feelings of the lover. According to Reddy, this utterance is a strategy to encourage, amplify or even transform the feelings of the beloved.

Performance also has a place in the recent “cognitive turn”, in other words the rise of the history of knowledge, discussed earlier in this article. Take the example of the lecture. Lectures, whether “live” or presented on television, are a form of “staging” knowledge. This point is probably most obvious in the case of 19th-century lectures on popular science, which were often punctuated by chemical explosions or electric shocks²³. But we all perform, in our different styles – Italian, Latin American or British.

II

I turn now to the second part of this lecture, on challenges to cultural history and alternatives to it. Today, the “cultural turn” and the New Cultural History are no longer new. The great problem with novelty, especially as a slogan, is that it is a cultural asset that depreciates very quickly. Cultural history has had its period in the limelight, and I can only be grateful, like my friends and colleagues such as Davis, Ginzburg, Darnton, Thomas and Chartier, that my career has coincided with the cultural turn. However, it must be admitted that the situation is beginning to change. What is new today is the “natural turn”. I should like to discuss this turn, including the challenges to which it responds as well as the challenges that it is posing to cultural historians, both young and old.

²² Reddy, William, *The Navigation of Feeling. A framework for the history of emotions*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001; Maddern, Philippa, McEwan, Joanne and Scott, Anne M. (eds.), *Performing Emotions in Early Modern Europe*. Turnhout, Brepolis Publishers, 2017.

²³ Burke, Peter, “From the Disputation to Power Point: staging academic knowledge in Europe, 1100-2000”. Blume, Hermann *et al.* (eds.). *Inszenierung und Gedächtnis*. Bielefeld. Transcript. 2014. pp. 119-131.

The New Cultural History was inspired to an important extent by cultural anthropology. However, cultural anthropology, and with it the very concept of culture, has been challenged from within the discipline. The central argument is that the term is so broad that it becomes difficult to say what isn't culture²⁴. But if everything is culture, we don't need the word at all! (a similar argument may be produced against the trend, widespread a few years ago, to speak of the "cultural construction" or the "discursive construction" of almost everything. Since culture or discourse were supposed to be everywhere, they were effectively nowhere). Finding a substitute for the term "culture" that would do the job it performed is probably a waste of time. The term is probably best regarded as a kind of glue joining together a whole range of practices. Any substitute term would therefore be open to criticism on similar grounds!

The problem of culture is not a purely conceptual one. The last two decades have revealed a major shift of interests among historians. Central to this shift is the rise of environmental history, itself encouraged by the debate on the future of the planet.

It is generally true that what historians look for in the past, or at a less conscious level, what they notice, is shaped by the enthusiasms and the anxieties of the present – in the 1920s the history of prices, for instance; in the 1950s the history of population; in the 1970s, women's history, and so on.

The history of the environment involves more than a displacement of attention from culture to our physical surroundings. For the last half century or so, some historians have been conversing (both literally and metaphorically) with their colleagues in neighbouring disciplines, not only in anthropology but also in sociology, economics, literature and archaeology. Environmental historians, on the other hand, have found new neighbours. They converse with geologists, climatologists, botanists and other natural scientists.

In similar fashion, in the expanding field of the history of emotions, some scholars, such as Daniel Smail, now keep company with neuroscientists and speak of Deep History or "neurohistory"²⁵. Others draw on cognitive science and use concepts such as "extended mind theory" and "distributed cognition". In similar fashion, some historical studies of memory make use of findings by experi-

²⁴ Abu-Lughod, Lila, "Writing against Culture". Fox, Richard G. (ed.). *Recapturing Anthropology*. Santa Fe. University of Washington Press. 1991. pp. 137-161; Kuper, Adam, *Culture: the anthropologists' account*. Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2000.

²⁵ Smail, Daniel L., *On Deep History and the Brain*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008.

mental psychologists²⁶. Like anthropologists, historians are facing a challenge from cognitive science²⁷.

Today, we find serious discussions in the *American Historical Review* and elsewhere of a “bio-history”, a possible future history of the “co-evolution” of humans with other animals²⁸. Such discussions form part of the rise of what is sometimes described as “non-human history”, in other words the relatively new attempts to write a history of both animals and things in which they are attributed some kind of agency or autonomy²⁹.

The argument is that humans have taken too much credit for achievements that required the co-operation of non-humans, from metals to microbes. It is not of course news that diseases such as the Black Death and smallpox have changed the course of history, but until recently little notice of this point was taken by philosophers of history³⁰.

In the case of animals, what is planned, and indeed beginning to be produced, is not only the history of the human use of horses, cows and sheep or even the history of pets. The new history – new in this second decade of the 21st century – includes the responses of animals to human dominance. My favourite example is that of foxes migrating to cities such as London in search, like human migrants, of a better life. More generally, “evolutionary history” studies the co-evolution of humans, animals and plants, not only in the very long term but also, in the Anthropocene age, the relatively rapid changes in animals, plants and insects in response to “anthropogenic” changes in the environment³¹.

The idea of the agency of things may seem like a return to the Middle Ages, to belief in the physical power of relics, images, magic wands and so on. However, there is a case for viewing things as – in a limited sense – active rather than

²⁶ Boyer, Pascal and Wertsch, James V. (eds.), *Memory in Mind and Culture*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; Tribble, Evelyn B. and Keene, Nicholas, *Cognitive Ecologies and the History of Remembering. Religion, education and memory in early modern England*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

²⁷ Bloch, Maurice, *Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

²⁸ Boyden, Stephen V., *Biohistory: The Interplay Between Human Society and the Biosphere, past and present*. Paris, UNESCO and Park Ridge, New Jersey, Parthenon, 1992; Russell, Edmund, *Evolutionary History Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011; *American Historical Review*. N° 119. 2014. Special issue.

²⁹ Pearson, Chris, “Beyond “resistance”: rethinking nonhuman agency for a “more than human” world”. *European Review of History*. N° 22. 2015. pp. 709-725; Russell, *Evolutionary History*.

³⁰ Le Cain, Timothy J., *The Matter of History. How Things Create the Past*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

³¹ Russell, *Evolutionary History*.

passive. As Matisse once said, “The object is an actor”. Paintings make an impact on their viewers. Again, things often resist human use or force humans to use them in certain ways. To fire a rifle or a bow, for instance, to write with a pen or to send a message on a smartphone it is necessary to adapt your body to the instrument. You need to stand or sit in a particular way, hold the object in a particular way and so on. In similar fashion, the manner in which we walk depends not simply on us but also on the kind of shoes that we are wearing. As the objects change, so human practices have to change with them.

It is thanks to these recent trends that we might speak of a “natural turn” in the study of history, a successor to the “cultural turn”. The problem is that this division between nature and culture is itself being criticized or even rejected today, notably by two French anthropologists, Bruno Latour and Philippe Descola, in one more example of the undermining of binary oppositions³².

To conclude. As I suggested earlier, the empire of cultural history may be beginning to contract, at least in the sense of attracting fewer young scholars. All the same, in another sense its empire is expanding, finding new topics, such as the cultural history of Fascism, or taking new forms, such as global cultural history, the theme of the next conference of the International Society for Cultural History, to be held in Estonia in 2019.

In any case, studies of the past cannot exclude the history of the imagination. Political history, for instance, cannot neglect the imagined community of the nation and its symbols. More generally, given the importance of symbols, there will always be a place – and indeed, a need – for cultural history.

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