

## SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

# History Without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma

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Among the many historical conventions that went out of fashion in the wake of the linguistic and/or cultural turn was the grand explanatory narrative rooted in an interpretive tradition that typically traced an arc from causes to consequences.<sup>1</sup> A chorus of criticism consigned the grand or meta-narrative to the dustbin of historiography, if not history. Linguistic theorists like Hayden White seemed to challenge historians' cherished notions of interpretive truth by stressing the resemblance between historical and fictional narratives; postmodernists of various stripes questioned whether historical narratives could escape the teleological tendencies of the master narrative of the Western/liberal tradition; and recently a leading postcolonial theorist has denounced all historicism, broadly defined, as incurably eurocentric.<sup>2</sup>

As will be discussed in the following essay, this has led to the virtual abandonment of the grand narrative tradition among historians of a strong theoretical bent, and a clear preference for microhistories that avoid or

1. In some discussions of this issue, narrative is equated with “event history”, but here I am following Paul Ricoeur's argument that all history takes some kind of narrative form. The distinction I would draw is between grand narratives structured by an explanatory arc from causes to consequences, and the smaller-scale interpretive narratives associated with a certain type of microhistory. For a discussion of these issues, see Peter Burke, “History of Events and Revival of Narrative”, in *idem* (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA, 2001), 2nd edn, pp. 283–300. On the lack of precision in drawing the boundaries between micro and macro-analysis, see Fritz Ringer, “Max Weber on Causal Analysis”, *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), p. 175; on narrative and causation, see Jürgen Peters, “New Historicism: Postmodern Historiography between Narrativism and Heterology”, *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), pp. 21–38.

2. On Hayden White, see Karen Halttunen, “Cultural History and the Challenge of Narrativity”, in V. Bonnell and L. Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), pp. 165–166; Roger Chartier, “The Chimera of the Origin: Archeology, Cultural History and The French Revolution”, in J. Goldstein (ed.), *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 167–186; Chris Lorenz, “Can Histories be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the ‘Metaphorical Turn’”, *History and Theory*, 37 (1998), pp. 309–329; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

refuse any systematic notion of causation. But I will also argue that there are other, simultaneous developments in the field of history – specifically the growing appeal of world history and, perhaps ironically, the rise of postcolonial studies – which have revived or sustained an interest in the grand historical narrative. My purpose in addressing this issue is not to endorse an uncritical return to the grand narrative tradition, but to consider what we lose if we abandon it altogether, to indicate how it still implicitly influences historical writing even by those who apparently renounce it, and to suggest that, perhaps, we might imagine new ways to narrate the past and to address the question, “Why?” without reverting to excessively positivist master-narratives.

#### THE CULTURAL TURN AND THE DECLINE OF CAUSATION

The turn to the new cultural history, in the United States and elsewhere, witnessed a decline in the production of research concerned with the causes of an event or a particular historical process, which has also implied a decline in a certain form of explanatory narrative. These days it is difficult to find a serious and theoretically engaged historian addressing a theme such as “the causes of the French Revolution”, or “the causes of the American Civil War”, or “the origins of capitalist relations of production in New England”. A book such as David W. Blight’s celebrated *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory* might discuss the putative causes of the Civil War in terms of different discursive positions and how they related to the struggle over how to “remember” the Civil War, but he never explicitly indicates a historiographical preference for one causal narrative over another.<sup>3</sup>

The near erasure of such questions (except as raw material for discourse analysis) so hotly debated just a few decades ago, even during the heyday of the new social history, can be explained, in part, by the skepticism of today’s historians with regard to grand narratives in general and, the ample criticism of the historian who positions him/herself as the omniscient narrator, imposing (his/her) narrative order upon the disorder and multiplicity of histories, and by that token ignoring or erasing other narratives and silencing other voices.<sup>4</sup> Beyond this, once we have accepted the notion that all narratives have embedded in them a series of interpretive

3. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA, 2001). Any attentive reader, however, quickly discerns a disapproving tone reserved for narratives that served as apology for the Confederate position.

4. For an excellent discussion of these issues, see Halttunen, “Cultural History and the Challenge of Narrativity”, pp. 165–181; see also Barbara Weinstein, “A Pesquisa sobre Identidade e Cidadania nos EUA: da Nova História Social à Nova História Cultural”, *Revista Brasileira de História*, 18:35 (1998), pp. 227–246.

decisions, how can we construct a coherent narrative without falling into the teleological temptation? By the same token, if we accept the notion of the “instability of the subject”, how can we narrate a history of the workers? Or of women? Or of gays?<sup>5</sup> If the very meanings attributed to these words/categories are historically unstable, whose story are we telling? All of these doubts and criticisms, many of them quite reasonable, have ended up devaluing, even de-legitimizing, a certain type of explanatory narrative, concerned with causes and consequences.

Furthermore, for those historians who were immersing themselves in the new cultural history, especially in its early phase, there was the unpleasant memory of another type of “cultural history”, with its tendency to essentialize culture, and to treat it as a factor that determined the destiny of a particular collectivity. It was precisely the whiff of eurocentrism, and even racism, of this older cultural history – that presupposed that certain cultures had an aptitude for modernity, economic progress, rational citizenship, while others did not – that moved previous generations to prefer social and economic history, to the detriment of cultural history, and to treat the cultural sphere as always reducible to the social and the material.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a return to an explanatory/historicist narrative in which culture would serve as the foundation for explanation, in the positivist sense, was something to be avoided at all cost.<sup>7</sup>

It was the rejection of this essentialized view of culture that made the new cultural history “new”. And at the moment when the cultural turn first manifested itself clearly in the US historical profession, perhaps the most important source of theoretical inspiration was the field of anthropology, and more specifically, the work of Clifford Geertz.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, he was not the only influence – even North American historians, with their reputation for provincialism, were reading Foucault,

5. For a classic discussion of the instability of identity categories, see Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis”, in *idem*, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).

6. David Landes, whose work treats culture as a set of stable, measurable, enduring attributes that causes some societies to prosper and others to languish, presents himself as more courageous than other scholars who, presumably for fear of being thought politically incorrect, shrink from this (older) cultural explanation because “it has a sulfuric odor of race and inheritance, an air of immutability”. Landes apparently feels that reference to other factors attenuates the potentially racist implications of his arguments; David S. Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some Are So Poor* (New York, 1998), p. 516.

7. Geraldo Mártires Coelho, “Qué história cultural?” (unpublished ms.) has an excellent discussion of the nationalist/romanticist roots of the “old” cultural history.

8. My discussion of Geertz and the new cultural history owes much to the following works: Richard Biernacki, “Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History”, in Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, pp. 62–92, William Roseberry, “Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology”, in *idem*, *Anthropologies and Histories* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1989), pp. 17–29, and Joyce Appleby, Margaret Jacob, and Lynn Hunt, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York, 1994), ch. 6.

Derrida, and Bourdieu.<sup>9</sup> But Geertz's method, his "thick description", was particularly influential. Derived from symbolic anthropology, this interpretive method insisted that all social activity took place within a web of meanings, and that symbols/texts should be read and interpreted in their own context, using the internal logic of the local system. Obviously, "explanation" formed part of the Geertzian project; in his own words, "it is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical".<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Geertz made a distinction between explanation as interpretation and as the enumeration of general causes; according to Geertz, "culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described".<sup>11</sup>

One implication of this widespread adaptation of anthropological methods to historical research was the eclipse of the longstanding concern with "change over time", and the emergence of a preference for synchronic, rather than diachronic, themes. The tendency now was to examine "a small piece of time", an instant, a snapshot. A certain variant of microhistory, focused on a specific historical anecdote, became the analytical raw material, *par excellence*, for the new cultural history.<sup>12</sup> Books and articles based on some minor episode – minor but bursting with significance – proliferated. A pioneering and quintessential example was *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, by Robert Darnton; in the title essay of this collection, Darnton took an initially puzzling vignette – the hilarity provoked among Parisian artisans at the killing of the pet cats of their master's wife – to explore a shift in social and cultural mores in pre-Revolutionary Paris. There has since been a steady stream of such studies; one recently announced on the back cover of the

9. Bonnell and Hunt, "Introduction", *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, pp. 1–5. Geertzian "thick description" was by no means the only option among cultural-anthropological approaches. See the essays in Sherry B. Ortner (ed.), *The Fate of "Culture": Geertz and Beyond* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).

10. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p. 5.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

12. Robert Darnton, a trendsetter for this historical fashion, very recently published an article in the *New York Review of Books* that summarizes some of the major contributions in what I am calling "anecdote history", and which he calls (perhaps more flatteringly) "incident analysis". "It Happened One Night", *NYRB*, 51:11 (24 June 2004), pp. 60–64. Darnton usefully distinguishes between the "microhistory" associated with the Annales School and social history methods, "event history", with its narrow interpretive goals, and what he calls "incident analysis". Even among the studies he cites, and others that might belong in this category, there is considerable variation, with some being more focused on the cultural analysis of a particular episode, while others use an episode mainly to punctuate a broader historical narrative. For an example of the latter, see Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994).

*American Historical Review*, by Jeffrey Freedman, is described in the following terms:

*A Poisoned Chalice* tells the story of a long-forgotten criminal case: the poisoning of the communion wine in Zurich's main cathedral in 1776. The story is riveting and mysterious, but it is also far more than just a good story. The affair became a cause célèbre, the object of a lively public debate that focused on the problem of evil.

By following the thoughts and actions of Europeans as they struggled to comprehend an act of inscrutable evil, this book brings to life a key episode in the history of the German Enlightenment – an episode in which the Enlightenment was forced to interrogate the very limits of reason itself.

And the ad ends with an endorsement from the distinguished historian Anthony Grafton who declares the book “a small masterpiece: the distilled essence of cultural history”.<sup>13</sup>

In these studies, the old explanatory narrative, concerned with causes, origins, and consequences, has given way to a new “micronarrative”, of very brief duration, concentrated on a particular (and often previously “obscure”) event that, if well chosen, offers us a bonanza of cultural meanings. The latter no longer refers to causes or origins, and with regard to consequences, the most they might indicate is a range of new cultural/historical possibilities. This, among other factors, makes the appeal of the anecdote entirely understandable. Aside from easing the whole process of archival research, it has a double attraction: at first glance, it offers a (relatively) pure piece of the past – though it would be more accurate to think of the anecdote as a fragment of a narrative.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps more important, the anecdote is reasonably compatible with the methods of symbolic anthropology.

This is not to say that all of the acolytes of Clifford Geertz in the historical profession have cultivated the same terrain. To be sure, there are many examples of studies inspired by his *oeuvre* that diverge from this pattern. Here I will just cite two studies – of very different themes and lengths – that illustrate this diversity. One focuses on an era whose parameters entirely escape the confines of “anecdotal history”, and the other is explicitly concerned with the question of change over time.

The first is the recent monograph by Eric Van Young on popular revolts in the era of the independence wars in Mexico. In contrast to the majority of works on this theme, *The Other Rebellion* does not seek to provide a unified explanation for the wars of independence, or their causes; on the contrary, Van Young rejects explanatory “models” for tending to homogenize the various categories of the colonial population that reacted

13. Jeffrey Freedman, *A Poisoned Chalice* (Princeton, NJ, 2002). This advertisement appeared on the back cover of the *American Historical Review*, 107:2 (2002).

14. This insight comes from Stephen Greenblatt, cited in Peters, “New Historicism”, p. 38.

in highly heterogeneous ways to the struggle against Spanish colonialism. Instead of speaking of causes, Van Young privileges what we might call Geertzian preoccupations, concentrating on the cultural meanings of the revolts for their participants. For example, when the peasants or villagers of a certain region speak of the king, what does the figure of the king signify for them? Van Young thus argues that the subaltern groups that participated in these revolts acted within a web of symbols, rites, and discourses that were very distinct from those that fueled the revolt against the Crown among more privileged (creole) sectors of the population. Again, the broad canvas on which Van Young interprets popular revolts (or popular quiescence) makes this a study of wider-ranging implications than a strictly “anecdotal” approach. But at the same time, it could be described as anecdotal history writ large – which may explain why the book is 700-plus pages long.<sup>15</sup>

The second work that is clearly influenced by Geertz, but that escapes the confines of the historical anecdote, is a fascinating article recently published in the *American Historical Review* titled “From Majesty to Mystery: Change in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries”.<sup>16</sup> As the very title indicates, the author, Monique Scheer, is explicitly concerned with change over time. But the particular nature of that concern reflects her immersion in anthropological methods. Refusing to dwell on the question of why these madonnas – a group of images widely known in Europe since the medieval era – were black in color (an issue she persuasively dismisses as a positivist distraction), Scheer focuses, instead, on the shifting meanings attributed to the color of these madonnas in different historical eras, culminating in the nineteenth century. In other words, the article explores how various commentators, in different historical-cultural contexts, noted/explained (or not) the color of these madonnas.

Scheer demonstrates that, prior to the eighteenth century, the tendency was to interpret the madonnas’ dark color as a sign of the antiquity and authenticity of these images, and, especially among popular groups, an indication of their miraculous qualities. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, one can perceive a significant shift in the perceptions of the madonnas, which cease to be statues that are black in color and become, instead, images of a black, or even African, woman. This change in perception is attributed by the author to two broad transformations occurring during this period. One, predictably, is the construction of racial categories that leads those commenting upon the black madonnas to

15. Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion* (Stanford, CA, 2001).

16. Monique Scheer, “From Majesty to Mystery: Changes in the Meanings of Black Madonnas from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century”, *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 1412–1440.

associate blackness with dark skin and racial difference. The other is the secularization of European society, which allows those commenting upon the madonnas to see them not as sacred (and even less, as miraculous), but as works of human artistry whose color demands a scientific/rational explanation. The images become a “mystery”, but in a new materialist sense, rather than the previous religious sense. Many nineteenth-century commentators, befuddled by the idea of an “African” Mary, ultimately conclude that the color was an accident, the result of accumulated candle fumes in churches and cathedrals.<sup>17</sup>

Scheer openly acknowledges her debt to Geertz in the very body of the article; she notes the importance of works on this subject by various art historians, but insists that her “approach to this question is not as a member of their discipline. Rather, it is informed by principles of symbolic anthropology.” Scheer’s article, at first glance, seems to demonstrate that Geertz’s methods are not incompatible with a consideration of change over time. Yet, contrary to the author’s claims, what gives the article interpretive coherence is not the Geertzian method employed, but its reference to a grand historical narrative that furnishes the explanatory elements for the changes over time highlighted in the essay. It is the emergence of “race” as a category for organizing human populations and the secularization of European society that provides the explanatory framework for change over time. To be sure, the attention to race as a central concept in post-Enlightenment European culture indicates that this is a revised version of the standard macro-narrative of “Western civilization”, but it is nonetheless a grand narrative, and one that is so thoroughly taken for granted in the elaboration of the article’s conclusions that it does not merit even a reference in the footnotes. In other words, far from discarding the master narrative, or disengaging from concepts of causation, this article (and not just this article) treats it as so thoroughly embedded in our cultural frameworks that it does not even require acknowledgement. What we have is not the rejection of the master narrative, but its complete and utter triumph as the historian’s “common sense”.

To be sure, we cannot expect an author focused on the history of a specific set of religious artifacts to rethink the entire narrative of modern (Western-centered) history. What we can expect from historians working in this vein is an explicit acknowledgement that they are invoking a well-established narrative of causation, for only then can we come to grips with its “common-sense” status, and begin to question and rethink the assumptions that inform this grand narrative. Again, the attention to race as a crucial category of “modern” knowledge indicates the subtle transformations in that narrative. These days it would be difficult to

17. *Ibid.*, p. 1435.

equate or celebrate certain western trends with the “march of progress”. Even with these significant modifications, however, it still seems dubious to speak unproblematically of “modernity” or “secularization” from the eighteenth century on as generators of symbols and meanings, or as constructing a historical context that is fixed and stable. Geertz’s approach may provide a fruitful means of exploring the meanings of rituals and relations in colonial and postcolonial societies, but it tells us little about the history of colonialism as a process, as a system, or as an ongoing power relationship that can be unstable and continually contested.<sup>18</sup>

This translation of cultural-anthropological methods to events of the past will certainly continue to inform historical research, but one can also perceive a sense that this approach, in its current conceptualization, is reaching exhaustion, and for various reasons. Lynn Hunt, who organized the now classic anthology on the cultural turn in the historical profession (*The New Cultural History*, 1989), recently co-edited another collection titled (unsurprisingly) *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (1999). Perusing the articles in the latter anthology, or in recent issues of the journal *History and Theory*, one can perceive a range of motives and impulses for going “beyond” cultural-anthropological methods.<sup>19</sup> First, there are considerations of a practical order. For Geertz and his followers everything is a text, and thus his method can be similarly applied to a contemporary ritual witnessed by an anthropologist, or one that took place in the eighteenth century and was recorded in a document of that era. But the inevitably fragmentary nature of the historical evidence, the additional levels of mediation between the event and the interpreter/spectator, and the lack of easy access to a multiplicity of “informants” means that only rarely can the interpretation of a text produced in the past have the richness and multiple layers of meaning that characterize the best cultural-anthropological studies.<sup>20</sup>

18. The most trenchant critique of Geertz in this vein can be found in Roseberry, “Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology”, pp. 26–29. According to Roseberry, in Geertz’s work “culture as text is removed from the historical process that shapes it and that it in turn shapes”; p. 28. For an appreciation and critique of Clifford Geertz’s impact on the discipline of history, see Biernacki, “Method and Metaphor”.

19. See Ann Kane, “Reconstructing Culture in Historical Explanation: Narratives as Cultural Structure and Practice”, *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), pp. 311–330.

20. Simon Schama, in his 1991 tour de force, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*, encountered the problem of constructing a historical narrative with insufficient evidence, and ended up supplementing his evidence with an explicitly fictional narrative, not to demonstrate the common structures of the two narratives, but because he did not have at his disposal any other “text” that would permit access to the discourses or practices of those involved in the crime being investigated.



## IS ALL THE WORLD AN ANECDOTE?

More relevant to the point of this essay, I think we can also perceive an inchoate yearning to return to a more encompassing narrative that would open possibilities for thinking anew about origins and consequences. This is not necessarily a desire to return to a positivist approach to history, with its laws of causation, but rather to revisit long-term processes and great historical events (a category undergoing continual revision), and discuss the question of origins in new ways.<sup>21</sup> There is a perceptible nostalgia for macrohistorical thinking that would permit us to address the broader implications of the operations of signification that have occupied so much space in recent historical research. The incessant debate over the possibility or impossibility of locating a sphere of sociability or social action that is not reducible to the cultural sphere (a debate that I think has been an intellectual dead end) is probably best explained as a symptom of this desire to pierce the limits set on historical narrative by the new cultural history and to escape the cramped confines of postmodernism generally.<sup>22</sup>

There are many areas of history where the question of reviving grand narratives has been raised, but perhaps the one where it is of most obvious relevance is in the burgeoning field of world history. In the remainder of this essay, I will explore both the opportunities and challenges presented by the field of world history for those historians interested in reviving and rethinking grand narratives, and the intersection between these tendencies and the concerns raised by historians working in the relatively new area of postcolonial studies.<sup>23</sup> Obviously, “world history” is not itself a new field, but what I am referring to in this essay is what might be called the “new” world history, an area of research and teaching that is profoundly marked by the historical and historiographical moment of its resurgence.

In the first place, it is important to note that world history, in its current form, is above all a pedagogical field; there are still relatively few historians

21. Here, Roger Chartier serves both as a critic of an older approach to causation, and as a source of new ideas about “origins”. In his words: “It is now less important to know whether the event was already present in the ideas that announced it, prefigured it, or demanded it than it is to recognize changes in belief and sensibility that would render such a rapid and profound destruction of the old political and social order decipherable and acceptable. In this sense, attributing ‘cultural origins’ to the French Revolution does not by any means establish the Revolution’s causes; rather, it pinpoints certain of the conditions that made it possible because it was conceivable.” Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC, 1991), p. 2.

22. Bonnell and Hunt, “Introduction”, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, pp. 6–8; Geoff Eley, “Is All the World a Text?”, in Terrence J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996).

23. Among the recent anthologies on postcolonialism, see Gyan Prakash (ed.), *After Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ, 1995); Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA, 1997); Mark Thurner and Andrés Guerrero (eds), *After Spanish Rule* (Durham, NC, 2004).

who would classify themselves as doing research in world history. Indeed, one of the ongoing criticisms of this area of concentration is precisely that it does not share the degree of specialization and professionalization that characterizes other fields or subfields (something that is not necessarily seen as a problem by those who are proponents of world history).<sup>24</sup> While no field of history is entirely detached from a pedagogical mission, in the case of world history, this is, at least for now, the primary focus of the field.<sup>25</sup> At first glance it may seem entirely predictable that this sort of course would proliferate at a moment of intense globalization; however, this alone would not explain the particular form that world history courses are generally taking. It is only possible to fully appreciate its pedagogical purposes by acknowledging what kind of academic course/discourse world history is meant to supplement, or even supplant.<sup>26</sup> Increasingly, this would be the venerable course known by various names – Western civilization, the rise of the West – and increasingly criticized for its association with a narrative of the “triumph of the West”. World history, in its current paradigmatic form, is not conceived of as a mere amplification of the “Western Civ” course. Rather, one of its principal purposes is precisely to rethink the place of the West in the macrohistorical narrative.

Practitioners of world history are developing various strategies to “decenter” the West, or to cite the phrase of subaltern studies historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, to “provincialize Europe”. And in most cases, for obvious (pedagogical) reasons, they involve a narrative that is explanatory and/or macro-historical.<sup>27</sup> One strategy with rather clear political implications is to insist that the only “advantage” that Europe enjoyed in the competition for global hegemony was its capacity to colonize and enslave – to exploit other cultures that, though sometimes more

24. According to Eric Wolf, “a major obstacle to the development of a new perspective lies in the very fact of specialization itself”; Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, CA, 1982), p. 19.

25. There has been an enormous output of textbooks in world history, but the production of monographic studies is still relatively small. An important exception is Lauren Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures: Legal Regimes in World History, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2002). There is also a journal, *World History*, entirely devoted to the field, a World History Association, and an annual prize for the best book in the area of world history. In addition, there are increasing numbers of scholars who would describe themselves as Atlantic historians and address some of the same issues.

26. For an introduction to this “new” world history, see Ross E. Dunn (ed.), *The New World History* (Boston, MA, 2000).

27. However, most would not go as far in the direction of “big history” as Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York, 1997), or other scholars who seek a single variable that can explain massive, long-term historical developments. See the cogent criticism of this trend in Susan K. Besse, “Placing Latin America in Modern World History Textbooks”, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 83 (2004), pp. 411–422.

sophisticated, were poorly prepared for the depredations and barbarities of the Europeans.<sup>28</sup> In a sense, this argument simply inverts the traditional discourse of European superiority based on Europe's supposed enlightenment – free thinking, free trade, self-discipline, and scientific temperament – a discourse that can still claim active and eminent defenders.

In recent years, two prominent figures of the “old” world history – Alfred Crosby and David Landes – have published books, widely acclaimed in some circles, that reproduce the lineaments of the narrative of a West triumphant due to its more democratic or scientific sensibilities. As one critic put it, they work within the narrative tradition of the “Great Explanandum” – the key to explaining the alleged “uniqueness” of the West.<sup>29</sup> Landes's book, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (1998), is especially audacious in its unrestricted endorsement of the eurocentric narrative. For one small example, listen to Landes's argument in favor of a “cultural” interpretation of European dominance: “If we have learned anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference [...] what counts is work, thrift, honesty, patience, tenacity.”<sup>30</sup>

This appeal to a “cultural” explanation (which in other parts of Landes's book is not quite as blatantly eurocentric as the lines quoted above) is obviously referring to an older cultural history, with its monolithic and essentialized notion of culture. The problem with those historical works that argue just the opposite – that the cultural qualities that made possible European hegemony were greed, brutality, barbarity – is that they are operating with the same deterministic and simplistic notion of culture, and the same assumption about Western “uniqueness”, but now with a negative valence.<sup>31</sup> It is an approach that serves to demonize the West, but not to decenter or provincialize it, contrary to their claims.

28. James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York, 1993); André Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, CA, 1998), both cited in Joel Mokyr, “Eurocentricity Triumphant”, *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 1241–1246.

29. Roger Hart, “The Great Explanandum”, *American Historical Review*, 105 (2000), pp. 486–493.

30. Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, pp. 516, 523, as cited in Mokyr, “Eurocentricity Triumphant”, p. 1243. For a (critical) discussion of Landes's book see “Review Essays: Explaining European Dominance”, *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 1240–1257. Crosby's volume is a less ostensibly congratulatory, but still emphasizes “unique” Western characteristics; Alfred Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250–1600* (Cambridge, MA, 1997). For a particularly unapologetic study that revives conventional forms of cultural determinism, see Thomas Sowell, *Conquests and Cultures: An International History* (New York, 1998).

31. This is not to say that I disagree with historians who claim that slavery and colonialism played a significant role in the “rise” of the West, though I regard this, in the first instance, as an empirical question that defies precise calculation. See, for example, Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944).

Another strategy for “provincializing Europe” that is gaining influence in the field of world history denies “culture” any significant role in the process of the West’s ascension, and focuses instead on questions of political economy presumably not reducible to cultural attributes. This approach is exemplified by two recent historical works comparing European and Chinese economic development: Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, and Roy Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*. The argument in both books is principally comparative and conjunctural, reminiscent of the explanatory methods of the Annales School. The two authors, both specialists in Chinese history, insist that the level of China’s development at the end of the eighteenth century was roughly comparable to that of western Europe, including Great Britain. Whether with regard to the standard of living, technology, maritime commerce, or state and bureaucratic organization, the similarities were greater than the differences.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, someone observing these two societies at the end of that century would hardly conclude that western Europe – and its cousin in the New World, the United States – would rapidly establish unquestioned global hegemony in the following century.

According to these two historians, the explanation for the unexpected “triumph” of the West cannot be attributed principally to a difference in culture or mentality, long-term factors that are useless for explaining a sudden and dramatic divergence. Instead of the intrinsic qualities cited by Landes and Crosby, Pomeranz and Bin Wong insist on the importance of contingent factors; for example, Britain’s access to the natural resources of the New World and its capacity to export its excess population, as well as conjunctures that permitted Europe to consolidate its economic position and take full advantage of new technologies of production and power.

One apparent problem with this approach for those teaching and researching world history is that it transforms a unipolar world (the West) into a bipolar world – China and western Europe.<sup>33</sup> But more important for our purposes here is the methodological aspect of these studies. Again, in both cases there is a lack of engagement with cultural history, old or new. It is ironic that these two studies – so bold in their criticism of the traditional historiography and its notion of Western cultural superiority – are based on approaches that are not at all methodologically innovative. Yet, this is not so puzzling when we consider that those historians involved in methodological innovation and current theoretical debates, as noted

32 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Roy Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of the European Experience* (Ithaca, NY, 1997).

33. Patrick Manning, “Introduction to AHR Forum: Asia and Europe in the World Economy”, *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 419–424.

earlier, have been accustomed to avoiding these types of macrohistorical questions.<sup>34</sup> Margaret Jacob, in commenting on Alfred Crosby's study of the supposedly unique Western disposition for quantification, opens her remarks by acknowledging this avoidance:

For my generation of historians [...] the big questions in Western or world history became strangely unfashionable. None is bigger than the question of what were the factors that made Western hegemony possible. Indeed, the very notion of Western hegemony, of the domination of much of the world by Western political or economic power from roughly 1800 to 1970, may be said to be so fraught with anger or guilt as to be almost untouchable.<sup>35</sup>

In effect, recent years have witnessed an odd disjuncture between the political and methodological inclinations of historians. On the one hand, there is the renewed emphasis on world history and the revision of macronarratives of Western exceptionalism; on the other hand, cultural history and the micronarratives continue to occupy (if not monopolize) the terrain of methodological innovation. There have been some tentative efforts toward linking one concern with the other. In a recent commentary on the studies by Pomeranz and Bin Wong, the historian of India, David Ludden, noted that chronicles of British imperialism written in the first half of the nineteenth century rarely remarked on the differences or inequalities in economic conditions between England and India; the theme of inequality typically appeared in descriptions of different social sectors *internal* to each society, and not divergences between metropolis and colony. Even the great famine in nineteenth-century India had its "European" counterpart in the similarly horrific Irish potato famine of 1846–1847, with the key difference being that the Irish enjoyed the option of transatlantic emigration.<sup>36</sup>

India, however, also suffered its "great divergence". In 1818, when James Mill published his magnum opus on the history of British India, there was not a single reference to British economic superiority. Three decades later, Karl Marx could refer to this superiority as an established and unquestionable fact. Although Ludden's narrative of India's descent into what

34. One exception would be Patricia Seed, whose work – though increasingly speculative and unpersuasive – does represent an attempt to use cultural studies methods for the consideration of world-historical problems. See her *Ceremonies of Possession in Europe's Conquest of the New World, 1492–1640* (Cambridge, 1995), and *American Pentimento: The Invention of Indians and the Pursuit of Riches* (Minneapolis, MI, 2001).

35. Margaret Jacob, "Thinking Unfashionable Thoughts, Asking Unfashionable Questions", *American Historical Review*, 105 (2000), pp. 494–500; *idem*, "Science Studies after Social Construction: The Turn toward the Comparative and the Global", in Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, pp. 95–120.

36. David Ludden, "Modern Inequality and Early Modernity", *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 470–480. To be more specific, the Irish had the slim but significant advantage of being able to emigrate as free, rather than bonded, laborers.

would eventually be called underdevelopment initially appears to be following the same path as Pomeranz's and Bin Wong's studies, Ludden briskly takes a linguistic turn, concerning himself with the discourses of difference and inequality that constructed a global order in which England and India played very distinctive roles, and that increasingly associated the "poverty" of a particular people with its supposed incapacity or ill-preparedness for modernity. There also emerged the new disposition to equate the parameters of an economy with the borders of the nation; instead of colonialism producing a system conceptualized as a single entity, it became routine to think of England as a rich land and India as a poor land, and one whose people did not (and could not) harbor the hope of sharing the standard of living enjoyed by the average British citizen.

#### THE POSTCOLONIAL DILEMMA

These insights – Ludden's attempt to understand the economic condition of modern India as a result not just of "objective" and quantifiable factors, but of new language and categories – serve as a bridge to the preoccupations of historians working in the area of postcolonial studies. With their roots in subaltern studies, many of these scholars define their project as an effort to rethink history from the point of view of the postcolonial world, including the ex-metropolis. Different from the earlier notion of neocolonialism, a fundamentally materialist concept, these historians recognize the anticolonial struggle and formal political independence as marking significant ruptures with the past, but at the same time recognize that decolonization will be incomplete, even illusory, in a world where imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism persist in other forms, and where hybridity makes the formation of an autonomous cultural sphere unimaginable.<sup>37</sup>

Beginning with that loose set of assumptions, this diverse group of historians has in common a strong critical concern with the meta-narrative of progress that places Europe at the center of all historical processes – a meta-narrative that, despite the reproofs of postmodernists and disdain of new cultural historians, still hovers over historiographical debates and thoroughly informs public discourse. In the widely acclaimed *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty presents the question in a refreshingly frank manner: he laments that he and other historians of Asia (and one could substitute Africa or Latin America) need to pay attention to the scholarly production of their European colleagues, but that the latter need not take into account the scholarly production of South Asian, or African, or Latin American historians. Shifting to a more elevated plane of debate, he makes a similar

37. Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Cambridge, 2001).

point in different form: while there may be other, documentable ways of representing the self or community outside “Europe”, these “will never enjoy the privilege of providing the meta-narratives or teleologies (assuming that there cannot be a narrative without at least an implicit teleology) of our histories”.<sup>38</sup> For Chakrabarty, historicism – and especially the “narrative of transition” – will always end up referring to a Europe that is the originating source for modernity, the nation and, above all, reason.

It is important to note that Chakrabarty, despite his thoroughgoing criticism of the eurocentric narrative, does not intend to denounce, *grosso modo*, the historical implications of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason. In the very final paragraph of his book, he makes a point of insisting, yet again, that “provincializing Europe cannot ever be a project of shunning European thought” – indeed, he characterizes that thought, without irony, as “a gift to us all”.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, he insists that the eurocentric historical narrative, that identifies Europe as the axis of all progress, cannot be viewed as a mere imposition of European imperialism; on the contrary, he cites Third World nationalisms – modernizing discourses par excellence – as active partners with “the West” in the dissemination of this narrative. Hence, the real challenge for Chakrabarty – and for other scholars of postcolonial studies – is to imagine a means of rejecting historicism, whose theoretical subject is always “Europe”, without discarding the categories of political modernity associated with European history.

To demonstrate just how difficult it is to escape the historicist trap, Chakrabarty concentrates his criticism not on works, such as those by David Landes and Alfred Crosby, that exalt exceptional European virtues, and whose arguments are relatively easy to refute, but on studies by historians for whom he has great admiration. For example, he discusses the famous essay by E.P. Thompson on “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism”. In this essay Thompson not only describes the process by which the English worker is obliged to internalize the discipline associated with industrial work rhythms, but also contends that the same is happening, or will happen to, the Third World worker, with the only difference between the English and, say, Indian worker being the passage of secular/historical time. In this respect, the Thompson article is an excellent example of the problematic tendency cited by Chakrabarty: “The modern” continues to be understood “as a *known history*, something

38. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 37. Throughout the book, Chakrabarty makes it clear that he is referring to a “hyper-real” Europe rather than a specific set of nations or populations.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

which has *already happened elsewhere*, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content”.<sup>40</sup>

To be sure, Chakrabarty is even more critical of the early writings of his own colleagues from the subaltern studies school. He disapprovingly cites the foreword of the very first issue of *Subaltern Studies*, which announced the group’s project as:

[...] the study of this *historic failure of the nation to come to its own*, a failure due to the *inadequacy* of the bourgeoisie as well as the working class to lead it into a decisive victory over colonialism [...] *it is the study of this failure which constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India.*

Although the majority of his colleagues today would not overtly reiterate this discourse of “failure”, Chakrabarty insists that the tendency to read Indian history in terms of something that is lacking, of something incomplete, of something inadequate continues to influence the historical narrative, and guarantees that the Indian narrative of transition will always remain “grievously incomplete”.<sup>41</sup>

What, then, is the alternative that Chakrabarty offers? In *Provincializing Europe* there are four chapters that explore aspects of Indian cultural and political life, and of Indian customs and traditions (some of them very recently invented) that, from his point of view, cannot be easily assimilated into a historicist narrative. He begins his analysis by citing Paul Veyne’s distinction between “singularity” and “specificity”.<sup>42</sup> The specific is an example of a general tendency, and thus easily lends itself to an explanatory narrative. The black madonnas discussed above would be an excellent instance of “specificity”, because the meanings they produced changed over time in a predictable manner, once they were situated within a narrative of secularization and racial classification linked to the birth of modernity. In contrast, Chakrabarty seeks out forms of sociability or social practices that are, in his view, singularities – that is, they resist assimilation into a historicist narrative.

These chapters are certainly intriguing, but they are far from addressing the problem that Chakrabarty himself identified as the central issue. Indeed, even if we accept these practices as singularities (and I suspect many readers will not be entirely convinced of this), the result is a series of cultural fragments that serve only to demonstrate that the history of India is not merely a variation of European narrative history. But this does not

40. The discussion of Thompson’s essay is in *ibid.*, p. 48; the second part of the quote (in *ibid.*, p. 39) is from the Australian historian, Meaghan Morris.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32. For a similar discussion in the Latin American postcolonial context of this notion of a historical “not yet”, see Mark Thurner, “After Spanish Rule: Writing Another After”, in Thurner and Guerrero, *After Spanish Rule*, pp. 12–57.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 82. On this distinction, see Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essays on Epistemology* (Middletown, CT, 1984), p. 56.



necessarily advance the mission of “provincializing Europe”. After all, the eurocentric perspective boasts a long tradition of situating elements of “oriental” culture outside of its historicist narrative; in this respect, Chakrabarty’s argument sometimes seems to run the risk of replicating an “orientalist” discourse that would certainly represent no challenge whatsoever to the eurocentric vision of the world.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the cogency of his criticism, it is difficult, within the logic of Chakrabarty’s argument, to discern a strategy that opens the possibility of Europe becoming a province, rather than the center, of history. In a sense, the author is doubly caught in a trap of his own creation. He fully accepts, at the outset, that Indian culture is hybridized and that there is no prospect of writing an autonomous (non-Westernized) narrative of Indian history. According to Chakrabarty, “the very colonial crucible in which Bengali modernity originated ensured that it would not be possible to fashion a historical account of the birth of this modernity without reproducing some aspect of European narratives of the modern subject”.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, he insists that all historical narrative – indeed, the very preoccupation with history, which he regards as a “rational-secular discipline”, defined by the capacity to see past time as separate from present time – inevitably has as its referent a Europe associated with reason and progress. Apparently, for Chakrabarty, there does not exist the possibility of writing a macro-historical narrative of India that could replace the narrative of colonialism.

He illustrates this argument by citing an episode involving the noted Indian intellectual B.R. Ambedkar, active during the era of formal colonialism. In a 1916 presentation at Columbia University on the practices of *sati* and child marriage, Ambedkar lamented the complete absence of historical studies of these practices that could explain “the *causes of their origin* and existence”.<sup>45</sup> Chakrabarty alludes to the words of this venerable scholar (and champion of the untouchables) as if they virtually speak for themselves as an indictment of Ambedkar; clearly, the latter had fallen into the grave error of historicist thinking, and had given in to the (allegedly) Western temptation to ask, and to seek to know, “why”? Yet, while few scholars today would argue, in a positivist vein, that historical research could provide a definitive answer to the questions posed, do we really want to contend that such questions defy any and all historicization? If so, we run the risk of reproducing one of the key discursive underpinnings of European colonialism, conceptualizing “non-Western” societies as “the people without history”, to cite Eric Wolf’s memorably mordant phrase.<sup>46</sup>

43. A similar criticism can be found in Jacques Pouchepadass’s review of Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, in *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), pp. 381–391.

44. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 148.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 248. Italics are Chakrabarty’s.

46. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*.

## THE NEW MACRO-HISTORY?

In this regard, it is important to note that not all historians working in the vein of postcolonial studies share the position advocated by Chakrabarty. At least one of the essays in the volume *Beyond the Cultural Turn* offers an alternative perspective on the dilemma of the postcolonial historian. The author, Steven Feierman – an eminent scholar of African history – is also concerned with the project of provincializing Europe, but he suggests a very different strategy for its implementation. Like Chakrabarty, Feierman opens with a criticism of historians who have attempted to recuperate the “authentic voices” of the African past, and approvingly cites the consensus among historians and anthropologists of the region about the hybridity of African culture, and the consequent futility of any search for “authenticity”. Instead, the new cultural history of Africa has explored the extensive and complex interaction between dominant practices (of colonialism, capitalism, and Christianity), and the local practices defined as “African”.<sup>47</sup> After enumerating, with a tone of apparent approval, the various studies in this vein, Feierman then shifts to a more critical tone, and it seems worthwhile to cite this passage in its entirety:

These innovative contributions are fascinating when taken individually, but they present a profound problem of historical representation when aggregated into a regional historical narrative. The studies of commodities (or of Christian sin) in one place, and then another, and then another can be aggregated only on the basis of their shared relationship to the relevant European category: they cannot be placed within a larger or more general African narrative. What is African inevitably appears in a form which is local and fragmented, and which has no greater depth than the time of colonial conquest, or the moment just before it.<sup>48</sup>

Or to cite the words of the editors of the anthology, Feierman’s essay indicates the pitfalls of “focusing exclusively on the micro level” which “may just leave untouched all the usual macro accounts of the sweeping success of colonial conquest and capitalist expansion”.<sup>49</sup>

While both Feierman and Chakrabarty are troubled by the resistance of historical Europe to “provincialization”, when it comes to potential strategies for breaking down that resistance, the former arrives at the opposite conclusion from his colleague in South Asian history. Referring to his own research on the African tradition of public and collective healing – a tradition repeatedly repressed and revived – Feierman calls for the construction of an African macrohistorical narrative that would privilege the history of bodily practices, which he believes would not

47. Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories”, in Hunt and Bonnell, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, pp. 184–185. Feierman indicates the anthropological roots of this historiographical turn in the work of Jean and John Comaroff.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

49. Hunt and Bonnell, “Introduction”, in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, p. 20.

easily fit within the European linear-narrative framework. Unlike Chakrabarty, Feierman believes that such practices, though presenting significant difficulties for narrative historical representation, would not completely confound the historian's capacity to construct genuinely new narratives. He readily admits that any "regional macrohistory" that resulted from this effort would be very problematic – perhaps as much as the eurocentric narrative – but insists that the only means to begin provincializing Europe would be to create alternative points of reference that are not defined, in the last instance, by the colonial/hegemonic narrative.<sup>50</sup> In short, Feierman is looking for a way out of the postcolonial dilemma through the creation of multiple macrohistorical narratives, instead of through the postmodern rejection of the very notion of macrohistory.

My intention here is not to endorse unreservedly Steven Feierman's intriguing proposal. I think it is indeed likely that any effort to construct a regional macrohistory will either end up essentializing African culture, or will unduly minimize the impact of European culture. But between the nearly total rejection of historical narrative – and especially any attempt to explain "why?" – which I would define as Chakrabarty's position, and Feierman's optimism with regard to the capacity for innovation of the historical imagination, I have to go with Feierman.

For historians of Latin America – my own area of specialization – the project of "provincializing Europe" has been an especially vexing one, given Latin America's uneasy place within the postcolonial paradigm.<sup>51</sup> The region's long history of colonialism and contact, and ambivalence about Western vs non-Western identity, has meant that few historians would venture to emulate Chakrabarty's search for "singularities" not easily assimilated into historicist narratives, or to adopt Feierman's notion of a macrohistory based on practices that transcend the colonial experience.<sup>52</sup> At the same, Latin Americanists themselves have a long history of challenging historical models that locate all agency in the European metropolis; a leading example is Steve J. Stern's now classic critique of Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory.<sup>53</sup> Latin Americanists have also expressed unease about an excessive reliance on "European" or "North American" theories and thinkers, as Michiel Baud

50. Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories", p. 207.

51. For a discussion of Latin America's place within postcolonial studies, see Thurner, "After Spanish Rule: Writing Another After".

52. There are some partial exceptions; a work that has a similar proposal (to Feierman's) for Mexican history is Thomas Benjamin, "A Time of Reconquest: History, the Maya Revival, and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas", *American Historical Review*, 105 (2000), pp. 417–450.

53. Steve J. Stern, "Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World-System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean", *American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), pp. 829–872.

incisively discussed in an earlier issue of this journal.<sup>54</sup> Yet such preoccupations have been significant mainly for scholarly work within Latin America and have had limited ramifications for a rethinking of grand narratives. In a recent forum on Latin America's place in world history, it was generally agreed that the region tends to get short shrift once the narrative/analytical frame broadens beyond the western hemisphere.<sup>55</sup>

Even so, there are some innovative lines of historical interpretation among Latin Americanists that have the potential to contribute to the "provincialization of Europe". One is a critique of the diffusion model of intellectual history. In this model of knowledge dissemination, ideas have an identifiable point of origin and radiate out from the center to the periphery. Sites such as Latin America, therefore, only come into possession of this knowledge belatedly – after it is well-established in Europe and North America – and are often portrayed as misinterpreting or misapplying these new (delayed) ideas. This presumed pattern of "first Europe (successfully), then everyone else (incompletely)" is precisely the narrative/explanatory model that inclines Chakrabarty to forsake historicism altogether. But another, less drastic, way to respond is to reject the very notion that "ideas" have fixed and identifiable points of origin, or that they spread in unilinear fashion.

Julyan Peard, in her study of the nineteenth-century *tropicalista* school of medicine in Bahia, contends that these medical researchers' location within the tropics moved them to question, before their Europe-based colleagues, the fatalistic notion that tropical climate, in and of itself, caused disease and degeneration. Again, given their location, it made sense that the *tropicalistas* were more eager to discover ways in which medical knowledge could intervene to ameliorate health conditions in the tropics than their counterparts in Britain or France – though as medical personnel in those countries became more directly engaged in colonial ventures, they began to pursue similar lines of inquiry. The *tropicalistas*, situated in a society where people of color constituted a majority, also adopted a less rigid and deterministic view of race as a factor in the health of nations when compared with Europe-based medical researchers.<sup>56</sup>

54. Michiel Baud, "History, Morality, and Politics: Latin American Intellectuals in a Global Context", *International Review of Social History*, 48 (2003), pp. 55–78.

55. "Forum: Placing Latin America in World History", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 84 (2004), pp. 391–446.

56. Julyan G. Peard, "Tropical Disorders and the Forging of a Brazilian Medical Identity", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 77 (1997), pp. 1–44. For a more extensive discussion of these issues, see her *Race, Place, and Medicine: The Idea of the Tropics in Nineteenth-Century Brazilian Medicine* (Durham, NC, 2000). I am using the somewhat awkward "Europe-based", rather than European, deliberately. Several of the *tropicalistas* were Europeans residing in Bahia, but once again, their point of origin was less significant than the fact of their identification with the local medical community. I make a similar point about discourses of rationalization and

In a closely related vein, Nancy Stepan's study of the eugenics movement in Latin America rejects the idea that Latin American intellectuals and scientists simply misinterpreted or distorted concepts transferred from Europe to Brazil, Mexico, or Argentina. Rather, she describes a process of appropriation whereby these concepts are both adopted and adapted to local circumstances. Though such adaptations, which rejected more biologically determinist versions of eugenics, may have been based, technically speaking, on "bad science", they were neither arbitrary nor counterproductive in the Latin American context.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, Peard and Stepan are not just narrating instances of local variation, which would be intriguing for specialists but irrelevant to a larger historical narrative. Rather, I would argue that, once we dispense with "point of origin" as a principal concern, we can start to think in terms of the circulation of ideas and practices, and of multiple "contact zones" where modifications adopted in one location, previously identified as on the periphery, can serve to break down orthodoxies (about the scientific foundations of "race" or the causes of disease) in another, more "central", location.<sup>58</sup>

Another line of historical research on Latin America, involving a re-examination of the origins of modernity and the idea of race, challenges the eurocentric narrative from a different angle. Historical anthropologist Irene Silverblatt, in her newly-published *Modern Inquisitions*, contests the claim that the modern notion of race emerges in the post-Enlightenment nineteenth century, arguing instead that it is a product of first-wave Iberian colonialism, and more specifically, of the Inquisition's campaigns to persecute "Judaizers" and to catalogue indigenous peoples. In Silverblatt's study, the concept of race is not just the "barbaric underside" of modernity, but rather is a key constitutive element of modernity, inseparable from the new ways of perceiving the world. In other words, it is not a blemish on the face of modernity – it is the very face of the modernity that emerges in the context of Europe's "civilizing mission".<sup>59</sup>

productivity in my *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in São Paulo, 1920–1964* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), p. 7.

57. Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics?: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, NY, 1991).

58. The concept of "contact zones", derived from the work of Mary Louise Pratt, is discussed in Gilbert M. Joseph, "Close Encounters: Toward a New Cultural History of US–Latin American Relations", p. 5, in Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, and Ricardo Salvatore (eds), *Close Encounters of Empire* (Durham, NC, 1998). These contact zones are not divorced from unequal relations of power, but that power inequality does not mean that knowledge exchange is entirely unidirectional.

59. Irene Silverblatt, *Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World* (Durham, NC, 2004).

## BACK TO THE FUTURE: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The scholarly debate over whether or how to go about provincializing Europe has emerged at a moment when the dilemmas of the postcolonial condition are ever more difficult to ignore, both in the former colonies and in the “Western” nations. The presence of immigrants from the erstwhile empires is ever more apparent and unsettling. And the discord over whether the societies of western Europe (and, with some modifications, North America) can absorb people whose cultures and practices are characterized as “non-Western” is increasingly fierce. Thus, the project of provincializing Europe is, simultaneously, a historical discourse about the postcolonial past and present, and an instrument for constructing a still-undefined future. If we leave unchallenged and intact the eurocentric narrative, the future is clear: gradually, these new collectivities – South Asian, Arab, African, Caribbean – will (or will have to) assimilate to the lifeways and values of the “modern and democratic” societies of the West, leaving behind those customs and values that are not congruent with a certain construction of modernity and citizenship.<sup>60</sup>

Should this assimilationist scenario remain the dominant one, the grand narrative of the rise of the West, and the colonial discourse it spawned, will endure virtually unaltered despite the nearly universal repudiation of the imperial past.<sup>61</sup> Chakrabarty, in referring to British colonial discourse in India, cites two key foundational elements – the concept of progress and the “woman question” – in the construction of Western superiority, and these elements continue to be fundamental to the assimilationist discourse of the postcolonial era. To offer just one small example, an article in a July 2003 edition of the *New York Times* reported on the “honor killing” of a young woman in a rural region of Turkey.<sup>62</sup> The case of the murdered woman is profoundly tragic, and she deserves our unreserved sympathy; I thoroughly agree with Chakrabarty in his criticism of cultural relativism,

60. Most contemporary (Western) public discussions of these “customs and values” treat them primarily as impediments to assimilation, and their practitioners as irrationally, if not dangerously, clinging to tradition. Few academic studies have seriously questioned these assumptions, or explored the meanings of religious practice in these new contexts. One outstanding exception is Aisha Khan’s study of race and religious identity in Trinidad, in which she argues that religious rituals “are sites of dynamism rather than simply static repetitions”, and that the search for knowledge through religion is crucial to allowing South Asian communities in Trinidad to be “agents of their own futures” in a context of cultural mixing; Aisha Khan, *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad* (Durham, NC, 2004), p. 229.

61. I think this continues to be the case despite the recent embrace of the imperialist ethos by some eminent historians. See Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York, 2004).

62. “‘Honor Killings’ Defy Turkish Efforts to End Them”, *New York Times*, 13 July 2003, p. 3, emphasis added.

and his insistence that “we need universals to produce critical readings of social injustices”.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the eurocentric (and racist) implications of the way the *Times* reporter presented the issue: according to the article, the debate over legislation to combat killings “in defense of honor” forms part of an attempt “to resolve a question that has been discussed for centuries about Turkey’s place in the world: in Europe or in the Middle East”. Who could doubt that, in this formulation, Europe represents “progress and civilization” and the Middle East represents “backwardness and barbarity”? As long as this binary – and the grand historical narrative that sustains it – continues informing our visions of the world, Europe will indeed continue to resist all attempts at its provincialization.

63. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 254.