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Logics of History as a Framework for an Integrated Social Science

This essay surveys the contributions of William H. Sewell Jr.’s Logics of History and concludes that the book sketches a compelling agenda for an integrated historical social science. The author first summarizes Sewell’s ontological and epistemological claims concerning social structure and event, history and temporality, and sociohistorical causality. The author then discusses five main areas in which ambiguities in Sewell’s approach might be clarified or his arguments pushed farther. These concern (1) the relationship between historical event and traumatic event; (2) the idea of the unprecedented event or “antistructure”; (3) the theory of semiosis underlying Sewell’s notion of a multiplicity of structures; and (4) the compatibilities and differences between the concepts of structure and mechanism (here the author argues that social structures are the distinctive “mechanisms” of the human or social sciences). Finally, (5) Sewell’s call for “a more robust sense of the social” in historical writing locates the “social” mainly at the level of the metafield of power, or what regulation theory calls the mode of regulation; the author suggests a possible integration of this society-level concept with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of semiautonomous fields.

Almost no one has done more than William H. Sewell Jr. to overcome the mutual misunderstandings, suspicions, and hostilities between historians and sociologists. Sewell was a pioneer of the cultural-anthropological approach to history. His Work and Revolution in France (1980) was at the cutting edge

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of the cultural turn, blending smoothly into social scientists’ reception of Michel Foucault and books like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (1985). Work and Revolution in France was an antidote to the quasi-positivist forms of historical sociology whose view of temporality Sewell criticized as “experimentalist” or “teleological.” Sewell’s debate with Theda Skocpol in the Journal of Modern History (1985) marked the beginning of his effort to elaborate an original ontological and epistemological stance more explicitly. This led to Sewell’s pathbreaking article “A Theory of Structure” (1992), which is one of the most widely assigned essays in graduate sociological theory and methodology courses in the United States today and has served as the point of departure for a number of dissertations in sociology and other social sciences.

Logics of History (2005) is more than a collection of previously published essays. It ties the earlier articles together, reworks and rethinks them, and offers a set of new chapters that sketch an ongoing agenda of bringing a non-teleological version of political economy back into Sewell’s integrated historical social science. Sewell’s book consists of a series of theoretical, epistemological, and methodological arguments and concepts as well as a politics. His theoretical perspective, as it emerges here, can be summarized as a set of ontological and epistemological claims:

- Structure consists of schemata and resources—or in a more recent formulation, as semiotic systems and the “built environment” (ibid.: chaps. 4, 10).
- Structure is dual; that is, it is “both the medium and the outcome” of social practice. Human agency and structure, “far from being opposed, in fact presuppose each other” (ibid.: 127).
- History is uneven, unpredictable, discontinuous, and contingent.
- Temporality is complex in the sense that different structures have different rhythms and paces.
- Structures are multiple rather than singular, and they combine in a “conjunction of structures” in generating events (ibid.: 221). Causality, in other words, is combined and heterogeneous (ibid.: chap. 1).
- The social consists of semiotic practices plus the built environment; that is, the social is a web of semiotic practices that creates and transforms the “range of physical frameworks that both provide matrices for these practices and constrain their consequences” (ibid.: 369).

PQ: No specs for unnumbered list. OK as set?
A historical event is defined as a sequence of occurrences that (a) is “recognized as notable by contemporaries” and (b) “results in a durable transformation of structures” (ibid.: 228).

The signal aspects of Sewell’s methodological or epistemological stance include the following:

With respect to historical temporality, Sewell argues that all historians believe or know, at least implicitly, that time is fateful and irreversible: “An action, once taken, or an event, once experienced, cannot be obliterated” but is “lodged in the memory of those whom it affects and therefore irrevocably alters the situation in which it occurs” (ibid.: 6–7). Fatefulness is therefore a better term than the seemingly innocuous concept of “path dependency,” which was borrowed from economics. Like the seemingly more scientific term scope conditions, path dependency is deployed to deal with the historiographical truism of nonreversible time and to give it a more “scientific” allure. Such a rhetorical move is necessary only against the background assumption that, in genuine science, causal regularities are universal across space and time. It is also part of a set of boundary-policing strategies that social scientists erect against the allegedly less scientific historians. Sewell’s work is an important epistemological rejoinder to these strategies of epistemological domination.

Historical contextualization is essential for all social science (ibid.: 10).

Chronology matters, since events are produced by complex conjunctures rather than universal ones.

The politics of Logics of History are less obvious and need to be made explicit, but much of Sewell’s work has a political thrust. Sewell notes that historians contribute to the denaturalization of the present by describing the radical incommensurability of past societies. He compares this to the way anthropologists denaturalize their own societies through the study of others. Social scientists reveal the arbitrariness of present social practices through genesis explanations.¹

Although I find myself broadly in agreement with Sewell, I want to ask whether his approach might be pushed farther through an engagement with several additional theoretical frameworks: psychoanalysis, Carl Schmitt’s decisionism and theory of the “state of emergency,” the post-Althusserian
theory of the event offered by Alain Badiou, critical realism (Roy Bhaskar, etc.), Bourdieu’s notion of “field,” and regulation theory. Rather than deal with each of these separately, I want to bring them to bear in discussing five interrelated and unresolved substantive points in Sewell’s book: (1) the historical event and the traumatic event; (2) antistructure and the unprece-dented event; (3) semiosis and the conjunction of codes; (4) structure versus mechanism; natural and social causation; and (5) mode of regulation and field.

The Historical Event and the Traumatic Event

Sewell distinguishes historical events from mundane, structure-reproducing occurrences. Like Badiou, and like Bourdieu in his analysis of the field-founding nomothetes like Gustave Flaubert, Sewell deals with the momentous issue of the creation of novel structures, whether in art, politics, science, or love. Sewell’s final, or at least most recent, definition of the event is from “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures” (chap. 8). Half of that definition involves the recognition by contemporaries of the occurrences as noteworthy. One might ask, however, why a momentous change in structure has to be identifiable by contemporary actors.

One of the problems Sewell seems to avoid is that some structures may change due to the accretion of a kind of sociocultural drift, in which numerous microscopic changes finally give rise to a structural change. Certain structures, such as the structure of the “ruin” as discussed by Georg Simmel (1965) and others (Hetzler 1988; Steinmetz forthcoming), are characterized by slow, accretive changes (“ruin time”) that eventually destroy the structure itself. Nor does a change in structure have to be identifiable as such by contemporary actors. In “History, Synchroney, and Culture” (chap. 6), Sewell notes that we need a good synchronic analysis of the structure of a given moment even to recognize when and how a society (or a “moment”) has changed (Sewell 2005: 184–85). This suggests that socioanalysis needs to abstract from actors’ own understandings of a situation, to objectify them (see Bourdieu et al. 1991). This seems to acknowledge the possibility that social-structural changes are not always recognized as such by contemporaries. According to Bourdieu, the founding of the French literary field by Flaubert and Charles Baudelaire in the nineteenth century marked a structural change. But it was not until the twentieth century—indeed, not until
Bourdieu himself—that social scientists in general were able to recognize the broader social significance of the invention of semiautonomous fields such as the cultural ones.² There is a class of structure-transforming events that is not recognized as such during the event long after it.³ In fact, some events may never be recognized at all, like the “innumerable species of animals” that “existed and became extinct before man set eyes on them” (Freud 1961 [1930]: 24).

The first question concerning Sewell’s definition of the event is thus whether it really needs to include consciousness of eventfulness among contemporaries. In the essay on the Bastille as event, “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures,” Sewell (2005: 260) acknowledges that “defining the boundaries of a historical event” cannot rely strictly on contemporaries’ perceptions but “requires an act of judgment.” Another way of posing my question is therefore, which theories, reconstructions, and political interests govern such “acts of judgment” by the historian?

A related problem concerns the traumatic event.⁴ As we know from psychoanalysis, the perception of traumatic events by contemporaries is far from unproblematic. Theorists of trauma regularly describe a failure of signification. Momentous, structure-transforming events may not be recognized as such due to denial or disavowal. For Giorgio Agamben, the category of “bare life” denotes something beyond representation or, as he argues in Remnants of Auschwitz (1999), something that we do not want to represent. Slavoj Žižek (2000: 15–16), following Jacques Lacan, describes September 11, 2001, as the irruption of the Real into the Symbolic order, a moment when the “symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality” were shattered. At the very least, we need to introduce a distinction between conscious and unconscious signification. Here we are dealing with active repression, denial, or disavowal of knowledge and not with its simple lack.

In short, it makes a difference whether social actors themselves understand occurrences as events. What remains unclear is whether, and how, events that remain unsignified or are only unconsciously “recognized” can contribute to the transformation of social structures.⁵ Surely trauma, the unconscious, and the failure of representation are as much part of the human condition, and hence of the human sciences, as semiotically embedded practices. An ontologically realistic theory of structure cannot drive an artificial wedge between these different sorts of human practice.
Antistructure and the Unprecedented Event

Sewell also seems to suggest that *all* practices are derived at least in part from structures that preexist them. Transformations of structure would then be generated at least in part by other social structures. This raises the question of singularities; that is, are there practices or perceptions that do not represent tokens of a general type? More broadly, this points to creativity and the possibility of the unprecedented event. Sociologists since Emile Durkheim have tended to dismiss the idea of the unique or unprecedented event as a hangover from obsolete religious worldviews and as anathema to the development of a secularized science of the social. By contrast, political revolutionaries and theorists of the aesthetic and political avant-garde have seen the unpredictable event as centrally important. Badiou offers a reading of the category of the “event” that is different from Sewell’s. Here the event is described as “absolutely detached from, or unrelated to, all the rules of the situation,” as “a hazardous [hazardieux], unpredictable supplement” (Badiou 2002 [1998]: 67–68; see also Badiou 1988: 202, 215, 1997: 119; Hewlett 2004).

A parallel critique of structure is raised by Schmitt’s decisionistic theory and echoed in Max Weber’s theory of charisma. Juxtaposing *legality* to *legitimacy* and to the *state of exception*, Schmitt (1985: 15) writes in *Political Theology* that “the exception is more interesting than the rule. . . . In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition.” A classic example of pure decisionism, according to Schmitt (1991 [1941]: 28), occurred when U.S. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes was asked for a definition of the Monroe Doctrine in 1923 and replied that it was whatever the U.S. government said it was. Schmitt’s decisionism raises a more general possibility, namely, a proliferation of *decisionistic* logics throughout social space. Taking this one step farther, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) reverse the assumptions of structuralism and insist on the very *unlikeness* of social structuring, the fragility of any stabilized patterns of social practice.

This raises a further question, one that is perhaps closer to Sewell’s historical approach: which historical situations are characterized by a relative shift away from structuration and a freeing up of agency, that is, by a proliferation of “decisionistic” logics? It is unclear whether such periods of the relative weakness or absence of structure fit under Sewell’s rubric of “logics of history” or are instead a necessary complement to such logics.
Semiosis and the Conjunction of Codes

In his chapter “A Theory of Structure” Sewell imagines structure on the basis of the Saussurian notion of language (*langue*), which in his view needs to be combined with attention to material “resources.” In the book’s final essay, “Refiguring the ‘Social’ in Social Science,” Sewell speaks of a *web of semiotic practices*, whose material counterpart is now called the “built environment” rather than “resources.” Here too we are asked to imagine semiotic practices along Saussurian lines as a system of interrelated signs. One of Sewell’s most attractive concepts is his inversion of Sahlins’s “structure of the conjuncture” as a “conjuncture of structures.” The question, however, is how we should imagine multiple sign systems as combining in a conjuncture, and what exactly that might mean.

In Sahlins’s model culture is structured *exactly* like a language, as a single system of interrelated signs. But what does it mean to have *multiple structures*, in Sewell’s (2005: 261) sense, or to argue that structures “form a loosely articulated network”? Does it mean that different individuals and groups in a single linguistic community participate in *different* cultural systems, along the lines of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia* or Valentin Volosinov’s *multiaccentuality*? Should we imagine that a single signifier is connected to different signifieds for different groups? Or should we think of this more along the lines of *multilingualism*, in which people are able to code-switch or speak more than one language at the same time? Another possibility is that a single “denotative” sign (i.e., a single combination of signifier and signified) itself serves as a signifier and is connected to an additional signified—as in Roland Barthes’s (1957) analysis of the structure of *connotation*.

Another option is to think of multiple structures as different segments of the overall sign system. In this case the structuring of gender would refer to the parts of the sign system containing signs of gender, sex, kinship, and the family; the structure of race would refer to signs referring to allegedly biological differences among human groups; and so on. Here too we might complicate the model through heteroglossia, multiaccentuality, or connotation. By imagining culture this way we can make sense of Louis Althusser’s (1977) insight that revolutionary conjunctures should be analyzed on an analogy to overdetermined psychic symptoms or dream symbols. In cases of simple *additive* overdetermination, each segment of the overarching structure retains its autonomy, and events are shaped simultaneously by, say, class,
race, and gender, each of them operating along parallel tracks: an event is jointly determined. In a more Freudian version of overdetermination these separate parts of the structure are understood as intermingling. In logics of overdetermined condensation, multiple signifieds are linked to a single signifier. For example, a word like American or an image like the American flag may combine significations of gender, class, and race, which become blended. In a logics of displacement, a signifier is articulated with an adjoining signified through metonymic logics: words for social class are connected laterally, as it were, to racial meanings, for example, thereby naturalizing inequality.⁹

In short, I am not sure which of these visions of semiosis is implied by Sewell’s idea of a multiplicity of structures. Sewell has long insisted that structure should be construed as having more than a merely “virtual” existence—that it also includes things compiled or realized in external, material form. In Work and Revolution in France Sewell (1980: 11, 13) denied “the ontological priority of economic events” but agreed that changes in “workers’ actions and consciousness” could be explained in terms of the ensemble of the “changing patterns of the larger society—the form of the state, major political battles, the nature of relations between various classes or orders, the ideas that informed public discourse, and so on.” In accounting for the development of the compagnons out of the earlier journeymen’s associations and trade corporations, Sewell (ibid.: 52, 60) pointed not only to the spirit of “discipline and moral rigor” that accompanied the “advance of the counter-Reformation church” but also to changes in the labor market and to the “uniformity of national life,” that is, “the centralizing efforts of the French administration.” In “A Theory of Structure” (1992), Sewell argued that structures include what he called actual resources along with virtual schemas. And in the most recent essay, “Refiguring the ‘Social,’” Sewell (2005: chap. 10) introduces Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of language games to clarify the argument that the virtual and material are both part of structure.

I am not convinced, however, that this solves the theoretical problem at hand. It is not obvious to me that resources, built structures, or the “slabs” used by Wittgensteinian actors can be included in the structural part of human culture—the part that shapes ongoing practice—independed of the meanings people attribute to them. This is not to deny that brute material facts and states of affairs can shape human practice but rather to ask whether they do so as “structure.” Hunger can diminish performance on a task even when it is ignored. The material ruins of a vanished human society can be used as
the physical foundations of a new built environment and thereby indirectly influence its form and stability, even if the meanings attached to the ruins by the vanished culture remain clouded in obscurity. The denotative and connotative dimensions of human culture are not necessarily embedded in its objects. Put differently, objects taken out of context are usually unable to retain or reconstitute the language games to which they once belonged. The only aspects of a material object that can continue to signify independent of any imbrication in a language game are its iconic and indexical dimensions (Peirce 1955)—the bullet hole that continues to index the bullet long after the shooter is gone. But indexical signs are hardly exhaustive of human culture. Indexical and iconic signs cannot make sense of the idea of popular sovereignty—a cultural transformation examined by Sewell—or of the supposed recognition of Captain James Cook as the god Lono by Hawaiians.

Structure versus Mechanism; Natural and Social Causation: Sewell and Critical Realism

Large numbers of social scientists, especially in Britain, have found critical realism (CR), originally developed by the Anglo-Indian philosopher Bhaskar, to be extremely useful in making sense of their own scientific activity and in warding off the twin dangers of epistemological positivism and idealism. Sewell’s theory seems at first glance entirely compatible with CR, which is compatible with his notion of the “duality of structure,” that is, the idea that structure and agency presuppose one another. Bhaskar (1986: 130) argues that mechanisms in the human sciences are “activity dependent,” and the concept of activity dependence is identical to Sewell’s (2005: 129) assumption that social structures “have no existence apart from the practices that constitute them.” Bhaskar (1986: 130) writes, almost identically, that “social structures exist only in virtue of the activities they govern, enable and constrain.” Figure 1, in which the upper level represents “social structures” and the bottom level agents’ “practices” (from Bhaskar 1986: 126), is compatible with (indeed, almost identical to) Sewell’s model (and to Anthony Giddens’s model, on which Sewell originally relied and which was itself indebted to Bhaskar [see Kaspersen 2000: 12]).

CR also agrees with Sewell’s ontological view of the properties of social structures. Social mechanisms, according to CR, are not just “activity dependent” but also concept, time, and space dependent. Concept dependence
refers to the semiotic embeddedness of social practice. Time dependence is similar to Sewell’s (2005: 9) argument that “what entities exist in the social world, how they operate, and what they mean change fundamentally over time.” Space dependence is the claim that social structures are not necessarily universal across all societies and cultures even in a particular historical moment. Sewell’s (ibid.: 10) premise of causal heterogeneity encompasses CR’s notions of time and space dependence.

The main difference between the two perspectives concerns the alternate concepts of structure versus mechanism. Even here Sewell has little disagreement with Bhaskar, who himself often uses the term structure to designate the sorts of mechanisms that generate social events and practices. But there is still the problem of how to deal with material objects and with nonhuman or natural causal mechanisms in the social sciences. CR is a theory of both the natural and the human sciences: a tempered version of scientific naturalism, in which natural and human mechanisms are distinguished along the lines discussed rather than being equated (Bhaskar 1979). CR’s account of the natural sciences deploy a notion similar to Sewell’s “conjunction of structures,” insofar as events in any open system are determined by a multiplicity of mechanisms. Bhaskar explains the logic of the natural science experiment in terms of the openness of the natural “system,” specifically its need to bracket out the operations of mechanisms other than the one under investigation; this means that natural events are also produced, normally, by a conjunction of mechanisms. CR agrees that human practice is codetermined or overdetermined by natural mechanisms, and it embraces the concept of the emergence of psychic and social mechanisms from natural ones. CR speaks of a “rainforestlike profusion” of causal mechanisms shaping human prac-
practice (Collier 2005: 336). Some of these mechanisms would be equivalent to Sewell’s semiotic structures, but others might be natural mechanisms. The word mechanism thus encompasses structures in Sewell’s sense: social structures are the distinctive mechanisms of the human or social sciences. This is a different way of calling attention to the sorts of causality emphasized by Bruno Latour (1999) and actor-network theorists, but it retains the difference between humans and nonhumans, between mechanical and social causality.¹²

Human practice is shaped by both social and natural (nonhuman) mechanisms, which combine in explaining social reproduction and social change. This allows us to imagine three metatypes of “conjunctions” of mechanisms: (1) a conjunction (additive, condensation, displacement) of social structures (which are emergent from but physically dependent on natural mechanisms); (2) a conjunction of natural mechanisms (as in the combined impact of geological and natural-selection pressures on species evolution); and (3) a conjunction of social structures and natural mechanisms, as in Sewell’s own account of the storming of the Bastille and the rise of the category of revolution: the poor harvest and resultant hunger combined with discourses that represented that hunger politically and with discourses of popular national sovereignty in shaping the event. This is less a criticism of Sewell than an attempt to specify further one strand of his argument.

Mode of Regulation and Field

My final point relates to the longest chapter in the book, chapter 2, which is Sewell’s analytic autobiography. Here I wonder whether this analysis might be enriched by a deeper engagement with Bourdieu’s category of the field. Sewell discusses the turn to cultural or linguistic history as the movement of an entire generation, but of course it was not that.¹³ Sewell seems to describe a particular set of locations in the field of history rather than the field as a whole. Academic history is also relatively autonomous from the overarching societal field of power. This means that the end of Fordism will not lead automatically to the end of historical epistemologies that resonated with Fordism. Bourdieu’s (1984) concepts of the hysteresis of habitus and the semiautonomy of fields point to the disjunctures between changes in the overall social space and in specific academic disciplines or other fields.

At the end of chapter 2 Sewell (2005: 80) calls on historians to regain “a
more robust sense of the social.” The “social” here is located mainly at the level of the metafield of power, or what regulation theory calls the mode of regulation. I do not think that regulation theory and Bourdieu are antithetical; indeed, two of the most interesting regulation theorists, Robert Boyer (2004) and Frédéric Lordon (2006), have explored these connections. Regulation theory can be said to describe a partial erosion of the autonomy of fields: the whole point of a regulatory mode is that diverse practices located in very different fields, with differing temporalities, are linked in ways that functionalize them for a single society-level metaproject. Figure 2 attempts to
visualize how different fields of practice were subsumed to differing degrees under the logics of the societal-level project of Fordism in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. The evolution of these practices is shown in figure 2 to be passing through Fordism, while other practices bypass it; this is meant to suggest that the former were mobilized or transformed by Fordism, while the latter were not. Thus religion and art retained a great deal of autonomy from American Fordism, while the fields of ethnicity, state structure, and the like were more deeply affected by their articulation into the Fordist social formation.

A more detailed and accurate diagram would show part of the art world (the bottom time line in figure 2) being subjected to the pressures of the mode of regulation. This would be the “heteronomous” pole of the artistic field, in Bourdieu’s (1995) terms. Figure 3 shows the field of cultural production embedded in the field of power, which is itself located in the overall (national) social space. In the overall space the vertical axis represents the total combined volume of capital (with the greater amounts at the top). The field of power consists of positions with greater-than-average amounts of either cultural capital (positions located on the left) or economic capital (positions on the right).

The field of cultural production is itself divided in similar ways: in the bottom part of the field of figure 3 are positions with less field-specific symbolic capital (CSs-); at the top are positions with greater overall holdings of this field-specific capital (CSs+). The field is also divided on the horizontal axis between the positions on the left, which engage in small-scale production of “art for art’s sake” and have lots of field-specific symbolic capital (CSs+) but are more autonomous from the temporal powers (especially economic ones) and have less economic capital (CE-), and the positions on the right, which are engaged in large-scale production (best sellers etc.) and have less field-specific symbolic capital (CSs-) but greater economic capital (CE+) and which are heteronomous with respect to the economic powers. The left side of the field is further divided between the “consecrated avant-garde” and the bohemian avant-garde.

Figure 3 suggests that different parts of the art field, or the field of cultural production are more or less autonomous from the “temporal powers” (the state, religion, the economy) in the field of power. These heteronomous artistic positions were more closely entwined with the Fordist mode of regul
Figure 3  The field of cultural production in the field of power and in social space
lation during the “thirty glorious years” of postwar Atlantic Fordism from 1945 to 1975. The autonomy of each part of a given field is differentially autonomous from the field of power or the “temporal powers.”¹⁵ We could draw comparable diagrams for academic fields like history and sociology or for the academic field as a whole in the United States (see Bourdieu 1988 [1984]; Burawoy 2004).

An approach combining regulation theory and a Bourdieuan analysis of fields with the achievements of the linguistic and historical turns in social science, can provide a more robust account of the genesis of social events. By combining a historical regulation-theoretical account of Fordism with a Bourdieuan account of internally divided fields, we can break with any residual reductionism that would see Fordism (or post-Fordism) as shaping all practices in a social formation. “Mass consumerism” in figure 2 includes the right-hand side of the field of cultural production in figure 3; “modernism” in the arts in figure 2 corresponds to the left-hand side of the field of cultural production in figure 3.

Conclusion

Sewell is at the center of theorizing in the human sciences. He has proposed a general ontology and methodology for the social sciences and sharply formulated some of the key theoretical problems of our time, including the debate on structure and agency and the theory of the event. My comments here are intended to explore ways of pushing Sewell’s project farther. Indeed, it is the fate of mature social theorists to lose control of their theories, as others are inspired by them and adapt them to their own purposes. In this sense as well, Logics of History elaborates a full-fledged social theory that can stand beside those of Bourdieu, Althusser, Giddens, Bhaskar, and Niklas Luhmann, whose approaches also continue to be transformed by their successors.

Notes

1 On the genesis of social fields, see especially Bourdieu 1995 on the emergence of the literary field and Bourdieu 2001: vii–viii, which deals explicitly with the “historical mechanisms responsible for the relative dehistoricization and externalization of the structure of the sexual division and the corresponding principles of division.”

2 This was important not only for historians of literature but also because the literary
field is the most obvious case of what Niklas Luhmann would call *autoopoiesis*, insofar as the most distinguished writers were writing for and competing with other writers but not for the market or other “temporal” powers (the state, the church, etc.). One major difference between Bourdieu and Luhmann is that Bourdieu’s analysis of fully formed fields allows certain sectors to remain (or become) heteronomous, subordinated to the logics of temporal powers and engaging in large-scale production for the economic market. See Nasseri and Nollmann 2004.

Not all structure-transforming events are *universally* recognized as such at the time of their occurrence. The capacity to label something a major event stems from power in a social field. For example, September 11 has become the date of the attacks on the World Trade Center, when America entered into a permanent state of emergency and war without end, and is not widely recognized as the anniversary of the Chilean coup of 1973, when the structures of Chilean society were irrevocably transformed. Even in American society there is an ongoing struggle over the statute of limitations on commemorative grieving of the events of September 11, 2001.

One would also need to consider the *sublime* object or event, defined by Immanuel Kant as unrepresentable.

Lest the social scientist object that the unconscious is “unscientific,” we should note that even biologically oriented cognitive psychologists have started to study the unconscious (e.g., Berridge and Winkielman 2002; Berridge 2004; Winkielman and Berridge 2004).

See also Turner 1969 on the concept of antistructure.

Sewell (2005: 267) alludes to Weber’s concept of *charisma* in accounting for the moment of cultural invention in the revolutionary National Assembly in 1789. I am not as convinced that Durkheim’s *collective effervescence* serves Sewell well, since Durkheim used that category to account for the *reproduction of culture*, not its reinvention or lasting disruption. The entire literature on “moments of madness” (Zolberg 1972) that stems from Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* seems to me easily assimilated into a straightforward functionalism. Ann Swidler’s (2001) notion of “unsettled” times seems closer to the idea I am presenting here.

Freud (1961 [1930]: 42) defines “as cultural all *activities* and *resources* which are useful to men for making the earth serviceable to them.”

Here I would suggest that we return to the insights in *For Marx* (1977), in which Althusser applies Freud’s analysis of condensation and displacement in dream work to the contingent conjunction of structures producing a ruptural political crisis. Althusser suggested that social practices really can be modeled on the structuralist analysis of language. Social contradictions can be displaced onto adjacent ones in a metonymic movement; they can be replaced by others in a metaphorical logic; or they can be condensed with other contradictions like a multivalent dream symbol. This sort of analysis is possible if all social structures share a semiotic dimension, as Sewell argues. Similarly, Bhaskar (1986: 109–12) argues that mechanisms are prone not just to interact with one another in a causal conjunction but also to *condense* and *merge* in complex ways.
CR is presented in Collier 1994, 2005, and its importance for historical sociology is discussed in Steinmetz 1998. Bhaskar’s original formulations (if not his more recent ones) are based on Kant and analytic philosophy and are not part of a Continental tradition, as implied by one reviewer of this article. That his ideas are far from “opaque” and “tangled” is suggested by the fact that large numbers of social scientists in the British homeland of analytic philosophy have found them extremely useful; see Archer et al. 1998.

It does not follow that material causality is a form of social causality. Sewell’s “resources” or “built environments” can be socially efficacious only to the extent that they are represented, that is, insofar as people perceive them. This is not to deny that material inequality or hidden illnesses can affect social structures, practices, and habitus without being represented culturally. Such unrepresented factors can shape variations in mortality, work productivity, performance on examinations, or bodily hexis, defined by Bourdieu (1977: 93–94) as permanent embodied dispositions. But they are social only insofar as they are perceived or represented, consciously or unconsciously.

An alternative is to retain the word mechanisms for the causal entities of the natural sciences and structures for those in the human sciences. I prefer a term that underscores the fact that both social and natural mechanisms are causally determinative. Alternative terms like causal entity, form, essence, and object are problematic for reasons that, for want of space, cannot be discussed here.

The Social Science History Association itself, dominated by noncultural historians, flourished at the same time as the linguistic and cultural turn in history during the 1980s. As Andrew Abbott (1991) remarked, historical sociology was also marked by a chiastic structure in this period, a split between the quantitative and Weberian wings. Sewell (2005: 60) himself notes the “out of phaseness” of the revolt against positivist Fordist history with socioeconomic realities.

Writers like David Harvey (1989) and Serge Guilbaut (1983) have of course argued that the arts are profoundly shaped by Fordist capitalism. I have revised my view of these matters since publishing the original article from which figure 2 is taken.

Post-Fordism, by contrast, is much less nationally embedded. Bourdieu (1988 [1984]: 173) speaks of the conjunction of independent “causal series” and the “harmonization of fields” that results from the “synchronization of crises latent in different fields.” The problem with this diagram, taken from Bourdieu’s book on the French literary field in the nineteenth century, is that it is nationally based; see Casanova 2004 for a Bourdieuan analysis at the global level. But Fordism was itself a nation-centric formation. This means that the diagram is not misleading in the context of the present discussion.
References


