AHR Forum
When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy

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One cannot make true or erroneous statements about the digestive or reproductive processes of centaurs.

Paul Veyne

An examination of descent also permits the discovery, under the unique aspect of a trait or a concept, of the myriad events through which—thanks to which, against which—they were formed.

Michel Foucault

IN HIS WORK ON THE HISTORY of historical periodization, Reinhart Koselleck describes the experience of “acceleration” as a distinguishing feature of an implicitly European modernity. He figures this process as a speeding-up of the rate at which “one’s own time is distinguished from the preceding time.”¹ According to Koselleck, the rhythm of temporal compression is marked by an increasingly rapid retrospective designation of moments consigned to the past. Starting in the Enlightenment, and especially after the French Revolution, he claims, this accelerated sense of historical time gave rise to a new notion of the present as well. In the sped-up temporality of European modernity, the present is always also a moment of transition to an immanent future. Conceived in the crucible of colonialism and capitalism, Neuzeit established and encapsulated difference in terms of “the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous.”² From the vantage of Europe’s modernity, the pasts of Greco-Roman antiquity and the “Middle Ages” also became “fundamentally other.”³ In Koselleck’s narrative

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³ Ibid., 250.
of modernity’s narrative, the present is demarcated from this past and resolutely oriented toward a new, secularized vision of the future. The concept of “progress” (as well as its paired concept of “decline”) emerged in and underwrote this movement. Grouping together many meanings and experiences under a single term, progress, like the history it authorizes, moves forward in the “collective singular,” even as it produces difference in the form of uneven development.4

Koselleck is invoked here not to unproblematically endorse his claims, but to suggest how normative assumptions about the relationship between time and an implicitly European modernity are written into historical and historiographical writing itself. By historicizing the modern practice of history, Koselleck’s work is a case in point. In his self-referential account, the periodization whose emergence he traces also underwrites his conception of “conceptual history.” In his view, the disciplinary coherence of history depends on a theory of periodization: “without such a theory, history loses itself in boundlessly questioning everything.”5 Taking modern European history as his object of study, Koselleck’s work renders explicit some of the temporal concepts that conventionally govern “modern” historiography: logics of periodization and a view of history as a “collective singular,” as well as attendant ideas of both decline and delay.

The periodizing impulse that Koselleck describes as quintessentially “modern” has, of late, proceeded at an accelerated clip. History-writing seems to have undergone a rapid succession of historiographical moments or “turns.” If the “linguistic turn” initiated a turn to turn talk, it was soon followed by the cultural and the imperial, and more recently the transnational, global, and spatial turns. The problem of how to narrativize these historiographical developments has become a minor historiographical subfield in its own right.6 Ideas of succeeding—and competing—historical epochs are now far more common, as are influential new theories of periodization.7


toriographical turns have proliferated. But in this methodological whirlwind, little attention has been paid to the implicit temporality of turn talk itself. What does it mean to describe a historiographical moment as a “turn”? A brief history of what has come to be called the “linguistic turn” can be useful in addressing this broader question. The reason for undertaking such a review is not to offer a more comprehensive narrative of the “linguistic turn” or to privilege one version of it over another, but rather to question the usefulness of the concept itself. As a look at some key texts in the adventure of this concept will show, it is difficult to clearly pinpoint a singular or coherent “turn” as having taken place. In addition to being reductive and constraining, the temporality of turn talk presumes a supersession of one disciplinary trend by another. While a turn seems to signal innovation and renewal, its spatio-temporal logic more often than not entails foreclosure. By contrast, a genealogical counternarrative can keep multiple strains of critical interrogation open for the historiographical future.

Closely linked to a spatio-temporal logic of supersession is a generational model of historiographical development. In narrativizing the “linguistic turn,” historians have drawn on implicit and explicit arguments about historiographical “generations” as one way to lend coherence to an otherwise diverse and mutually questioning set of methods and epistemologies. But what are the limits of such generational thinking and the logic of supersession that it often implies? What are the contours of a historiographical generation? When and where is it located? These questions can be answered through an exploration of how the idea of the “linguistic turn” took shape within a specific Euro-American historiographical context. The goal is not to reassert the hegemony of this narrative, but to provincialize it.

Gabrielle Spiegel’s 2008 AHA presidential address provides a good point of entry. Her comments can be read as exemplary in their adroit summary of much recent work on the shifting paradigms of postwar Euro-American historiography. Given that she made them as president of the American Historical Association, her remarks carried symbolic and institutional as well as temporally ritualized significance.

In keeping with generic convention, Spiegel’s speech takes stock of recent historiographical trends in order to offer thoughts on the future of the discipline. Her narrative describes the “semiotic challenge” to “traditional” ways of writing history that arose in the period following the Second World War. As she recounts it, this
challenge issued from multiple domains at once: philosophical investigations of language, anthropological explorations of culture, psychoanalytic interrogations of subject formation, and radical questionings of the possibilities and limits of knowledge formation. While admittedly diverse and divergent, these strands of epistemological questioning roughly coincided in time. And, Spiegel argues, they took on great significance for the generation of European and American historians who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s; that generation, in turn, went on to pose new questions about the objects and subjects of historical knowledge. The resulting linguistic, cultural, and poststructuralist “turns” provoked what Spiegel describes as a “massive change in our understanding of the nature of historical reality.”12 Her account of this “massive change” in many ways depends on a grouping together of these “turns.” Such groupings have now become something of a historiographical commonplace. In tracing a genealogy of the “linguistic turn,” we can critically reexamine (and unsettle) these conflagrations.

Spiegel’s argument parallels and draws on another recent account of historiographical trends, William Sewell’s Logics of History (2005). Sewell likewise links “history’s linguistic turn” to broader trends in cultural history, which questioned materialist accounts of historical causality, especially in the field of European social history.13 For Sewell, “a linguistic model of the social” subtended these developments in both cultural history and cultural anthropology. And it is this linguistic model, he claims, that informs “the ontological assumptions underlying contemporary cultural history.”14 But can we make broad generalizations about debates that were themselves intently focused on questions of existence? As recent commentators have noted, “French theory” alone is a problematic assemblage. Distinct institutional and intellectual convergences, in the United States and France, certainly fostered demonstrable personal and philosophical connections between French thinkers and their American acolytes. It was, however, the contentious debate between Heideggerians and Marxists, psychoanalysts and literary critics, structuralists and historians of science, that made those encounters so bracing. When the scope of thinkers assembled under the rubric of the “linguistic turn” is further widened to include Clifford Geertz, Jürgen Habermas, and Quentin Skinner, its coherence becomes still more difficult to sustain.15


13 Sewell, Logics of History, 23. For an examination of the problematic conflation of the “cultural turn” with “cultural history,” see Cook, this forum.

14 Sewell, Logics of History, 331.

It is not enough, however, to merely call for more nuance and complexity. We need to interrogate how the distinct strands of thought highlighting “language” as constitutive of intellectual and social life were braided together. How, when, and where did these presumptive convergences take place? And why describe them in terms of a “turn”?

The model of the “turn” is, of course, itself a trope or turn of phrase. It implies a change of course or direction, a turning away at the same time as a turning toward, which lies at the Latin root of “conversion.”16 Etymologically, it is linked to the notion of “revolution”—and to “lathe” in ancient Greek. Turns can be understood not only to have directional movement, but also as formative: they shape and reshape by cutting away.17 Similarly, the language of linguistic and other “turns” not only describes, it produces a specific understanding of the epistemological challenges described by Spiegel and Sewell (among others) as a discernible historiographical event. Did a “massive change” take place? Was this shift part of a collective, singular movement or historical logic? Who was included, and when?

A number of assumptions have been written into narrative accounts of historiography as a succession of “turns.” Because it “fragments what was thought unified” and “shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself,” genealogy is particularly well suited to the endeavor of revising those suppositions.18 It was in the field of European intellectual history that the language of the “linguistic turn”

formed the Intellectual Life of the United States, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis, 2008). While works of synthesis and summary have long been available, intellectual histories of thinkers associated with “French theory” are just now beginning to appear. These histories are distinguished by their efforts to keep epistemological and political stakes vibrant in and by contextualization. See, for example, Edward Baring, The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945–1968 (Cambridge, 2011); Julian Bourg, After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France (Lanham, Md., 2004); Bourg, From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought (Montreal, 2007); Tamara Chaplin, Turning On the Mind: French Philosophers on Television (Chicago, 2007); Michael Scott Christofferson, French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s (New York, 2004); Stefanos Geroulanos, An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought (Stanford, Calif., 2010); Ethan Kleinberg, Generation Exe

16 OED, s.v. “conversion.”
17 OED, s.v. “turn.”
first emerged. Even in that delimited domain, however, these turns were multiple and mutually questioning rather than singular or synonymous. When European social historians seized on the notion of the turn, further occasions for conflation and confusion proliferated. By recalling the at once diverse and circumscribed contexts in which the expression “linguistic turn” took on meaning, as well as the skepticism expressed by some of its earliest chroniclers, we gain insight into how, when, whether, and for whom this historiographical event took place. The point is not to better secure the epistemological or political foundation of the “linguistic turn,” but rather to interrogate the periodizing impulse on which its postulation and subsequent passing depends. These temporal and disciplinary presumptions show how turn talk constrains our vision of the historical and historiographical future.

As an expression, the “linguistic turn” has an involved history, whose complexity is to some extent belied by the concise movement that a “turn” is supposed to describe. One landmark in this history is the 1967 anthology edited by philosopher Richard Rorty.19 As Spiegel notes in her presidential address, the essays collected in that volume were devoted to contemporary trends in analytical, rather than continental, philosophy.20 The figures that Rorty discussed were thus, for the most part, logical positivists and ordinary language philosophers, not the structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers who are most often cited by historians as having influenced the discipline’s epistemological crisis. The term “linguistic turn” was coined by one of these figures, Gustav Bergmann, who quickly qualified his use of it to distinguish between two competing schools (he called them formalists and anti-formalists) whose relationship, he suggested, was characterized by “much strain and lack of mutual appreciation.” Between these two sides, Bergmann sought out a “middle position.”21

In citing Bergmann, Rorty sought to pose questions about this turn, rather than simply confirm its existence.22 More specifically, in outlining the multiple claims (and contestations) of “linguistic philosophy,” he interrogated whether it had, in fact, achieved a thoroughgoing disciplinary “revolution.”23 In this sense, his invocation of “a turn” was ironic. By highlighting the diversity of its proponents’ arguments, he pointed to the role of “linguistic philosophy” (especially that espoused by Rudolf Carnap) in rejuvenating debate within the discipline. But Rorty also resisted the purported turn’s more hyperbolic and totalizing claims about purifying philosophical language of metaphysics. As Jürgen Habermas noted, the collection of essays thus served an ambivalent double purpose: “In summing up a triumphant progression, they are intended at the same time to signal its end.”24 Analogous qualifications and

23 Ibid., 33.
24 Jürgen Habermas, “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn,” in Habermas, On the Pragmatics of Com-
ambivalence can be detected among intellectual historians who adopted and adapted the language of the “linguistic turn.”

Martin Jay was one of the first to usher the expression into the domain of history proper with his 1982 essay “Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate.” As in Rorty’s case, Jay’s use of the term contained within it an element of critical questioning, as is indicated by the essay’s title. That questioning was borne out in his careful exploration of the plurality of contemporary philosophical investigations of language. Indeed, his piece aimed principally to distinguish between several “linguistic turns” in order to determine which paradigm might prove most fruitful to intellectual historians. Thus, while pointing, at the outset, to a generalized interest in the “question of language,” Jay insisted that “linguistic turns . . . may take very different directions.”

These directions included: first, ordinary language philosophy inspired by Wittgenstein; second, the “very different” path taken by Saussurean linguistics; and third, a “very different linguistic turn,” namely the German hermeneutical tradition. The latter—which Jay further subdivided into the existentalist tradition (represented by Hans-Georg Gadamer) and the Critical Theory tradition (taken up by Habermas)—was the main focus of his essay.

Importantly for Jay, then, there was no single linguistic turn. Indeed, the critical force of his essay depended on this very point. After indicating certain parallels between respective linguistic theories, he rejected the viability—and indeed the desirability—of a Gadamerian “fusion of the horizons.”

His analysis of these differences left open the space for critical evaluation and ongoing argument. It refused uniform pronouncements and unreflective endorsement. Thus, while the philosophies under discussion by Jay were distinct from those that concerned Rorty in 1967, both authors shared a desire to question the coherence, decisiveness, and indeed desirability of a definitive disciplinary “turn.”

While posed by Jay in 1982 as an open-ended prospect, by 1987 the “linguistic turn” had, according to John Toews’s often-cited article “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn,” already taken place within the field of Anglophone writing on European intellectual history. In the wake of that shift, Toews discerned a shared problematic among some rather sharply distinguished (in both senses of the word) figures: Martin Jay and Dominick LaCapra; Keith Baker, J. G. A. Pocock, and Quentin Skinner; Allan Megill and Mark Poster. While Jay’s essay was a work of analysis, Toew’s (as befitting a Hegel specialist) is a work of synthesis. To put it in more vernacular terms, one splits, while the other lumps. Toews thus claims that “although no easily discernible, common position emerges,” the authors grouped together in
his essay can “be seen as participating in a common discourse.” Their commonality lies, in his view, in a shared effort to understand the difference and dialectical unity of “meaning,” on the one hand, and “experience,” on the other. In seeking to comprehend this “common discourse,” Toews was, of course, doing his job as the writer of a magisterial review essay. And he was also participating in the very trend that he describes. For, as he goes on to claim, one consequence of the “linguistic turn” was “a focus on ‘discourse’ as an organizing term for conceptualizing and practicing the history of meaning.” Toews, in other words, appeals to the framework of “discourse” in order to explain what these authors all shared.

The conceptions of discourse that Toews details are, however, quite distinct. First there is a Foucauldian archaeological conception articulated by Mark Poster, of which Toews is quite critical. In this guise, discourses are “impersonal, anonymous, ‘objective’ systems of rules” that ultimately construct “experience.” Then there is the concept elaborated by exponents of early modern Anglo-American political theory (Skinner, Pocock), whose focus was on reconstructing linguistic contexts in order to better understand authorial speech-acts. Toews is somewhat more partial to this school, which seemed to cast discourse as more dynamic than static in its provision for creative reappropriations and individualized linguistic performances. Or, as he remarks, this model “implies the communicative context of an intersubjective community of free individuals.” Finally, there are histories that trace the trajectories of a specific problematic, such as Martin Jay’s account of “the discourse of totality” in Western Marxism. While approving of Jay’s refusal to reduce contextualization to intertextuality, Toews finds the work lacking in its limited effort to relate individual authors’ lives (their “experiences”) to their works.

Toews’s account of the “linguistic turn” is thus structured by a suspicion of what he views to be the dangerous excesses of textualism. He wonders, specifically in reference to Dominick LaCapra’s critiques of reductive contextualization, whether “the theory of linguistic density and complexity of texts, contexts, and their apparently circular relationships” has “outrun its possible utility.” The “linguistic turn” in this guise is a dead end. It is thus unsurprising that Toews worries in his conclusion about a new form of “reductionism,” and indeed “a new form of intellectual hubris”: that of the “wordmakers who claim to be the makers of reality.” By foregrounding “experience” as irreducible to a purely discursive frame, he aims to keep that hubris in check.

The terms of Toews’s argument about the linguistic turn are familiar and have been the subject of a fair amount of critical commentary, including by authors cited in the piece. But there are two historical points that might be made regarding this
pivotal essay. First, in casting the linguistic turn as part of a “common discourse,” Toews’s essay played a productive, rather than merely descriptive, role. In other words, it both helped to consolidate the apparent coherence of the “turn” and issued a set of normative judgments about the epistemologies he associated with it. Few subsequent pieces of writing on the topic can forgo its citation, even though the quite sizable corpus under review was relatively circumscribed to the field of modern European intellectual history (with some somewhat marginalized American exceptions). For example, the essay notably drew no connection between the intellectual historical “linguistic turn” and contemporaneous historical interest in either anthropology (Clifford Geertz’s name does not appear) or feminism.

Second, Toews’s concluding appeal to generational logic articulated this “common discourse” with a presumptively shared experience. He figured “intellectual historians of the younger (post-1968) generation” as particularly implicated in the shift. Seeking to restore a balance “lost in recent oscillations between opposing reductionisms,” he called on his contemporaries “to recognize and examine the recent turn away from experience as a specific response to particular events and developments in the history of experience.”

Toews appealed to the model of the “generation” in order to hold the strains of “discourse” and “experience” together in his own account. The suggestive correlation between “events . . . in the history of experience” and this generation’s “common discourse” of the linguistic turn remained unspecified. He left it for other historians to speculate on those epistemological, social, and political connections.

European intellectual historians thus played an important early role in both introducing and critiquing a variety of questions and methods now associated with the “linguistic turn.” But the consecration of the phrase as a shorthand for what was increasingly framed as a profession-wide wave of revisionism and epistemological crisis took several more years to catch on. According to Peter Novick’s That Noble Dream, for example, intellectual historians raised new epistemological questions that paralleled other critical interpretive interventions—from Geertzian anthropology to critical histories of gender and race. For Novick, however, these parallel—occasionally intersecting but as often conflicting—moves did not constitute a general and generalized “linguistic turn.” Indeed, the central narrative of Novick’s book is one of divergence and fragmentation, not convergence—a kind of “fall” into disciplinary


anarchy and anomie—as his final chapter, titled “There Is No King in Israel,” so clearly intimates.35

By the end of the decade, however, debates surrounding the crisis of materialist explanation in modern European social history also came to be described in terms of a “linguistic turn.”36 As contemporaries often noted, the radical transformations of 1989 reinforced this connection and may have contributed to a new conception of that turn as a distinct event—a watershed moment in the history of the discipline of history.37 As Michael Geyer and Konrad Jarausch noted in their preface to a special issue of Central European History, “History had come unstuck from all sorts of framing devices that historians had devised in order to nail it down.”38

Linkages between revisionist, post-Marxist histories and a critical interest in language were, of course, not new. In 1980, a skeptical editorial in History Workshop Journal described how “for some time now linguistics—or an appeal to its authority—has been widely used to challenge materialist theories of knowledge.”39 And in an influential 1981 review of François Furet’s landmark revisionist text Rethinking the French Revolution, Lynn Hunt drew parallels between Furet’s reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Derrida’s account in Of Grammatology.40 (Furet later denied the connection, and for many Derrideans, the feeling was mutual.)41

Hunt pursued similar parallels in the 1989 introduction to her New Cultural His-

35 Novick thus wrote in his final chapter: “By the 1980s more and more practitioners were reluctantly concluding that even by the most generous definition, history no longer constituted a coherent discipline; not just that the whole was less than the sum of its parts, but that there was no whole—only parts.” Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity” Question in the American Historical Profession (Cambridge, 1988), 577.


37 The editors of History Workshop Journal claimed: “The idea of a progressive socialist history has been seen by many to be thrown into question, not just by events in the communist East, but also by developments within academic studies in the West . . . scholars now often turn to theory—predominantly literary theory—for answers to larger questions, rather than to the historical archives.” “Editorial,” History Workshop Journal, no. 32 (Autumn 1991): v. One might note that in German, the historical transformation associated with reunification and the “linguistic turn” are both described as a Wende.

38 Michael Geyer and Konrad H. Jarausch, “The Future of the German Past: Transatlantic Reflections for the 1990s,” Theory, Practice, and Technique, Special Issue, Central European History 22, no. 3/4 (1989): 229–259, here 229. As the editors explain, the volume was based on a conference that was held in October 1989, but authors were given time after the events of November to revise their contributions. Jane Caplan’s piece, a sensitive exploration of different strands of post-Marxism and poststructuralism, did not rely on the trope of the “linguistic turn.” She was, in fact, suspicious of how, when framed as a “battle,” “more exacting definitions and distinctions may go by the board.” Caplan, “Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction: Notes for Historians,” ibid., 260–278, here 260.


41 Christofferson, French Intellectuals against the Left, 266. On the limitations of Furet’s theory of
tory anthology. She juxtaposed—without, however, synthesizing—a series of approaches: (a) post-Marxist political histories; (b) Michel Foucault’s genealogies; (c) Geertzian anthropology and Annales-style histories of mentalité; (d) literary theory; and (e) gender history. Hunt did not, at the time, use the trope of the “turn” to describe the shared foundations of cultural history. Furthermore, she argued that some trends exercised more force than others, with anthropology’s influence “reigning supreme” and Foucault’s “anti-method” and agenda remaining “idiosyncratic.”

The influence of literary theory (meaning the largely French thinkers who came to be associated with “literature departments” in the United States), she claimed, had, until that point, remained mostly the preserve of intellectual historians. The field is represented in the volume by Lloyd Kramer’s essay on Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, whose respective approaches, as Hunt underscored, differed significantly: “the former emphasizes unity; the latter, difference.”

With the dissemination of the term, however, debates surrounding revisionist political histories and critical histories of gender and race, as well as those in intellectual history, came to turn around it—and to become collapsed and confused. The “turn” was increasingly described as something that historians should or should not take, as if it were a road or a means of transport (leading off, especially when conflated with poststructuralism, into an implicitly wild unknown). Framed by scare quotes that implied an unspecified citation and ironic distance, references to this turn became increasingly commonplace in historiographical essays. In the 1989 volume of Central European History, Thomas Childers described German historians as “caught on a conceptual roundabout, uncertain whether to . . . take the ‘linguistic turn’ into uncharted territory.” In the often-cited “Is All the World a Text?,” Geoff Eley claimed that only “a relatively small number of historians” had, like Joan Scott, “taken the train to the end of the line, through the terrain of textuality to the land of discourse and deconstruction.” This poststructuralist train was not exactly a bandwagon. And while Eley endorsed “the basic usefulness and interest of poststructuralist theory,” he nonetheless described “the rest of us” as “partly there for the ride, partly curious to see where it goes, and not at all sure we’ll stay very long at the destination.” The “turn,” in other words, was becoming part of a disciplinary spatio-temporal imaginary.
Despite the ludic tone of Eley’s proclamation, the debate over whether to take this “train” or “turn” was quite fierce, not least in the pages of the British journal *Social History* (of whose editorial board Eley is a member). Such debates were, in fact, as much about the purported turn’s identity (and indeed coherence) as about whether historians should get on board. There were, in other words, multiple trains, and they did not lead in the same direction. In revisiting these exchanges not only between advocates and critics but also among purported advocates, we get a firm sense of important and politically salient differences between them, especially with respect to the future of Marxism.

Reactions to Gareth Stedman Jones’s revisionist history of Chartism spurred the debate. But there were significant methodological and epistemological differences between Stedman Jones and other self-proclaimed proponents of the “linguistic turn.” For some, such as Patrick Joyce and James Vernon, Foucault’s critical rethinking of “the social” itself was an indispensable point of departure. Stedman Jones, by contrast, argued vigorously against what he believed to be Foucault’s excessive weight and influence (which, it will be recalled, Hunt’s introduction had denied): “If a linguistic approach to history is to be further developed, it is important to refuse this identification. The ‘linguistic turn’ did not begin with Foucault, nor did it—nor does it—in any sense depend upon Foucault’s version of what it meant. Foucault’s theory was only one of many possible variants of a linguistic approach.” In his view, Foucault’s writing remained overly indebted to Marxist narratives and categories (the bourgeoisie, in particular), even as he took distance from them. For Stedman Jones, “the implications of 1989” were clear: historians needed to “assess and move on from the unsorted debris left by the death of Marxism.”

Against starker pronouncements, Eley and *Social History* editor Keith Nield argued for nuance and complexity—and against a wholesale abandonment of Marxism. Taking Patrick Joyce as their main target, they sought to split some of the opposing camps. Rejecting an “all-too-familiar simplification” (“an undifferentiated ‘Marxism’ is assumed to be ‘past’ in some irretrievable and un lamented way”), they reaffirmed by invoking Michel de Certeau’s figuration of Foucault’s theories as akin to a car driving along a cliff. Importantly, for Certeau, what lay over the cliff was not pure discursivity, but rather a non-discursive space where “the usually reliable foundation of language is missing.” Certeau, “Micro-Techniques and Panoptic Discourse: A Quid Pro Quo,” in Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis, 1986), 185–192, here 189. See also Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff*. For another analysis of these metaphors, see Sewell, “Language and Practice in Cultural History.” In debates around Subaltern Studies, the problem of poststructuralism was framed in terms of multiplicity and incommensurability—hence the metaphors of attempting to ride “two horses at once.” Gyan Prakash, “Can the ‘Subaltern’ Ride? A Reply to O’Hanlon and Washbrook,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1 (1992): 168–184.

Marxism’s historical and intellectual plurality. At the same time, they warned against the flattening of “postmodernism” into a “seductive and spurious singularity.”

The problem, of course, is that the phrase “linguistic turn,” especially when preceded by a definite article, lends itself to homogenization. The fields and methods of inquiry that became grouped under the moniker had distinct trajectories—at the level of institutions, networks, and publications, as well as intellectual influences—and different agendas, although they did on occasion intersect. To return to our prior example, Toews’s review concentrated on a circumscribed set of intellectual historians. It did not register how questions about “discourse” and “experience” were under discussion in other domains, such as European social history, feminist history, or Subaltern Studies.

For example, William Sewell and Joan Scott each published essays that directly addressed the relationship between “experience” and discourse, taking The Making of the English Working Class as their point of departure. Sewell’s essay pointed to what he viewed as the unsustainable theoretical weight that E. P. Thompson’s book placed on experience as the crucible of working-class identity. He argued that Thompson’s narrative lacked a necessary and parallel account of transformations in “class discourse” (transformations that he describes in terms of structural shifts). If Sewell supplemented Thompson’s account in order to make it more theoretically coherent, Scott’s essay privileged analysis. It raised questions about the coherence of class as a category of identity, and hence of the experience that Thompson posited as its ground. Scott’s and Sewell’s essays thus worked in different directions. But what their arguments shared—in contrast to Toews—was a pointed questioning of experience as a coherent concept or category in historical writing.

Also writing in 1988, Rosalind O’Hanlon drew a parallel between debates surrounding the category of experience in Thompson’s work and presumptions about identity, experience, and recovery in the writings of the Subaltern Studies school. In a powerful review essay, she deconstructed presumptions about the unicity of experience and its autonomy in ways that paralleled Scott’s critique of Thompson. O’Hanlon’s critical account of Subaltern Studies, while informed by thinkers such

50 Ibid., 363.
51 Toews did discuss parallels between trends of new historicism, the social history of ideas, intellectual history, and social history in a later essay, but he was hesitant about grouping them together under the term “linguistic turn.” Indeed, he remarked at one point, with respect to the influence of Geertzian anthropology, “For historians this turn to interpreting the past in terms of a process of reconstruction based on cultural units as systems of signification has often been conflated in both revealing and confusing ways with what is sometimes called the ‘linguistic’ turn.” John E. Toews, “Stories of Difference and Identity: New Historicism in Literature and History,” Monatshefte 84, no. 2 (1992): 193–211, here 196.
53 Joan Wallach Scott, “Women in The Making of the English Working Class,” in Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York, 1988), 68–90. My point is not to suggest that Toews should have known about or cited this work, which was published after his own. It is instead to indicate both the echoes and the differences between these parallel discussions.
as Raymond Williams, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Toril Moi, and Gayatri Spivak, was not cast in terms of a presumptive opposition between discourse and experience. Nor did she reduce these thinkers to a shared position or movement. She rather drew on their resources in order to raise questions about the Subaltern Studies project, namely its implicit effort to restore the autonomy of subaltern experience.\(^{54}\)

Joan Scott eventually brought these parallel discussions together in her well-known 1991 article “The Evidence of Experience,” in which she discussed historians’ recourse to “experience” as a foundational category. Naming Toews as one example among several, Scott questioned the broad framework opposing language and experience on which his account was based. Rather than reasserting the autonomy of the linguistic over and above an “irreducible experience,” she interrogated the oppositional (and homogenizing) terms in which Toews had cast the debate.\(^{55}\)

Written in part as a response to Scott, Kathleen Canning’s 1994 essay “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn” echoed Toews’s title, and to some extent his argument, especially with respect to “experience.” At the same time, Canning claimed the autonomy—and even precedence—of feminist history’s “linguistic turn” from that taken in intellectual history, which had its origins in “the influence of Foucault, Derrida, and/or Lacan.”\(^{56}\) Feminist history’s “linguistic turn” was thus, for Canning, distinct from rather than dependent on poststructuralist theories, of which she remained suspicious. In a double move, she both questioned the “turn’s” coherence and reasserted a discourse/experience opposition. She thus wrote: “‘the linguistic turn’ (like the term postmodernism) has become a catch-all phrase for divergent critiques of established historical paradigms, narratives, and chronologies, encompassing not only poststructuralist literary criticism, linguistic theory, and philosophy but also cultural and symbolic anthropology, new historicism, and gender history.”\(^{57}\)

While questioning the coherence of the “turn,” Canning nonetheless reasserted the opposition between “discourse” and “experience” that Toews used to characterize

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\(^{54}\) Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 1 (1988): 189–224. O’Hanlon’s subsequent arguments with Subaltern Studies were more pointed. With David Washbrook, she would go on to figure the “anti-foundationalist” strain in Subaltern Studies as insufficiently attentive to class and capital, and hence as politically compromised—i.e., as “the bad conscience of liberalism.” O’Hanlon and Washbrook, “After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1 (1992): 141–167, here 166. See also Prakash, “Can the ‘Subaltern’ Ride?” In her account of Subaltern Studies in Latin American history, Florencia Mallon was more measured in her assessment of the tensions between a Gramscian focus on hegemony and subaltern experience, Foucauldian accounts of the microphysics of power, and a Derridean focus on the instability of meaning. Following Prakash, Mallon described these tensions as politically and intellectually productive rather than disabling. Notably, these authors, while focused on the relationship between Marxism and anti-foundationalism, do not use the rhetoric of the “linguistic turn.” Mallon, “The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1491–1515.

\(^{55}\) Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 788.


\(^{57}\) Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn,” 369.
intellectual history’s “linguistic turn.” She sought, by contrast, to identify mediating terms (the body, agency) as a way beyond this presumptive opposition. Vacillating between deployment and disavowal, Canning’s usage exemplified historians’ ambivalent relationship to the epistemological questions the “turn” supposedly entailed. By the mid-1990s, the term had become routinized—oddly meaningful despite (or was it because of?) its ambiguousness. In a sense, the disciplinary fixation on the “turn” can be seen as a fetish in the psychoanalytic sense. It simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed epistemological challenges and strenuous arguments, thus overcoming and containing a perceived threat.\(^{58}\)

The point here is not to recycle old debates, but rather to highlight the gaps and fissures that existed at the very moment that this decisive turn was supposed to be happening. Historians have nonetheless continued to use the language of the “turn” and figured it to be both a general and a generational event. As Eley recalled it in 2005, “In the world of historians, this was the much vaunted ‘linguistic turn’—a general discursive shift in the rhetoric and practice of the profession from ‘social’ to ‘cultural’ modes of analysis.”\(^{59}\)

Indeed, recent accounts suggest that the shift became “hegemonic.”\(^{60}\) The claim may seem surprising, given that, as Spiegel notes as an aside in her presidential address, “the actual number of historians actively engaged with these questions was probably relatively small in comparison to the field as a whole.”\(^{61}\) Spiegel nonetheless asserts here—and elsewhere—that the impact of the “turn” was so broad-based and significant as to have radically modified the kinds of claims that all historians are now prepared to make. Citing Sewell, she reads the recent “revisionist” turn away from semiotic analysis and toward questions of practice and agency as demonstrative of this prior prominence. In a sense, these newer developments are supposed to prove the previous moment’s (albeit now fading) “hegemony.”\(^{62}\)

Given the diversity of the trends associated with the linguistic turn as well as the constantly contested character of its reception, Spiegel’s invocations of the first person plural possessive pronoun “our” and her repeated references to a collective “we” of historians are at once striking and significant. “We all sense that this profound change has run its course,” she remarks. And further: “we need some explanation of how and why this sea change in history occurred.” The goals of her analysis, then,


\(^{59}\) Eley, A Crooked Line, 125.

\(^{60}\) The introduction to the AHR Forum on A Crooked Line thus describes how, by the late 1980s, “Many, if not most, of [social history’s] practitioners had turned to cultural history, which soon achieved hegemonic status”; American Historical Review 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 391–392, here 391.


\(^{62}\) Ibid., 3. Sewell figures the publication of Hunt’s 1989 volume as a marker of cultural history’s “hegemonic position.” Sewell, Logics of History, 48. Neither Sewell nor Spiegel elaborates on their usage of hegemony as a way to describe the “turn’s” trajectory. It is worth recalling the genealogy of the term offered by post-Marxist theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in the 1980s. They drew implicit historical parallels between the “postmodern” present and hegemony’s emergence in Gramsci’s work at another moment in which Marxist historical narrative was in crisis. Drawing on Foucault, they argue that hegemony emerged to “fill a hiatus that had opened in the chain of historical necessity.” Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (London, 1985), 7.
are simultaneously retrospective and prospective, as she hopes to “offer some insights into what remains valuable as we move forward into a new era of historical concerns.” Her account of the historiographical past is therefore marshaled toward a vision of the historiographical future. She thus signals the topics that have been put on the agenda of history’s future (into which we have now moved): questions of economy and technology; diaspora and displacement; empire, territoriality, and the transnational. It is difficult to argue with Spiegel’s assessment of these current trends. But how should we understand the relationship between thematic shifts and theoretical or epistemological reorientation?

It is important to underscore that Spiegel positions herself as favorably disposed to the “semiotic challenge” and as anxious to preserve some of its insights for future historical practice. Structured analytically and metaphorically by a generational model, her speech at once indicates a waning interest in the “linguistic turn” and traces the afterlife of her cohort’s contributions. On the one hand, she suggests that their work is done, now that “the ‘semiotic challenge’ has been addressed, absorbed.” On the other, she signals the importance of preservation, the need, at the very least, to “appreciate and employ what poststructuralism has taught us.” But does her narrative of generational supersession work against rather than toward that end?

A model of successive and specific historical “generations” is at the heart of Spiegel’s analysis. Remaining within a Euro-American frame, she correlates the radical epistemological questioning of postwar (French) philosophy with the ineffable sense of loss specific to the second post-Holocaust generation. The connection, she argues, is not directly causal, but a displacement, or “alchemy,” exemplified in the thought of Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s insistent assertions of unstable origins, present absences, and impossible wholes thus exemplify, in her view, “an entire generation’s understanding of the wreck of history attendant upon the war and the revelations of its horrors.” This is in many ways a provocative analysis, especially given the skepticism with which historians so often treat Derrida’s thought (when they treat it at all). The argument is, however, difficult to assess, in part because Spiegel never clearly explains who belongs to this generation and why. Even if we accept “post-Holocaust” as a chronological marker (although questions might be raised about this, too), its status as a generational demarcation is more fraught. How are we to map the contours of the “generation[s]” formed by “the event” not only chronologically, but also geographically? Even scholars who focus specifically on Holocaust survivors and their children worry over the importance of drawing careful distinctions along the lines of age, nationality, and experience.

64 Ibid., 10–11.
65 Ibid., 8. For a brilliant account of the multiple factors—at once institutional, religious, philosophical, and political—that influenced the “young Derrida,” see Baring, The Young Derrida and French Philosophy.
Spiegel’s account is likewise notable for the starkness with which it adopts not only a generational, but also a distinctly Euro-American frame. She focuses on how the metaphysical concerns of the post-Holocaust generation intersected with political and institutional developments, especially in the United States. She thus suggests elsewhere that “it is worth noting how tied to the experiences of a single generation these transformations appear to be.”68 Here again, her argument parallels that of Sewell, and in certain ways Eley’s *A Crooked Line*. And she indeed draws on their generational analyses as evidence for her case.69 For Spiegel, the rise of the “linguistic” and/or the “cultural” turn can be explained by a generational convergence between “post-Holocaust” metaphysical concerns, on the one hand, and the more directly political, economic, and institutional trends traced by Sewell and Eley, on the other. How can we historically assess this recent “turn” to a generational account of historiography itself?

In a 1973 essay, “The Historical Problem of Generations,” Alan B. Spitzer wrote: “Each generation writes its own history of generations.”70 His exploration of this problem was marked by self-awareness, as he invoked at the outset a proliferation of work on “generations” in the wake of contemporary student revolts. Spitzer drew on an earlier set of discussions, going back to the 1920s, on the usefulness of the generation as a category of historical analysis. That earlier debate had included the likes of sociologist Karl Mannheim, who sought to refine the concept, and historian Lucien Febvre, who questioned its explanatory power.71 In other words, the notion of generation in history is tied to a distinct intellectual and political history. Pierre Nora, for example, locates the advent of “generational consciousness” in and with the historical rupture of the French Revolution, and he depicts it as a decisive, and constitutive, moment in specifically French historical consciousness. In citing these moments, Nora thus asserts that “generations are powerfully, perhaps even primarily, fabricators of lieux de mémoire, or mnemonic sites, which form the fabric of their provisional identities and stake out the boundaries of their generational memories.”72 Featured in a book devoted to French national “realms of memory,” the claim is intended to be performative: it seeks to create what it describes—including the construction and consignment of the “generation of 1968” to the space of memory.73

Generational arguments are not only a powerful way to carve up historical time. They also reassert the boundaries of collective identity, not only in specific times, but also in specific places. As a result, the construction of a “generation” cannot be assumed as self-evident: it is a productive, rather than merely descriptive, concept. For some time, history, as a discipline, was supposed to be internally riven and scat-

68 Spiegel, “Revising the Past/Revisiting the Present,” 18.
69 Ibid., 15.
73 On the stakes of this “generational” account of May 1968 in France, see Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago, 2002).
tered in multiple directions—in part as a result of the innovations (or incursions) that came to be associated with the “linguistic turn.” But recent accounts of the past historiographical generation (those presumed to have participated, in one way or another, in the “turn”) strikingly reassert community. Does this narrative consign that once-troubled past to history in order to reassert the coherence and comity of the discipline in the process?74

The historiographical “generation” dovetails conveniently with a coherent conception of historiographical “turns.” It presupposes collective new beginnings as well as eventual endings. In its wake, space is made for new “turns,” now that, according to Spiegel—and others—the postwar revisionist moment is “effectively over.”75

In order to explain this now-passed postwar moment of historical revision, Spiegel draws on Michel de Certeau’s account of how “historiography separates its present time from a past.”76 This model of the “historiographical operation” is taken from his now-classic work The Writing of History, which was first published in 1975. The book has a complex relationship to the thematics of memory, loss, and death that Spiegel aims to historicize. As she explains, he articulates the death and ritual mourning of the past with a vital present and future. For Certeau, then, “to mark” a past is to make a place for the dead, but also to redistribute the space of possibility.” Historiography uses “the narrativity that buries the dead as a way of establishing a place for the living.”77 An analogous logic underlies the aim of Spiegel’s address: by describing and explaining a temporal and historiographical scission, its narrative arc is supposed to make room for younger historians by historicizing the recent historiographical past.

But even as it describes this generational movement, Spiegel’s argument indicates the impossibility of creating sharp chronological (and methodological) ruptures—not least in her own (re)turn to Certeau as guide. She thus rejects an absolute break between the historical past and future, and suggests that the insights of “postmodernity” cannot be “so easily jettisoned.”78 And indeed, Certeau’s own account of historical writing highlights a similar difficulty. He forcefully challenges models of discrete periodization, even as he describes the logic implicit in the “historiographical operation.” In his view, the past’s intelligibility in terms of distinct moments or periods is based on procedures of selection. The apparent coherence of those moments remains fragile, however, as the return of what he describes as repressed “shards” and “remainders” can always “discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of ‘progress’ or a system of interpretation.”79

Revisiting some of the crucial early moments of writing about the “linguistic turn” can help us recall some of those remainders to the surface. The complex debates that

77 Ibid., 100.
took place in the 1980s and 1990s—about discourse and subjectivity, or the relationship between “linguistic” structures, agency, and experience—show that there was no singular “turn.” These discussions did not occur once and for all, in an orderly logic of progression and supersession, or uniformly across the discipline. To take another example, the chronologically contemporaneous theoretical and methodological ferment associated with Subaltern Studies figures unevenly and problematically in European historians’ retrospective accounts of the “linguistic turn,” despite certain shared attributes, Marxist revisionism, and a concern with symbolic representation among them. Eley thus writes: “this South Asian historiography both presaged and paralleled the course of the ‘linguistic turn’ in the West.”

The assessment is provocative because it posits parallelism and indeed priority to “post-colonial” historiography, rather than reasserting the rhetoric of temporal delay that figures such as Dipesh Chakrabarty have so powerfully critiqued. Eley does not posit incommensurability between these histories (he notes, for example, a shared Gramscian heritage), but he nonetheless presents the “linguistic turn” as a specific moment in Euro-American historiography, not as a cross-disciplinary trend.

If historians have returned to these questions of late, it is because they are as concerned about history’s future as they are about its past. Sewell’s *Logics of History* is exemplary in this regard. In the chapter titled “The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History,” he strongly states his goal: “to revive some of the lost virtues of social history without abandoning the tremendous intellectual gains attendant upon history’s linguistic turn.” This is an engaged history, both politically and personally: the future of the discipline—and his relationship to it—is at stake.

Sewell construes a linguistic theory of the social to be the shared epistemological basis of “cultural history”—and the principal source of its rupture from “social history.” In order to map future directions, he reconstructs the political effects of Euro-American historians’ linguistic epistemologies in the postwar decades. His narrative traces two parallel paths in order, in the end, to suggest a causal relationship between them. His “internalist” account of this recent history is a truncated prosopography, in which he groups himself together with Lynn Hunt and Joan Scott. Without sideling his own contributions, Sewell argues that “the rapidity of the rise of cultural history in the 1980s and the widening of the epistemological fissure dividing it from social history were disproportionately fueled by developments in women’s history.” Here he credits feminism, the “critical and deconstructive historical analysis of central cultural categories—sex and gender,” with helping “to radicalize and energize cultural history as a whole.”

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80 Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 146. This argument is more difficult to make with respect to Latin Americanists’ appropriation of the subaltern model.
81 Chakrabarty, * Provincializing Europe*.
84 Ibid., 47, 48. For a contrasting account of the recent history of historiography, see Scott, “History-Writing as Critique.”
Sewell’s social and structural account recapitulates arguments by Fredric Jameson (hence the reference to the “political unconscious”) and David Harvey—themselves first formulated, it should be recalled, in the 1980s—on the historical convergence of postmodernism, post-Fordism, and neoliberal ideology. Following their analyses, he writes: “I think it is essential to recognize that the cultural turn was also fueled, in ways we were essentially unaware of, by a secret affinity with an emergent logic of capitalist development.” According to Sewell, history’s turn to language and culture misrecognized late capitalist logics of history. In his generational analysis, “1960s rebels” misread their historical moment: they attacked a “collapsing Fordist order” when their actual target should have been the emerging “order of globalized flexible accumulation.” In this melancholic narrative, the “turn” was politically well-intentioned, but ultimately misguided.

In order to restore clarity to historical—and political—vision, Sewell calls for a (re)turn to social science: “Critical awareness of the potential complicities between contemporary forms of capitalism and a purely cultural history seems to me an essential condition of clearheaded and efficacious epistemological, methodological, and practical work in historical studies today.” A number of historical and political assumptions are written into this call, not least that his generation’s “linguistic turn” produced what he describes as a “purely cultural history” and that its practitioners were blind to this complicity. Sewell’s narrative ends up minimizing the history of dissension in social theory and historical practice, even though their implicit and explicit political effects were chief differends in those debates. Like Spiegel, he seeks to preserve some of the theoretical and critical insights generated in past decades. But by turning the “turn” into a shared generational event or moment, Sewell also suggests that it is a time whose time has come—and gone. We are collectively urged, instead, to write histories of late capitalism’s present that understand deeper (structural) logics rather than misreading (or, worse, perpetuating) its surface cultural effects.

Sewell thus offers us a cautionary tale about the dangers of untimely thinking. His call for disciplinary reorientation in the present assumes periodization, generational unity, and implicit world-historical movement. But does this narrative hold together? What happens to this story when the presumptive methodological, generational, and global coherence of the “linguistic turn” is contested? The evidence, when examined closely, suggests that the “linguistic turn” was not a coherent moment. It cannot be conceived as the intellectual property of a single historiographical generation or consigned to a collective past.

It is unclear, for example, how feminist analysis coincides with Sewell’s claims of generational cecity. According to his account, feminism’s focus on the historical con-
stitution of sex and gender lent cultural history political energy, but it also entailed a radically linguistic—and hence critically limited—epistemology. The “micro” focus of histories of gender and sexuality (and in particular, those influenced by Foucault) were, he suggests, ill-equipped to address broad structural economic and social change. For Sewell, an emphasis on the plasticity of cultural categories is politically symptomatic rather than analytically trenchant.90

This view of feminist history and theory is not only inexact, it is politically limiting. Consider how a focus on gender and sexuality helped to establish the historical and historiographical significance of feminized consumption alongside masculinized production.91 Today, feminist analyses, and especially those that draw on Foucauldian accounts of governmentality, provide signal insights into the contemporary dynamics of consumption and capitalism, neoliberalism and globalization. While by no means unified by a single position or approach, such work demonstrates how gendered constructions of agency, desire, and sexual victimization are integral to the contemporary restructuring of markets, state sovereignty, and international order.92

What is more, it helps to illuminate what anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli has

90 On the link between Foucauldian microphysics and the eclipse of structural analysis, see ibid., 59. On the eclipsing of “the social” by a focus on “culture and gender,” in the case of History Workshop Journal, see ibid., 65. Daniel Rodgers pursues an analogous line of argument about the divisive effects of microanalyses of power, including by feminists, as part of a broader dynamic of social fragmentation in America; Rodgers, Age of Fracture (Cambridge, Mass., 2011). For a critique of this elision, see Samuel Moyn, “Studying the Fault Lines,” Dissent 58, no. 2 (2011): 101–105, here 103. In a parallel argument, Nancy Fraser has suggested a “pervasive, subterranean elective affinity” between feminism and neoliberalism; see Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” New Left Review 56 (March–April 2009): 97–117, here 108.


recently described as the distinct “grammars” of temporality—orientations toward futurity as well as civilizational rhetorics of “pastness”—that structure the differential distribution of neoliberalism’s, or what she refers to as late liberalism’s, global effects. In sum, it is crucial to recall that such feminist analysis remains a vital historical and political resource.

The temporalizing logic of turn talk forecloses these critical possibilities rather than creating new horizons. It implicitly consigns still-vibrant analytic resources to a periodized posterity and politically compromised epistemology. What is at stake here is not the positive or negative legacy of a purported “linguistic turn,” but the usefulness and disadvantages of such fetishized “turns” for history’s life. If narratives of generational supersession represent analytical and political foreclosure, what kind of horizon does the re-membering of this past open up?

Here again, feminist analysis remains salient, not least because feminists have examined the at once epistemological and political limits of “generational thinking.” Histories of feminist “generations” or “waves” regularly grapple with questions of temporality: how to articulate past achievements, present-day urgencies, and visions of an alternative future. Should the new challenges in the present be understood as a sign and symptom of past or current failures? As Judith Roof has noted, “generational” models of feminist history ironically remain beholden not only to an oedipalized and reproductive conception of family, but also to a linear conception of historical time. In recasting historical temporality, Roof suggests that “generations” no longer appear as the most accurate or productive framework for articulating past, present, and future: “In a paradigm where history, governed by linear time, becomes the cause of ensuing events, the concepts of originality, pioneer, tradition, and precedent make sense. But if we challenge the very notions of time and history that ground these ideas, generation becomes an insignificant term in the creation, recreation, sharing, and proliferation of feminist knowledges.” Thus “generational thinking” may limit the proliferation of knowledge tout court, not least by consigning the critical resources of feminism to a chronologically and politically exhausted moment.

Most pressing now, as we proliferate histories of our present, is the need to unsettle rather than confirm what appear to be increasingly sedimented narratives. Genealogical analysis is particularly helpful for doing this. In one sense, there is a family resemblance between genealogy and generational thinking, at least when kin-
ship relations are naturalized and universalized. But when viewed as a critical technique for mapping relations (and non-relations), genealogy reveals the construction and constriction of generational ideas. While overtly engaged in and by questions of the present, it does not seek to discipline thinking toward a singular historiographical future.

In reading the entrails of recent debates, we can see the composite character of the centaur known as the “linguistic turn.” Following Paul Veyne’s proposition, one cannot make true or erroneous statements about such animals. Rather than seeking to uncover the beast’s hidden nature, we have seen how it came into being—as both myth and fetish. The linguistic turn—and other purported “turns”—might be better understood not as historically inevitable disciplinary trajectories, but as specifically located, imaginatively cast, at once multiple, overlapping, and dynamic constellations. In this astrological rendering, there is also space for “untimely thinking,” or what Walter Benjamin, citing Friedrich Nietzsche, called a “star without atmosphere.”

96 See, for example, David Schneider’s pathbreaking and controversial critique of the genealogical presumption in anthropology in Schneider, A Critique of the Study of Kinship (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1984).


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