Week 6: New Social History (Historicizing Race, Religion, and Culture)

Travelling along the path of the "new social history" blazed by E.P. Thompson,[1] Thomas Holt, Ronald Grigor Suny, and Joao Jose Reis advocate an enhanced sensitivity to the fundamental historicity of professedly eternal themes: namely, race, politics, economics, and religion. Like Thompson, all three historians use the example of culture to demonstrate the very alterability of the long-standing structures that have come to define the "social" approach to historical inquiry, in turn reinvigorating the role of human agency. Thus, these historians perform an admirable task: one of reconciling the social history of the 1960s and 70s with the dominant cultural history of the 80s and 90s, placing the historical discipline on the threshold of a new era.

Thomas C. Holt's essay, "Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History," takes up the task of historicizing the seemingly timeless phenomenon of racism.[2] In doing so, Holt identifies two energizing mechanisms of racist attitudes, both of which involve what he calls "marking". First, marking entails "the act of representation that is the marking of race," or in other words, an acknowledgement of racial difference, of the Other.[3] Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, marking

[1] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).
[2] Thomas C. Holt, "Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History," *American Historical Review* 100.1 (Feb., 1995).
[3] Ibid., 3.

occasions "the act of inscription that is the marking of history."[4] Here, the author introduces his historicization project. For Holt, and everyone who abhors the evils of racial prejudice, the matter is not merely academic: ahistorical interpretations of racism falsely naturalize the condition, effectively forestalling any attempt to eradicate this historical disgrace.

Having laid out the problem, Holt goes on to entertain possible solutions. The first step involves laying bare the origins of racist attitudes. Seeking out theoretical models with which to explain racism, Holt immediately rejects the main premises of the Freudian "psychological paradigm" as exceedingly essentialist. Once again, the problem lies with the normalization of racism: "Those who take Freudian theory most literally are especially prone to naturalize racist behavior; that is, generalized over time and space, the presumably innate processes of child development come to function must like biological explanations."[5] Holt's preferred approach, the "cultural paradigm,"[6] uses social constructivist theories of race as a launching point. This interpretation "trace[s the origins racism] to some aspect of the specific cultural or social formation in a given society or to the evolution of society as a whole. Racism is seen to be embedded in a social formation that is materially, culturally, and historically specific."[7] However, despite the inherent strengths of the cultural paradigm, the relationship between individual players and their wider social environment requires fleshing out.[8]

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 5.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 6.

Holt attempts to solve this long-standing historiographical problem by locating the nexus of individual behavior and collective ethos at the level of the "everyday."[9] This is the site where "race is reproduced via the marking of the racial Other and [where] racist ideas are naturalized, made self-evident, and thus seemingly beyond audible challenge."[10] That said, Holt is not content focusing solely on the day-to-day enactment of racism; he enlists the work of Martin Heidegger and Henri Lefebvre to expand his conception to a worldwide level. In this view, the particular and universal constantly play off each other:

> The global and the everyday…are interactive and mutually constituted, and neither takes causal priority over the other. At any *given* historical moment, the everyday has already been created within a determined global space, and global relations are already the product—at least in part—of everyday existence. It is at the global level that human activity achieves its greatest efficacy and most enduring significance. It is at the level of the everyday that global phenomena are enacted.[11]

To illustrate his point, Holt refers to two historical examples of global racist ideology propagated at the level of the everyday. The first example has already been studied in detail: the complicity of average Germans in the crimes of Nazism. Here, Holt seems to be making a silent affirmative nod to Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil," particularly when he writes that "the more profound aspect of [German workers'] moral irresponsibility is the fact that in the small gestures of everyday life they reenacted and sustained a vision of the world that made mass extermination ordinary, perhaps even possible. What is most chilling is the routineness of their culpability."[12] Shifting to American history, Holt cites the example of white adoption and exploitation of black

[9] Ibid., 7.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 10.

forms of entertainment, specifically the minstrel show, to demonstrate how local popular culture broadcasted larger social anxieties, "reinforcing black stereotypes and institutionalizing racist ideas and images" in the process.[13] Hence, the dissemination of racism at the everyday level reinforces its significance on a global scale. Although Holt's historicized study of race admonishes against a naturalized view of the racial prejudice, the practical value of his work only goes so far. In the end, the author merely exposes several roadblocks in the way of liberation; he laments that he sees no clear path to racial harmony.[14]

Whereas Holt's work historicizes racism, Ronald Grigor Suny's discussion of late-twentieth-century historical trends historicizes politics.[15] Like Holt, Suny adopts a vocational approach to the practice of history, seeing himself not as a passive observer of events, but as an active participant in altering the course of history. If the purpose of Holt's work is to help create a world free of racial prejudice, Suny's goal is to help install a viable alternative to capitalism. Also like Holt, Suny's meta-historical article attempts to reconcile social and cultural methodologies.

To begin, Suny sketches out a genealogy of cultural turn historiography, locating the genesis of the turn toward the cultural in the work of E.P. Thompson. For Suny, Thompson's emphasis on the human element in labor history, rather than obliterating the subject (as Althusserian Marxists tended to do), made history into an "arena in which

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[12] Ibid., 14.
[13] Ibid., 16.
[14] Ibid., 18.
[15] Ronald Grigor Suny, "Back and Beyond: Reversing the Cultural Turn," *American Historical Review* 107.5 (Dec., 2002).

humans transmute structure into processes."[16] Thus, cultural history, somewhat paradoxically, owes a certain debt to the humanist Marxist tradition.

Next, Suny neatly enumerates the central tenets of cultural turn historiography. Following Suny's summary, the hallmarks of the cultural turn are a suspicion of social naturalism, the autonomous subject, grand narratives, and objectivity coupled with a tendency to problematize culture, emphasize the symbolic aspects of culture, and expose the power dynamics that govern social relations.[17] Although these themes and sentiments have undeniably maintained their standing in the historical profession, on the eve of the new millenium historians were eager move "beyond the cultural turn"[18]—to branch off and explore fresh avenues of research. One such avenue, according to Suny, is "a reassessment of the place of the material and the structural, or what is often referred to as 'the social,'" in light of what the cultural turn has taught us.[19]

Interweaving social and cultural approaches to history, Suny isolates what he perceives to be the most fruitful contributions of each trend in order to formulate a utopian political vision. In the work of Thompson and Geertz, Suny admires the opening of many possible futures, the "recovery of alternative worlds that held up visions not of why we had arrived at where we were but of where we might have gone."[20] From the social tradition, Suny clings to the radical historicist strain of Marxism, or "the view that all social formations (capitalism included) have their own history and evolution, their birth, maturity, and death, and their replacement by other forms"[21]—a sort of non-

[16] Ibid., 1479.
[17] Ibid., 1484-1487.
[18] Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
[19] Suny, 1488.
[20] Ibid., 1499.
[21] Ibid.

teleological historical dialectic. As Suny sees it, this dramatically revised Marxism paired with poststructuralist self-reflexivity provides fertile ground for the sprouting of a post-capitalist political reality. In sum, by historicizing politics we avoid the pitfall of artificially "naturalizing" any one political system. As Suny insists, there are myriad possibilities at our disposal.

Although Joao Jose Reis' study of "a particular, extraordinary episode" [22]—the 1836 Cemiterada rebellion in Brazil—necessarily lacks the transformative potential so evident in Holt and Suny's more contemporarily relevant pieces, the book does a fine job historicizing religion and economics from the perspective of culture difference, thereby reconciling social and cultural historical currents.

Reis begins by contrasting his interpretation of the rebellion with that of earlier historians. Specifically, he laments that past historiography of the event has revolved excessively around material motivations and a misguided civilization versus barbarism trope: "Historians who have mentioned the Cemiterada believe it was motivated by a combination of economic reasons and a backward expression of religious fervor."[23] Indeed, as Reis freely admits, religious and economic factors were pivotal, but the author warns that "[i]t should not be concluded that an ancient religious culture served merely as an ideological varnish for strictly materialistic motives…[rather,] the ritual and material economies were two sides of the same coin."[24] Adopting a culturally sensitive outlook, Reis shows how the clashing religious and economic interests--manifested in the context

[22] Joao Jose Reis, *Death Is a Festival: Funeral Rites and Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, trans. H. Sabrina Gledhill (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 12.
[23] Ibid., 11.
[24] Ibid., 305.

of funerary rituals--positioned the Bahian brotherhoods against the city's provisional government, medical experts, and entrepreneurs.

In 1836, Bahia was primed for rebellion. As Reis describes, "[t]he city's growing population—mainly people of African descent—faced a severe economic crisis. This state of affairs, together with social injustice, racial prejudice, and contemporary religious, liberal, and nativist ideologies, explains the civil unrest that gripped Bahia in the 1820s and 30s."[25] After Brazil attained independence from Portugal in 1822, culture was becoming increasingly politicized; tradition was declining, and secularization was on the rise.[26] Secularization was facilitated by the increasing polarization of the Catholic faith: popular, or Baroque Catholicism, was being encroached upon by a tamer Romanized Catholicism. While the former—the faith of the brotherhoods—was inspired by residual paganism that saw the living as connected to the dead, the latter—the preferred faith of the modernizers—favored the separation of the living and the dead. As it follows, the brotherhoods wished to maintain the tradition of churchyard burials, while the modernizers vouched for the construction of a cemetery.[27] Thus, as Reis plainly demonstrates, considerations of religion factored into both groups' rationales for opposing or supporting the cemetery; this was a matter of cultural nuance, not a struggle between the forces of fanaticism and progress.

Likewise, the question of economic motives in the rebellion was not as unidimensional as traditional historiographical treatment of the subject has suggested. Just as two conceptions of religion were counterpoised in the Cemiterada rebellion, so were two mutually opposed economies. The elaborate funerary rituals that coincided with

[25] Ibid., 38.
[26] Ibid., 214.

popular (Baroque) Catholicism provided myriad economic opportunities for people from various strata of Bahian society (e.g. poor women wailed, Franciscan friars sewed shrouds, etc), but the lower orders and the brotherhoods benefited particularly. Hence, when the ruling elite banned churchyard burials and granted three entrepreneurs a monopoly on the financial rewards of death, the brotherhoods erupted in protest.[28] But even here, Reis is careful to note, economic and religious interests were intertwined in the same thread. For instance, Dominican monks, who sympathized with the plight of the brotherhoods, anticipated that "the decline of worship, the closing of churches, the abandonment of faith, the rebellion of the faithful, and even the destruction of the state" would result as a result of the switch to cemetery burials.[29] All told, the negative economic ramifications of the cemetery monopoly certainly played a role in inciting the Bahian brotherhoods to rebellion, but these material concerns were only instrumental insofar as economic ruin necessarily entailed spiritual decline. Again, social structures are inseparable from the cultural vagaries that undergird them.

[27] Ibid., 289.
[28] Ibid, 294.
[29] Ibid., 288.