

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, Michael O' Malley. *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present, and Future*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 464 S. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-11506-1; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-11507-8.

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## J.W. Cook u.a. (Hrsg.): The Cultural Turn in U.S. History

Discussions about the “New Cultural History” – about its variants, its status in the field of historical studies in general, its relevance in relation to other areas of historical research – have reached a new phase. During the 1990s, highly controversial debates erupted with often polemical undertones along lines that either celebrated or condemned the newly emphasized categories of cultural meaning and symbols contested in multi-layered power relations. These controversies eased down significantly with the new millennium, first of all because discussions now became less theoretical but were then based on actual research done by (new) cultural historians who produced well (or not so well) outlined case studies. These books and articles established the “New Cultural History” if not in the mainstream of international historiography but still as a visible and dynamic element in the field which soon became very attractive and promising especially to younger scholars. Now, almost another decade later, it is time for a critical retrospection, for outlining traditions, accomplishments, missed opportunities, and failures. Over the period of that development, though, one feature of the debate remained constant in the U.S.: Its mostly national frame of reference. While German evaluations of the “New Cultural History” looked for international, first of all Anglo-American or French examples and models, but generally stripped them from their national meanings and implications, debates in the U.S. for instance, often closely related to ongoing “culture wars”, almost ignored ideas and arguments elsewhere.

“Past, present & future” – the subtitle of this anthology edited by James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman, and Michael O'Malley already indicates that their book fits precisely into this new trend of critically assessing the developments in historical studies after the linguistic turn. Moreover, this collection of altogether 14 essays is truly anchored in U.S. history and both the academic as well as political discussions that have influenced historians working inside and outside American universities. The project leading to the book began in September 2005 with a conference held in honor of Lawrence W. Levine; the volume, in result, somehow throughout keeps its “Festschrift”-character. But the consistent reference to Levine, who passed away in fall 2006, nevertheless contributes significantly to the main argument the editors and authors want to stress in their contributions: That the lines of tradition and the roots of the “New Cultural History” in the U.S. are older and strongly integrated in the evolution of a liberal-progressive paradigm of historical writing since the 1960s, something very much influenced by Levine and his work. The author of important books like “Black Culture and Black Consciousness” (1977) or “High Brow, Low Brow” (1988), Levine was some kind of a new cultural historian *avant la lettre*. Together with colleagues such as Herbert Gutman, Warren Susman, or Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, he linked his political sympathies with the New Left to an uneasiness with regard to the quantitative approaches pushed by the first generation of social historians. “Agency” was the key term to that group of scholars, Levine and others were researching those historical actors who only left

ambiguously different and fewer primary sources than those groups studied before, and they did this with an emphasis on culture as a motor of historical development. Their understanding of culture was one of shared values, shared traditions, shared experiences, and shared goals among social groups conceived as coherent, and they asked for more sensitivity to “the contingencies of individual perception, language, imagery, and day-to-day experience” (Cook/Glickman, p. 16).

Reminding their readers about this legacy is, on the one hand side, a very welcome contribution to ongoing debates about the place of the “New Cultural History” in the general field, for it clearly underscores two important and often forgotten aspects – first, that a perspective on things considered cultural grew out of methodological concerns, and second, that it was inextricably related to political issues. That taken seriously enriches a critical assessment of the “New Cultural History” and its relevance to the status of the whole discipline. On the other hand though, many texts included in “The Cultural Turn in U.S. History” deploy this reference to Levine and his generation of historians too celebratory and at times even in what might be termed a nostalgic notion. Here the reasons why, starting in the mid-1980s, younger scholars turned away from the collective actions of seemingly stable and coherent oppressed cultures towards questioning categories of structuring altogether, towards looking at contradictions among certain groups and challenging ideas of coherence by embedding language, institutions and actors in a multi-relational web of power relations, remain imprecise. “Back to the Future”, one gets the impression, is the title of the program to which the editors and most of their authors subscribe, and although they certainly have a point in putting “agency” and “resistance” to the foreground again, they do so by giving much too little credit to many fine studies conducted over the last twenty-five years.

This becomes evident when looking at some of the volume’s texts more closely. Two pieces frame the whole project, and from the perspective of critical retrospection, they are the most interesting, too. In their long introductory essay, James Cook and Lawrence Glickman suggest “Twelve Propositions for a History of U.S. Cultural History.” In this programmatic proposal they sketch out their basic point that what became to be known as “New Cultural History” is part and parcel of “a much longer twentieth-century trajectory” (p. 7). Proposition after proposition, they do a fine job in mapping out the development of U.S. historiography over the last eight decades, pointing to the consistent relevance of some idea of “cul-

ture” to that overall project. But although the authors emphasize the importance of the linguistic turn and name its main theoretical assumptions, they somehow miss the most crucial point – that the insistence on the limits of representation through language alters historiography in the most profound way for it advances a mode of thinking different from those prevalent before the linguistic turn. If the historical subject can no longer be postulated, but a) has to be analyzed in its genealogy, and b) with reflecting upon the active role taken by the historian in the act of writing, neither traditional historical method nor mid-range theories adopted from the social sciences will do any longer.

Karen Halttunen’s article, “The Art of Listening,” closes the frame and concludes the anthology. In it, Halttunen picks up where Cook and Glickman left and evaluates the volume’s essays with the editors’ program in mind. Although she is sympathetic to the attempt to rescue the older traditions of cultural history (the phrase “Art of Listening” is a direct reference to Levine’s own idea of confronting primary sources), in her assessment of the individual contributions she is not reluctant to name the many aspects of theory and method that conflict with the emphatic approach to cultural history advocated in the “Twelve Propositions” and in most of the individual essays. Halttunen is right in underscoring the valuable and original research done by the eight articles grouped together under the heading “Practicing Cultural History”, and she also highlights correctly the insights established in the four essays in the “Agendas for Cultural History” part. Still, she also manages to point out problems.

What exactly are those difficulties that come to mind? A first one has something to do with the book’s structure – the agenda setting essays are placed after those demonstrating actual research in cultural history. This leads to the double notions of lacking coherence plus conflicting agendas, for the two big parts of the anthology do not really correspond with each other. Whereas the chronologically arranged articles of the “Practicing” part generally emphasize individual agency and a more micro-historical understanding of cultural history, the latter ones from the “Agendas” part focus on more structural frameworks of culture. Moreover, there is a certain disbalance among the texts: While “race” as a category of analysis is prominent in many contributions, “gender” is strikingly often missing. Additionally, the model of the linguistic turn deployed as a reference point for critique seems to be a rather dated one. With the exception of the “spatial turn”, other more recent trends trying to add

to or enlarge the framework of post-linguistic turn research in the humanities are mostly ignored – something especially striking since, for instance, the turn to Visual Culture Studies is especially prominent among U.S. historians.

Still, outlining inherent problems of the overall anthology does not mean that the individual contributions are not great pieces of research or thought provoking arguments in ongoing debates. To name only a few highlights in the volume, very subjectively chosen on the basis of this reviewer's own interests: Two essays on the Great Depression by Elliott Gorn ("Re-mem-bering Dillinger", p. 153-183) and John Kasson ("Behind Shirley Temple's Smile", p. 185-216) are dedicated to advance interpretations of the ambivalent character of "star person" in an era whose culture still usually remains iden-

tified with escapist cinema and New Deal art. Ellen Tyler May's article on the politics of fear during the Cold War ("Gimme Shelter," p. 217-241) provides for an excellent example of emotional history. And in the "Agendas" section, Nan Enstad's piece "On Grief and Complicity" (p. 319-341) makes an interesting read alongside Judith Butler's recent book "Frames of War: When Life is Grievable?"

To conclude, "The Cultural Turn in U.S. History" is a strong piece of scholarship because it raises controversial but stimulating arguments in the ongoing debate about the relevance of the "New Cultural History". It deserves to be discussed widely among those scholars interested in advancing cultural history as a project both academic and political.

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