

## Review Article

# *New Historicism: Taking History into Account*

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THE NEW HISTORICISM is about ten years old. In the turmoil of contemporary theory, shelf-life may not equal half-life. New historicism still excites readers and remains fully charged. Rather than speculate at length on the future of this loose confederacy or multivalent movement, I would like to discuss its attractions and accomplishments and mention its occasional shortcomings. The essays that Vesser has collected in *The New Historicism*<sup>1</sup> deserve careful reading and provide insights and pleasures. This review concentrates on the recent changes to new historicism, on its use of anecdote or narrative, on the techniques it shares with other methodologies, and on its disparities, which may have implications for its future.<sup>2</sup>

Louis Montrose says that although in 1980 Michael McCanles was the first to use "new historicism," Stephen Greenblatt's use of the term in 1982 gave it currency (32, n. 6).<sup>3</sup> New historicism has recently undergone three great changes. First, in the United States it has become the dominant discourse in studies of the English Renaissance. Second, it has extended its range of practitioners to include those interested in feminism, deconstruction, Marxism, and other discourses. Third, it has moved outside the Renaissance to other periods just as deconstruction came to range beyond romanticism. Scholars and students of the English Renaissance cite Greenblatt more than any other critic. It took a few years for the full import of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) to be felt. The paradoxes and subtle qualifications that mark the opening of this

book begin and end another work that consolidates Greenblatt's influence, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988). Both texts historicize their terms, so that Greenblatt finds that the verb "fashion" comes into its own in the sixteenth century in writers like Spenser and that "*energia*" derives from the Greek rhetorical tradition that became so influential in the Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> Just as self-fashioning creates anxiety, so too does social circulation. This method, Greenblatt says, moves against an ahistorical and essentialist view that allows critics to apply a technique to any text regardless of its historical period. Both texts begin their chapters with anecdotes and proceed by analogy between the non-literary text or social context and the literary text. Greenblatt has helped to create a genre that many others have followed. He furnishes the lead article for this collection. Besides confessing his surprise over the success of the term "new historicism" and his penchant to do practical work before establishing his theoretical position, in "Towards a Poetics of Culture," Greenblatt engages Marxism and postmodernism in a debate that runs throughout the collection (1-14). Greenblatt questions Fredric Jameson's view that capitalism becomes "the agent of repressive differentiation" that shatters our integrated selves and separates us from the public domain and Jean-François Lyotard's contrary view that it constitutes "the agent of monological totalization" that makes discursive domains untenable and integrates them into a monolithic discourse.<sup>5</sup> For Greenblatt, both Marxism and postmodernism use history as "an anecdotal ornament," fail to address "the apparently contradictory historical effects of capitalism" and totalize capitalism as a philosophical principle. Greenblatt appeals to historical "evidence," an important but a more complex term that he wants to admit here (2-6). In a recuperative dialectical or ironic move, Greenblatt says that American capitalism and its cultural poetics oscillate between Jameson's "differentiation" and Lyotard's "totalization" (8). Greenblatt advocates a study of the mutual relation or movement between social and aesthetic discourses and the construction of an "interpretative model" that accounts for "the unsettling circulation of materials and discourses" within "the hidden places of negotiation and exchange" (11-13). He does not say whether these hidden spaces dwell in the unconscious or the subliminal, whether they

represent a hermeneutic mystery whose meaning literary criticism must coax, whether they constitute intricate manipulations or relations of currencies and negotiations, or whether he means something else. What distinguishes new historicism from old historicism is, in Greenblatt's view, a methodological self-consciousness that does not assume transparent signs and interpretative procedures.

Other discourses are interrogating new historicism. Jane Marcus's "The Asylums of Anteus" and Judith Newton's "History as Usual?" examine feminist interest in it (132-67). Marcus accuses new historicism, including its feminist versions, of colourizing history for present consumption (133). She wishes "to demonstrate that history and literature deserve equal narrative force in a cultural text," to "propose a theory of the *feminist fetish*, collating and adopting recent work of Naomi Schor on female fetishism and Tom Mitchell on iconography and commodity fetishism to discuss the poster art and political dress of British Suffragettes," to name female fetishism and to say that its failure to survive "wartime iconoclasm" shows a complicity with a "new iconoclasm" in opposition to feminist versions of new historicism (133-34, 148). Newton asserts that most histories of new historicism have barely alluded to "the mother roots — the women's movement and the feminist theory and scholarship which grew from it" (153). Feminist criticism of male assumptions of objectivity, feminist views of knowledge as politically and historically specific, and feminist analyses of the cultural construction of female identity and the role of ideology in subjugation all have contributed to the "postmodernist" premises of new historicism (153).<sup>6</sup> Although in the first chapter of *Shakespearean Negotiations* Greenblatt argues against totalizing the artist and the society, Newton, who does not address Greenblatt in particular, makes a strong case that non-feminist new historicists represent the ideologies of the male elite as the typical way to construct culture and suggests that they amend their method to include the material world of the domestic and the anxiety of women and other oppressed groups (166).

Gayatri Spivak and Richard Terdiman explore the relation of deconstruction and poststructuralism to new historicism. Spivak agrees with Derrida that the conflict between new historicism and deconstruction constitutes a "turf battle" between Berkeley

on the one side and UCLA and Irvine on the other. She says that "since I see the *new* historicism as a sort of academic media hype mounted against deconstruction, I find it hard to position myself in its regard" (280). In discussing the move from the term "Marxism" to "materialism" or "cultural criticism," Spivak finds much fault. She also asserts that "one of the things that one cannot do with Foucault is to turn him into a hermeneut who talks about nothing but the microphysics of power and thus make him an alibi for an alliance politics which takes for its own format the post-modern pragmatics of non-teleological and not necessarily innovative morphogenetics, giving rise to more and more moves" (285-86). Spivak thinks of "history" as a catachresis, the abuse or misapplication of a metaphor, or the improper use of a word. Her programme differs from the new historicists': "We live in a post-colonial neo-colonized world. And we should teach our students to find a toe-hold out of which they can become critical so that so-called cultural production — confessions to being a baby-boomer and therefore I'm a new historicist — that stuff is seen as simply a desire to do bio-graphy where actually the historical narrative is catachretical. If you think of the '60s, think of Czechoslovakia, not only Berkeley and France, or that the promises of devaluation didn't come true in some countries in Asia in '67" (290-91, see 279-82). For Spivak, the politics of history are not the politics of new historicism: the state of criticism seems pale beside the state of the world. In "Is there Class in this Class?" Terdiman links education with social and political hierarchy and observes that whereas poststructuralism concerns itself with "the constitutive, irreducible *play* of signifiers," new historicism concentrates on "their constitutive, irreducible *power*" (225, see 225-30).

A strong interest also exists in the relation between Marxism and new historicism. In "Marxism and The New Historicism," Catherine Gallagher grants the value of new historicism by listing its insights: "that no cultural or critical practice is simply a politics in disguise, that such practices are seldom *intrinsically* either liberatory or oppressive, that they seldom contain their politics as an essence but rather occupy particular historical situations from which they enter into various exchanges, or negotiations, with practices designated 'political'" (37). She also tries to explain the

opposition to new historicism: "The search for the new historicism's political essence can be seen as a rejection of these insights. Critics on both the right and left seem offended by this refusal to grant that literature and, by extension, criticism either ideally transcend politics or simply are politics when properly decoded" (37-38). Contrary to Spivak, Gallagher thinks that the radical American politics of the 1960s was imperative, says that her own experiences with Marxism and deconstruction did not provide the explanatory power that new historicism did and tells how the women's movement taught her, and radicals like her, that the more resistance in personal and mundane matters, the more it confirmed the importance of their struggle (40-45). Gallagher argues that the new historical work has kept New Left assumptions "about the sources, nature, and sites of social conflict and about the issue of representation. Instead of resubscribing, as some Marxist critics have to a historical meta-narrative of class conflict, we have tended to insist that power cannot be equated with economic or state power, that its sites of activity, and hence of resistance, are also in the micro-politics of daily life" (43). In the 1980s as in the 1960s, this radical politics attempts to destabilize history and text, sign systems and things, representation and the represented. Although Gallagher admits that new historicists often use similar methods to left formalists like Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey, especially when they assume an unstable text that is historically stable, they also oppose them by suggesting that ideological contradictions can help maintain oppressive social relations and that the antagonism between ideology and literature constitutes "a powerful and socially functional mode of constructing subjectivity" (43-44).<sup>7</sup> In Gallagher's view the arguments from the left tend to accuse new historicists of failing to stress the subversive potential of the text and the critic's function to activate it, so that they are quietists who make others despair in opposition (45). New historicism will continue to study the complexity of the modern subject and will be as oppositional as Marxism even if Marxists do not always think so (46-47).

Another methodological question involves narrative rather than direct political allegiance: the use of the anecdote in new historicism. Joel Fineman's essay, "The History of the Anecdote," as-

sumes as paradigmatic, but defers to the last note, this method in Greenblatt's essay, "Fiction and Friction" (49-76, see n. 34). He examines the genre of the anecdote in literary and historical writing. In discussing Thucydides and Hippocrates, Fineman concludes that the anecdote, the narration of a singular event, is the *historeme* or the smallest unit of historiographic fact. He wants to know how the anecdote, which refers and is literary, "possesses its peculiar and eventful narrative force" (56-57). One of the goals of new historicism, according to Fineman, is "to discover or to disclose some wrinkling and historicizing interruption, a breaking and a *realizing* interjection, within the encyclopedically enclosed circle of Hegelian historical self-reflection" (60). Rather than casual and accidental, the anecdote, Fineman says, represents the literary and referential and affects historically the writing of history. Here is Fineman's thesis: "the anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end" (61). The anecdote, in Fineman's view, produces the effect of the real and of contingency by representing an event inside and outside the context of "historical successivity." Anecdote opens and destabilizes the context of a larger historical narrative that can be seduced by the opening anecdote (61). Fineman would like to examine the "operation of the aporetic anecdote on the history of writing" and suggests that this "anecdotal historiography" might be accomplished by discussing texts from Thucydides through the lives of saints and jest books to the works of new historicists. Paradoxically, Thucydides is trying to create a teleological and therefore ahistorical history but, in a culture that is attempting to produce an ahistorical philosophy and literature, he betrays his totalizing intentions for historiography and shows its very contingency (62). During the Renaissance, Fineman maintains, a technicist science and history arise, the latter carrying with it the cost of "its unspoken sense of estranged distance from the anecdotal real" when it gives to science "the *experience* of history, when the force of the anecdote is rewritten as experiment" (63). Fineman characterizes the writing practice of new historicism as a "Baconian" essay that introduces history, an amplification, a moralizing conclusion that puts an end to history

and, sometimes, another anecdote that tries to keep things open. Like history in the Renaissance, new historicism promises openness until anti-historical currents threaten it with more closed scientific or ideological historiography (64). If Fineman's essay examines the tropological and narrative functions of anecdote, it also suggests that what appears to be incidental actually constitutes the very basis of history. The possibility that this thesis deserves consideration should prevent any of us from being dismissive of the methods of new historicism and should encourage us to test Fineman's thesis and read new historical work even more carefully.

If, as Fineman thinks, the openness of history in the Renaissance and in the period of new historicism and the resistance to that openness has created an especial affinity between the two historical practices, we can also observe more new historical work in other periods. Marcus, Newton, and others have used this method in discussing twentieth-century works, and some essays in this collection also apply it to nineteenth-century literature. Jon Klancher's essay, "English Romanticism and Cultural Production," warns of the risk of "making historical criticism a transhistorical echo of the politics of the present" and suggests that an emerging critique of Romanticism in Britain is attempting to break the bond between the ideologies of the past and present and to refuse the estrangement of culture and politics that Romantic writers proposed (77-88). Klancher advocates the use of "cultural materialism" to avoid the Romantic opposition of power and culture, individual and society and the new historicist identification of them (77-78). Cultural materialism, as practised by Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore, and others, inquires "into relations of cultural practice and politics that cannot be posed as alternative between 'subversion' and 'containment'" (78).<sup>8</sup> In "The Sense of the Past," Stephen Bann examines the relation of image, text, and object in forming historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Britain (102-15). Bann argues that historians have been unable to understand historical consciousness as it developed at this time because of the myth that nineteenth-century historians liberated history from literature and founded a historical science. He suggests a new understanding, akin to Foucault's, that would include the pursuits of archaeologist, antiquarian and historian (102-03). Jonathan

Arac's essay, "The Struggle for the Cultural Heritage," discusses the implications for the canon of Christina Stead's response to or "refunctioning" of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain (116-31). Arac's refunctioning of Stead examines issues that still obtain in political and cultural debates from "totality" and feminist strategies to an exploration of popular culture and mass media (117). In "The Nation as Imagined Community," Jean Franco considers whether the term "national allegory" can be applied to Latin American novels that writers produce in places where "nation" represents a contested word or seems like "a vanished body" (204-12). Using Lizardi's *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816), Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1816) and Hostos' *Pelerinaje de Boyoán* (1863) as examples of novels that debated the nation, Franco looks at the representation of nationhood in the modern novels of Fuentes, Llosa, Carpentier, Márquez, Bastos, and Juliá. She suggests that "Going back to the forties and fifties, the novel which, in the nineteenth century, had offered blueprints of national formation more and more became a sceptical reconstruction of past errors" (205). The range of new historicism and related methods is extending more and more beyond the English Renaissance.

The essays that Aram Veerer has collected demonstrate the range of scholars interested or participating in the multivalent movement of new historicism (ix-xvi). In the "Introduction," Veerer describes new historicism as transgressing the objectivity, specialization, and blandness of conventional scholarship, which, although perceptive to some extent and an effective polemical strategy, totalizes and generalizes scholarship as if all the predecessors or opponents of new historicism never explored interdisciplinary boundaries in an attractive style (ix-xvi). Many of Veerer's points about the opposition to new historicism seem correct, such as its threat to turf and method (deconstructionists and Marxists are as self-protective as old historicists and new critics), but Marxists, philosophers, lawyers, and historiographers are concerned about evidence because of its centrality to discussions of the social, political, and cultural. This concern is not simply a "right-wing" *revanche*, although it can take this form. Veerer effectively notes the basic assumptions of new historicism without making it appear formulaic; agrees with its premise that through circulation, nego-



tiation, and exchange, capitalism envelops critics and text; and observes that after his collection, it will be more difficult to dismiss this movement. In "Professing the Renaissance," Louis Montrose defends new historicism from attacks, implicit and explicit, by those, like J. Hillis Miller, who regret the return to history in literary studies and those, like Edward Pechter, Allan Bloom, and William Bennett, who oppose what they perceive to be a radical, leftist or Marxist threat to the canon and traditional scholarly methods (15-36). As in any battle both sides offend and defend.

Both sides discuss the influences on new historicism. Bacon, Marx, Nietzsche, cultural anthropologists, like Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, feminist works, like *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1960), the Warburg Institute, Michel Foucault, Stephen Orgel, Jacques Derrida, and other influences find their way into explanations of the origins of the movement. In "The Use and Misuse of Giambattista Vico," John Schaeffer looks at Vico's influence (89-101). He hopes "to show why Vico's thought is critical to a theory of discourse and also critical of some of the theories which use him" and proposes that Vico's theory is more radical than Foucault's or Hayden White's because it constitutes a rhetorical paradigm that challenges rationalistic, secular, and ironic assumptions from the Enlightenment in current attempts to construct a theory of periodicity (89, 99-100). Although Schaeffer may be properly defending Vico's radicality, I cannot agree with him that Vico is pre-ironic because the ironic posture occurs in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, More, Erasmus, and in others well before the Enlightenment and becomes increasingly complicated in post-Enlightenment ironists and ironologists like the Schlegels, Tieck, Solger, Müller, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. Ironic posture is not strictly a phenomenon of the Enlightenment. Besides discussing the influence of Marx and alluding to that of Geertz and Nietzsche on Greenblatt and new historicists, Frank Lentricchia's "Foucault's Legacy: A New Historicism?" concentrates on what its title suggests (231-42). In examining the anecdote that ends *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which relies on the analogy or similitude between the Renaissance and now, Lentricchia thinks that as a Foucauldian Greenblatt implies that we sustain a dream of free self-hood amid our disappointed liberal imaginations because we

think we know that the structure of power denies freedom everywhere else. New historicism, Lentricchia says, is a representative story about the contemporary American academic intellectual, who frets about liberalism in the face of a presumed totalitarianism or liberalism that sustains totalitarianism as the denial of freedom except in a dream (241-42). Gerald Graff's "Co-optation" also discusses Foucault's influence on new historicism, especially the later Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* (168-81). New historicism calls into question the romantic opposition of art as spiritual autonomy to the material world as alienation and repression, a questioning that Graff says is long overdue. He also asserts that the idea of the co-optation of power had its beginnings not in Foucault but in Baudelaire, Herbert Marcuse, the counterculture of the 1960s, and other sources (169-71). Like Stanley Fish, Graff points to the embarrassment that new historicists display when confronted with their own success, except Graff speaks more specifically about "Left New Historicism": "the problem with the co-optation argument as often wielded by the Left is that it tends to cast an attitude of disapproval on success without *making clear the conditions under which success might be legitimate*" (172). Right new historicists or neopragmatists like Fish, Steven Knapp, and Walter Benn Michaels are, in Graff's view, Foucauldians without Foucault's politics — they argue that since co-optation occurs in every form of culture, the idea of an oppositional position is silly. Graff cannot agree with their view that it is foolish to make any political judgements about cultural forms (175). In the work of Fish and Michaels, Graff observes an apparent "conflict between the new historicist tendency to over-specify the characteristics of discursive systems, in order to produce analyses of interpretive communities and literary works, and the pragmatist tendency . . . to dissociate those systems from specific practical uses" (179). Graff examines the confusion in oppositional criticism and shows his ambivalence over its possible demise (180).

In "The Limits of Local Knowledge," Vincent Pecora analyzes the influence of Clifford Geertz on new historicism (243-76). He aptly observes: "Geertz introduces into cultural anthropology ideas borrowed, ironically from the present vantage, from literary

studies — rhetorical analysis, Kenneth Burke's 'representative anecdotes,' the interpretation of cultural events as 'texts' which represent stories a society tells about itself to make sense of its life-world, the continual tacking between part and whole of the hermeneutic circle elaborated by Wilhelm Dilthey and by critics like Leo Spitzer" (245-46). After criticizing Geertz's work on Indonesia for ignoring the national and international politics of the time and discussing related problems of methodology in new historical texts, Pecora concludes that Geertz's interpretative anthropology, which constitutes a cultural semiotics that resides behind new historicism, conserves the dominant ethno-centric concerns.<sup>9</sup> Pecora also suggests that new historicism tends towards a formalism that traps "the critic inside the semiotic systems he or she would wish to explain, even as the definition of such formative systems requires the assumption of a non-semiotic, non-textual outside which is to be shaped" (272). The distinction between inside and outside remains more problematic than new historicists and other cultural semioticians have admitted. If new historicists are self-conscious, they need to be more so. In "The New Historicism and other Old-fashioned Topics," Brook Thomas observes the importance of a poststructuralist critique: if new historicists seem to promise a novel understanding of the past, "poststructuralists, following Nietzsche, can argue that bringing about the new, requires an active forgetting, not remembering. Creation of the new, like representation, inevitably involves an act of repression" (187, see 182-203). Thomas historicizes new historicism and poststructuralism. He discusses James Harvey Robinson's *The New History* (1912) and how poststructuralism shares much with the new history and the resulting relativism among progressive historians, especially in the latter's assumptions that historians do not scientifically or objectively recover the past but reconstruct it according to a present view (194-95). If new historicists tend to "reoccupy" the narratives of historicism from which they would break, poststructuralists, Thomas says, can practise the totalization they censure. New historicists are caught in the contradiction that the past must matter for the present but that history cannot represent what the past was: in advocating an enabling tension between poststructuralism and new historicism, Thomas rests his case on a

paradox — “the present has an interest in maintaining a belief in disinterested inquiry into our past” (200-01).

Other critical inquiries question the place of new historicism in relation to other historical and literary theories and practices. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Hayden White and Stanley Fish all look at the notion of textuality that so concerns new historicists. In “Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism,” Fox-Genovese agrees with Fredric Jameson’s view in *The Political Unconscious* that we must discuss questions of causation and extra-textual “reality” and she asserts: “History cannot simply be reduced — or elevated — to a collection, theory, and practice of reading texts” (216, see 213-24). Unlike Thomas, she finds fault with historicism and criticizes new historicism for denying that texts are products of and participants in a history that remains a structured set of social, political, and gender relations and that will allow the excluded their reclamation (222). Both Hayden White’s “New Historicism: A Comment” (293-302) and Stanley Fish’s “Commentary: The Young and the Restless” (303-16) address some of the issues raised throughout the collection. White asserts that critics of new historicism also ultimately construe history in textual terms and that they assume historical sequences to be “code-like” rather than “poetic” as new historicists do (297, 301). The cultural poetics of new historicism identifies aspects of historical sequences such as “the episodic, anecdotal, contingent, exotic, abjected, or simply uncanny” that “conduce to the breaking, revision, or weakening of the dominant codes” (301). Like the poetic, these aspects of history both challenge grammar and logic while expressing meaning. Like anyone who turns to history, new historicists discover no specific historical approach to “history” but find only a philosophy of history, which depends as much on how one construes one’s object of study as on one’s knowledge of history itself (302). Fish aptly observes that these pleasurable essays “are not doing New Historicism, but talking about doing” it (303). He also points out a recurring theoretical question that will become increasingly important for new historicism: if you think, with Lynn Hunt, that history cannot be a “‘referential ground of knowledge,’ . . . ‘how can you, without contradictions, make historical assertions?’” (305). The critique becomes subject to its own critique.

Fish argues that one can argue for the textuality of history and make specific historical arguments but that one cannot make those arguments following from the assertion that history is textual (307-09). He also says that new historicism asks us to be unhistorical and detached from the structures of politics and society when this demand is impossible in daily life. The new historicists can effect professional change and enjoy its benefits but, unless the larger social and political structures change, they cannot be the acknowledged legislators of the world. Fish also asserts that we cannot stand simultaneously in a legal, historical, critical or literary practice and survey its supports. For historicism to be new, it must assert a new truth and thus oppose, correct, or modify a previous one, but that newness cannot be methodological (311-15). Prophecy usually consists of a temporally extended hypothesis or projection or, in historical writing, of the future projecting a more recent past from a more distant past in order to make itself seem inevitable. To avoid the snares of prophecy, I shall provide a guess: in discussions of new historicism the methodological anxiety over whether the critic-theorist can be inside and outside his or her theory/practice, and the debate over the power or limitation of textual history will persist. With pleasure and anxiety, new historicists and their supporters and critics may explore these questions in view of "society" and "politics" while redefining these very terms.

Like the anecdotes that often introduce new historicist texts, new historicism constitutes a complex and indirect practice that encourages a plurality of methods and interests, displays the ability to change and shows the power to endure. In time and for various reasons, the works of new historicists will still be read. Whether the work of new historicists constitutes more access to reality than those in Veese's collection might admit, it will become part of the recalcitrant histories in which they participate in their lives and in their texts. In lively and fractious voices the contributors make this volume far more a pleasure than an obligation.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> H. Aram Veese, ed. *The New Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. xvi, 318. \$51.50. \$19.95 pb.
- <sup>2</sup> See Goldberg, Howard, Pechler, and Cohen.

- <sup>3</sup> See also McCandles.
- <sup>4</sup> See Greenblatt, *Renaissance and Shakespearean Negotiations*, and my forthcoming review articles in *Textual Practice* that discusses at length Greenblatt and the new historicist use of analogy.
- <sup>5</sup> See Jameson *Political Unconscious* 20, "Postmodernism," 53-93, and Lyotard esp. 37.
- <sup>6</sup> See Ferguson and Neely on the Renaissance. For studies of other periods, see Gallagher, Armstrong, and Poovey.
- <sup>7</sup> See Althusser, Machevey, Balibar, and Sprinker.
- <sup>8</sup> See Dollimore.
- <sup>9</sup> See Geertz.

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