Introduction:
Narratives and Social Identities

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This issue of Social Science History inaugurates a series of five articles, to be published over the next few issues, on the subject of narrative and the formation of social identities. The series originated in a session of the November 1989 Social Science History Association meetings in Washington, DC. That session included an early version of the article by George Steinmetz, published here, in addition to papers by Kathleen Canning (1992), Janet Hart, and Margaret Somers. The session inspired such enthusiastic interest and vigorous discussion that Ron Aminzade, now an editor of Social Science History but then an ordinary citizen, proposed that we think about collecting these papers in a special edition of the association’s journal. Since then, two other articles, by Mary Jo Maynes (in this issue) and Luisa Passerini (to be published later), have been added to the set.

These articles mark a departure from the usual fare of Social Science History and from the vision of social-scientifically informed historical study that has dominated the SSHA since its founding a decade and a half ago. By now most social scientists, even

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those who regard themselves as staunch enemies of structuralism and poststructuralism, probably accept the originally structuralist notion that the meaning of any concept is determined by its relations of opposition to other concepts. Had the founders of the SSHA been asked what social science history was most opposed to, the likely answer would have been “traditional narrative history.” Social science history, then, was largely defined against narrative. “Narrative history” represented everything that social science history was not: it was soft rather than hard, impressionistic rather than rigorous, and literary rather than scientific. It delighted in presenting the sentiments and the personal stories of the few rather than seeking out the social structures that determined the lives and fortunes of the many. The contrast between social science history and traditional history was, to use the opposition that seemed to encompass all the others, “analytical” rather than “narrative.” Unlike traditional history, which persuaded with storytelling and literary embellishments, social science history was to persuade by logical rigor and quantitative precision.

I might note in passing that the contrast between social science history and narrative history was (probably unconsciously) encoded in the grammar of the association and journal’s very title. To the humanistically inclined, the expression social science history, in which the noun phrase social science is used as an adjective modifying history, still rankles as a literary barbarism. Adopting the label social science history could be read as a signal act of defiance, a daring gesture of solidarity with the social sciences that went so far as to embrace the “barbarous” standards of social-scientific (anti-) literary style. Nothing could better symbolize the definitive break with narrative history.

If it is true that the initial definition of social science history as a specific field of scholarly inquiry depended on a systematic opposition to narrative history, the appearance in Social Science History of a series of articles advocating narrative marks an important shift in the scholarly terrain of historical studies. Above all, I think it marks a global change in the relationship of the historical social sciences to the humanities. In its early years, social science history was obsessed with “scientific” theories and methods, especially quantitative methods, and regarded the humanities as an atheoretical backwash from which nothing of value might be learned. But in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, the humanistic disciplines
were themselves fundamentally transformed, becoming at least as theoretically self-conscious as the social sciences—although in ways that some social scientists found uncongenial and even threatening. During the same period, many social science historians became dissatisfied with the intrinsic limitations of quantification, which proved of only slight value in reconstructing the life worlds of the past populations it enumerated and classified so precisely. During the 1970s, many social historians turned toward cultural anthropology, already a quasi-humanistic field, as a source of inspiration. In the 1980s, some social historians began to turn to literary theory and poststructuralist philosophy as well. In short, a significant subset of historically minded social scientists evolved over the past two decades from a general disdain for the humanities toward curiosity about, respect for, and increasing intellectual collaboration with them. Narrative is one of the emerging points of intersection.

Of course, the ever-sensitive antennae of Lawrence Stone had already picked up the revival of narrative among social historians as early as 1979. But rereading his essay in the context of the articles in this collection reveals how much social historians’ thinking about narrative has changed over the past decade. Literary and philosophical theories of narrative provide important background for these articles. By contrast, Stone was sublimely unaware of the appropriate theoretical literature. The only theoretical work on narrative that he cited was Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973), and in the footnote that acknowledged White, Stone remarked that he was indebted to Randolph Starn for bringing the book to his attention. That Stone felt no need to cite other works by literary theorists or philosophers of history, and that he was unaware of the existence of even so signal a contribution as *Metahistory* until tipped off by Starn, demonstrates how little social science historians followed theoretical developments in the humanities even in the later 1970s.

Unburdened by literary theory, Stone employed the term *narrative* commonsensically. He built the argument of his essay around the conventional distinction between narrative and analysis without feeling any need to develop a theoretical argument for the aptness of that distinction, let alone to criticize it. By narrative he simply meant historians’ attempts to tell interesting personal stories with plots, protagonists, beginnings, middles, and ends. He did not sys-
tematically consider how the stories the authors told fit into their arguments. His chief examples of the turn to narrative were works by such historians as Carlo Ginsburg, Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Davis, and Robert Darnton, whose stories, as often as not, were employed to present synchronic portraits of past societies, not to probe the dynamics of social transformations. That Stone could have dubbed their work a “revival of narrative” without remarking on the often antinarrative or only equivocally narrative character of their books’ rhetorical frameworks once again signals the untheoretical nature of Stone’s reflections.

To raise these points about Stone’s article is certainly not to condemn him. On the contrary, Stone was one of the few social science historians astute enough to see that a major change in styles of historical writing was under way and to reflect on this change in print. If his efforts to grasp the nature of that change now seem unsatisfactory, it is because he shared the outlook of virtually all historically inclined social scientists in the 1970s, whose reading and thinking did not yet extend to theoretical work emanating from the humanities. The publication of the present articles, with their sometimes extensive references to works on narrative theory, indicates that the naïve turn to narrative chronicled by Stone has been followed by a far more theoretically informed turn.

Of the five articles, Steinmetz’s spends by far the most time on questions of literary theory. His thorough bibliography indicates how much has been written on narrative over the past decade or so and also constitutes an extremely valuable resource for social science historians who want to read up on the subject. Moreover, the second section of his article is a lucid discussion of a variety of theoretical perspectives on narrative. Steinmetz deftly guides his reader through the mysteries of contemporary narratology.

But the central concern of Steinmetz’s article is neither narratological theory nor Stone’s question of how historians use narrative to investigate and represent the past. Like all five authors in this series, Steinmetz addresses the rather different question of how narratives shape lived history—the question of what Margaret Somers calls “ontological narrativity” and Steinmetz himself calls “social narratives.” The premise of these articles is that narrative has what Janet Hart calls a “dual role”: it is not only a means of representing life, used self-consciously by historians, novelists, and storytellers, but a fundamental cultural constituent of the lives
represented. All people develop a sense of themselves as subjects in part by thinking of themselves as protagonists in stories—of love and marriage, of success, of stoic self-sacrifice, of family obligation, of collective struggle, of religious renewal. Perhaps the most important claim of these articles is that getting at the narratives in which historical actors emplot themselves is crucial for understanding the course and the dynamics of historical change.

Steinmetz’s thesis is that successful working-class formation involves the development of particular patterns of social narratives. Something like a cohesive working class, he hypothesizes, can come into being only where workers understand the stories of their own lives and of their relation to collective history in ways that are organized by the category of class. Rather than attempt to test this claim empirically—a task that would certainly require far more than a brief article—Steinmetz adumbrates what such a claim might entail. He relates the question of workers’ narrative self-understanding to theories of the role of ideology in class formation, develops the claim that narrative is a fundamental category of human consciousness and of the construction of social identity, and finally turns, rather briefly, to how narratives seem to have been implicated in working-class formation, especially in the case of Wilhelmine Germany. Steinmetz’s command of the theoretical literature is exemplary, and his argument is at once clear and suggestive. But his article also whets the reader’s appetite for a more detailed and empirical working out of this theoretical perspective than Steinmetz has been able to provide in this context.

Mary Jo Maynes’s article also deals with the relationship between narrative and class formation, but from a quite different perspective. For the past several years, Maynes has been collecting and analyzing a large number of workers’ autobiographies written between the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her article is a reflection on methodological considerations that arise from her project.

Maynes acknowledges that she occupies “a contradictory epistemological location” that combines elements of both contemporary literary criticism and the mainline positivist social science history. Maynes’s contradictory location, her desire “to read autobiographies both as text and as data,” leads her to cast her methodological net widely. She considers issues ranging from the obviously positivist (the definition and reliability of her sample) to the obvi-
ously literary (the nature of the genre conventions that structure her subjects’ narratives). In my opinion, her epistemological location, however “contradictory,” is both appropriate and fruitful. Her careful definition of a large sample of some 100 texts from two countries (France and Germany) enables her to compare the textual qualities as well as the contents of autobiographies composed in different temporal, social, and political settings. From the literary and fictive character of the texts she infers that the differences between autobiographies arising in different contexts may result as much from socially constructed narrative conventions as from differences in “raw” experiences. At the same time, she points out that the conventions governing the texts may also govern the actions of those who write them, which makes the texts valuable data of a different order (about the motivating beliefs of their authors in the present) while it renders doubtful any notion of them as mere data files, replete with facts about raw experience. Maynes’s tacking back and forth between literary and positivist perspectives results, it seems to me, in a complex and critical approach to these autobiographical texts that is perhaps subtler than might have resulted from epistemological purity. Like Steinmetz, Maynes does not attempt to present detailed empirical conclusions but offers a programmatic reflection, tellingly illustrated.

Margaret Somers’s article, “Narrative Action, Narrativity, and Theories of Working-Class Formation: The Case of the English,” which will be published in a future issue, also deals with the relationship between narrative and class. Like the other authors, Somers insists that narrative is a category of lived experience as well as of representational practice: understanding nineteenth-century English workers requires an understanding of the narratives in which they emplotted themselves. But Somers differs sharply from Steinmetz on the question of existing models of class formation. Whereas Steinmetz asks what sort of social narratives result in the formation of a classical Marxian working class, Somers rejects the Marxian model altogether as embodying an encoded teleology. The Marxian model, she argues, necessarily defines actual historical instances of workers’ identity formation—even the experiences of the English workers who served as Marx’s model as he developed his theory—as deficient.

The problem, Somers insists, is that a particular narrative—that of the transition from traditional to modern society—has been
smuggled not only into Marxism but into the supposedly objec-
tive and ostensibly antinarrative epistemological assumptions that
underlie mainline social science. Correcting this problem will call
for replacing those assumptions with what she calls “conceptual
narrativity.” By this I take her to mean that social scientists must
assume that social reality itself has a narrative structure and that
we must attempt to recapture those narratives by narrative means
rather than seek universal laws. Somers’s essay is a bracing and
radical challenge to the received wisdom of most social science
historians.

The remaining two essays, Luisa Passerini’s “Memory for
Women’s History: Problems of Method and Interpretation” and
Janet Hart’s “Cracking the Code: Allegory and Political Mobiliza-
tion in the Greek Resistance,” differ from the other three articles
in three respects: they deal primarily with the formation of gender
and national identities rather than with class identities, report their
empirical findings in greater detail, and make extensive use of oral
histories.

Near the beginning of her article, Maynes remarks that feminism
has been a major stimulus of work on autobiographies because
both the women’s movement and feminist scholarship have taken
personal testimony especially seriously. After all, if the personal
is political, then developing the political practice of feminism re-
quires the uncovering of personal stories. Passerini’s article is a
preliminary report and methodological reflection on a large-scale
oral history project that is collecting personal narratives of the post-
1960s feminist movement in Emilia-Romagna, the region centered
on Bologna, in north-central Italy. The article contains interesting
observations on some of the unavoidable issues of oral-historical
research, for example, on the construction and use of interview
protocols and on the relationship between oral and written docu-
mentation. But it also makes very clear the political as well as
scholarly stakes of issues concerning narrative and memory. The
team undertaking this research is committed to a feminist political
project, intended, among other things, to enable feminism in the
present by providing it with a usable past. This kind of research
is particularly important for feminism, Passerini argues, because
of what she calls “the extraordinarily oral nature of the women’s
movement,” which, especially in its early days, depended on an
exceptionally dense practice of conversation, confession, personal
revelation, and development of new forms of expression and of communities of trust.

Janet Hart’s article draws from her oral history project on women in the Greek resistance during World War II. She begins with an extensive discussion of the theoretical literature on narrative but then shows how new ideas about narrative can illuminate her specific social-historical problem. Hart focuses on what she calls “mobilizational narratives”—narratives developed by leaders and elaborated and internalized by followers that motivated them to undertake the heroic and dangerous activities of the resistance. She uses ideological tracts, song lyrics, and the reminiscences of participants to demonstrate that the usual Western portrayal of the resistance as dominated by Stalinism is false. Despite occasional references to communism or the working class, the Greek resistance was narrativized above all as a national struggle, in a dual sense. It was understood by leaders and followers alike as the defense of the Greek nation against foreign invaders, but alongside this narrative of “defensive nationalism,” it also developed a narrative of what Hart calls “political nationalism.” In its struggle against the Nazis, the resistance extended meaningful citizenship to marginalized and disenfranchised groups, such as the poor and women. It developed narratives that empowered the previously unempowered, enabling women to become equal participants in political struggles as never before in Greek history. In long and telling quotations from her oral histories, Hart shows how the resistance liberated young women from the domestic roles in which they had been tightly confined. This fascinating personal testimony provides compelling insights into the elaboration of new identities through nationalist narratives.

These five articles explore new territory for social science history, sketching the theoretical landscape and outlining the range of empirical problems that might be approached through social narratives. As might be expected in such a novel enterprise, the articles also expose some unsolved problems. One is that they use the term narrative to signify many different things: a universal category of human cultures, conventions of storytelling, epistemological and ontological assumptions, accounts of life experiences, ideological structures intended to motivate the rank and file of social movements. Although each of these uses makes sense in its particular
context, one sometimes feels that using narrative to cover all of them dilutes the meaning of the term. For example, much of what both Hart and Somers refer to as narrative could as easily be spoken of as cultural idioms, ideologies, political programs, or moral beliefs. If the term narrative is to retain analytical bite, we probably need to be more attentive to what is specifically narrative in the texts and practices under study. Here it would surely be helpful to try applying some of the literary-theoretical issues of definition and terminology discussed by Steinmetz.

Finally, I think that filling in the perspectives on narrative introduced in these articles will require more extended and probing analyses of texts. None of these authors actually uses narratological techniques to take apart a text and show how it works to create specific identities and motivations and to occlude others. Until social science historians can show that specific text-reading strategies illuminate the meanings and dynamics of social movements and social processes, the positivistically inclined may feel justified in their skepticism. An analogy may be drawn to the early days of the encounter between social science and history. Throughout the 1950s, many historians borrowed concepts from social science theory; historical texts of the period abound with role expectations, relative deprivation, and status inconsistency. But it was only in the 1960s and 1970s, when historians began to adopt the concrete research practices of social scientists, that the breakthrough to a new social science history occurred. Like the historical texts of the 1950s, these texts on narrative test out a new theoretical vocabulary and the issues that it implies. But I am convinced that we cannot realize the full potential of current interdisciplinary explorations along the borders of the social sciences and humanities without following literary theorists beyond their theoretical signposts into the concrete practices of their textual analysis.

Fascinating and engaging individually, these five articles also mark an important trend in contemporary social science history. They indicate the potential value to social scientists of recent theoretical and methodological innovations in the humanities, and they argue forcefully for the inescapable centrality of narrative, not only in scholars’ representations of the past but in the lived experiences of historical actors. Collectively, they have mapped out
an impressive expanse of intellectual territory. It is a sign of the vitality of the collective effort that these articles also point toward a research agenda beyond their own horizons.

REFERENCES

