

Changing the Narrative, Again

*Transitions and Transformations*¹

Anton Schuurman

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Abstract

In this article I argue that the development of postmodernism and the return of the narrative in the 1970s did not just happen for internal scientific reasons but were a reaction to the societal developments and theories at the time. To this end I use the contemporary criticism concerning postmodernism by Beck and Giddens. In the second part I highlight three monographs to argue that social science history in recent decades also renewed itself against this background, thus helping us to understand our contemporary world in which questions of transitions and transformations are central. They use history to inform and diagnose our current situation, which they therefore need to understand as an ongoing process, though not necessarily a continuing one.

Introduction

In 2017 Jan de Vries published an article titled ‘Changing the narrative. The New History that was and is to come’.² It is a kind of testimony from a researcher looking back on his long and distinguished career. De Vries makes a plea for the way of writing history he has practiced during his

¹ This article is dedicated to Ben Gales who made his own contribution to the development of social science history and has always been actively interested in the interplay between the social sciences and history. An earlier version of this article was presented at the *Farewell Symposium for Ben Gales* in November 2018 in Groningen. I thank Michèle Gimbrère and Daniel Gallardo Albarrán for their help and the editors of this journal for their encouraging perseverance to be more explicit.

² Jan de Vries, ‘Changing the narrative. The new history that was and is to come’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 48 (2017) 313–334.

career, resulting in many important and influential books: history informed by theories and methodologies of the social sciences.³

In his article he addresses the story of the aborted rise of the ‘New History’ or ‘social science history’ in the 1970s. He defines social science history as problem-oriented, methodologically and theoretically informed history – as the opposite of, well, just telling history. His central argument is that the rise of social science history was hindered in its full breakthrough because it was quickly followed by a strong return to narrative history.⁴ De Vries gives several reasons for this return to narrative history: a dislike by historians of the technical inaccessibility and the scale of the ambition of the New History; a lack of serious interest in history from the side of the social sciences; and the role of postmodernism.⁵ As is apparent from the title of his article, he ends by being cautiously optimistic that social science history may get a second chance in our own time, because of the rise of global history and large-scale comparative history.

I agree with most of his article and seek to expand on it with two interconnected arguments by presenting a more positive view of the development of the social science history and by highlighting the significance of its results. My main argument is that the relative setback for the New History or social science history has as much to do with the reasons De Vries lists as with the societal changes at the time. Moreover, social science history has not been cut off in its prime but has continued to develop – in reaction to these same societal developments – though not as the dominant approach its practitioners hoped it would – and produced in this way an important new tradition. In this article, I put forth that the development of postmodernism and the return of the narrative did not just happen for internal scientific reasons but were instead a reaction to the societal developments at the time such as globalization, the decolonization process, increasing environmental awareness, new emancipatory movements, and issues of democracy, which the then dominant social theories had difficulties dealing with. Modernization theory, Marxism, and structuralism – as well as their universal, homogeneous, linear, reductionist, and deterministic

3 Most recently: Jan de Vries, *The price of bread. Regulating the market in the Dutch Republic* (Cambridge 2019).

4 ‘Narrative relies on description more than analysis, focusing on man, or individual actors, more than circumstances, and emphasizing particular more than collective experience.’ De Vries, ‘Changing the narrative’, 315.

5 De Vries, ‘Changing the narrative’, 318-319.

way of thinking – had become increasingly deficient in explaining what was going on in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in its last three decades.⁶ They found their most outspoken and extreme competition in postmodernism.

I will employ the contemporary criticism by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens concerning postmodernism to explain the role of societal developments in the changes of approaches in the social sciences. Why Beck and Giddens? Much more than other established contemporary social theorists like Bourdieu, Castells, and Latour, Beck in his *Risk society. Towards a new modernity* (published in 1986 in German) and Giddens in his *The consequences of modernity* (published in 1990) explicitly tried to deal with postmodernist critiques of the dominant social theories.⁷ Moreover, their criticism deserves special attention because they not only engaged with postmodernism but also tried to learn from postmodernism and provide a new approach, which Beck calls *reflexive modernity* and Giddens *radicalized modernity*. In this way they provided a better way to engage with contemporary issues.

While the section on Beck's and Giddens' scrutiny of postmodernism will help us make visible the challenges that confronted the social sciences in general, in the third section I will focus on some of the changes in the past decades in social science history writing itself. These shifts demonstrate not only that this way of writing history has continued, but also that it developed powerful ways to address the same contemporary issues Beck and Giddens had already identified. I have discussed the spatial dimensions of these changes in articles in previous issues of this journal.⁸ This time I will focus on how to handle transitions over time. I have chosen three cases – books by Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast, as well as Saskia Sassen, and John McNeill – because I am not interested in giving a historiographic overview but want to present inspiring concepts and themes. The authors are all well known. Their work has garnered many enviable prizes. By choos-

6 Cfr. J.W. Drukker, *The revolution that bit its own tail. How economic history changed our ideas on economic growth* (Amsterdam 2006).

7 Ulrich Beck, *Risk society. Towards a new modernity* (London 1992), originally published in German as *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (Frankfurt 1986) and Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity* (Cambridge 1990).

8 Anton Schuurman, 'Globalisering en geschiedenis', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 27 (2001) 385-410; Idem, 'Globalisering, geschiedenis en ruimte', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 33 (2007) 15-35. Cfr. also Anton Schuurman, 'Over ruimte en het publieke domein. Globalisering en democratie', in: Theo Engelen and Tim Riswick (eds.), *Van historische informatiekunde naar historische sensatie* (Nijmegen 2017) 117-129.

ing North, Wallis, and Weingast, as well as Sassen, and McNeill, I present authors who have been working on long-term changes in the organization of society, globalization, and the environment – three central contemporary issues. They have worked on new frameworks, concepts, and approaches that complement and push further the alternatives to postmodernism elaborated by Beck and Giddens, and which help to understand our contemporary world in which questions of transitions and transformations are central. They concentrate on the process of transition itself, which is already rare. They use history to inform and diagnose our current situation, which they therefore need to understand as an ongoing process, though not necessarily a continuing one. In short: they demonstrate how social science historians have gone beyond teleology, essentialism, reductionism, and determinism without – and this is what in the end social science history is about – abandoning attempts and methods to generalize.

My final section concludes that writing history is not just about the past but can provide an important contribution to an analysis and diagnosis of contemporary developments and problems by situating them in a longer time perspective and context, by practicing history forward as Peter Laslett, one of the early new social historians, once called it.⁹

The new societal challenges since the last quarter of the twentieth century. Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens and their critiques of postmodernism

This section argues why the social science history started with an uphill fight to become the dominant way of history writing, besides the reasons already mentioned by De Vries. The social theories it embraced – modernization theory, structuralism, Marxism – were all badly equipped to meet the societal challenges that had come to the fore since the 1960s/1970s. I will show this by focussing mainly on two books by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens: *Risk society. Towards a new modernity* and *The consequences of modernity*, respectively. In these books Beck and Giddens not only made clear why the dominant social theories were radically opposed by postmodernism but also demonstrated that one could take the postmodernist critique seriously without rejecting the Enlightenment project, as the postmodernists did.

9 Peter Laslett, 'The character of familial history: Its limitations and the conditions for its proper pursuit', *Journal of Family History* 12 (1987) 263-284.

Postmodernism has many faces.¹⁰ In general, it can be characterized by its resistance towards grand narratives (such as the theme of progress in modernization theory), its fondness for deconstruction and fragmentation, and its highlighting of subjectivism – Altena and van Lente called it ‘intellectual anarchism without utopia’.¹¹ Or to quote Anthony Giddens:

... we have discovered that nothing can be known with any certainty, ..., that “history” is devoid of teleology and consequently no version of “progress” can plausibly be defended; and that a new social and political agenda has come into being with the increasing prominence of ecological concerns and perhaps of new social movements generally.¹²

De Vries also emphasizes postmodernists’ opposition to master narratives¹³ and makes no secret of this frustration that the postmodernists’ approach ‘weakened the already fragile belief that historical knowledge is cumulative and self-corrective.’¹⁴ In other words: it went directly against the basic and most important achievements of social science history.

Ulrich Beck – Reflexive modernity

Beck considered his book *Risk society. Towards a new modernity* an answer to postmodernism, as is clear from the opening statement of this book: “The theme of this book is the unremarkable prefix “post.” It is the keyword of our times. Everything is “post”.”¹⁵ He wanted to create an alternative way of situating his contemporary world in time, and he wanted to stress the historical process of continuity and of discontinuity. He wrote that it was his ambition ‘to move the future which is just beginning to take shape into view against the still predominant past’.¹⁶ Later, he would call this process ‘metamorphosis’, in order to stress that something new is not created from scratch and is related to ongoing processes, while still being novel.¹⁷

10 Andreas Rödter, 21.0. *Eine kurze Geschichte der Gegenwart* (München 2015) 100-108.

11 Bert Altena and Dick van Lente, *Vrijheid en rede. Geschiedenis van Westerse samenlevingen 1750-1989* (Hilversum 2003) 340.

12 Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, 46.

13 De Vries, ‘Changing the narrative’, 319.

14 *Ibid.*, 321.

15 Beck, *Risk society*, 9.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Ulrich Beck, *The metamorphosis of the world. How climate change is transforming our concept of the world* (Cambridge 2016).

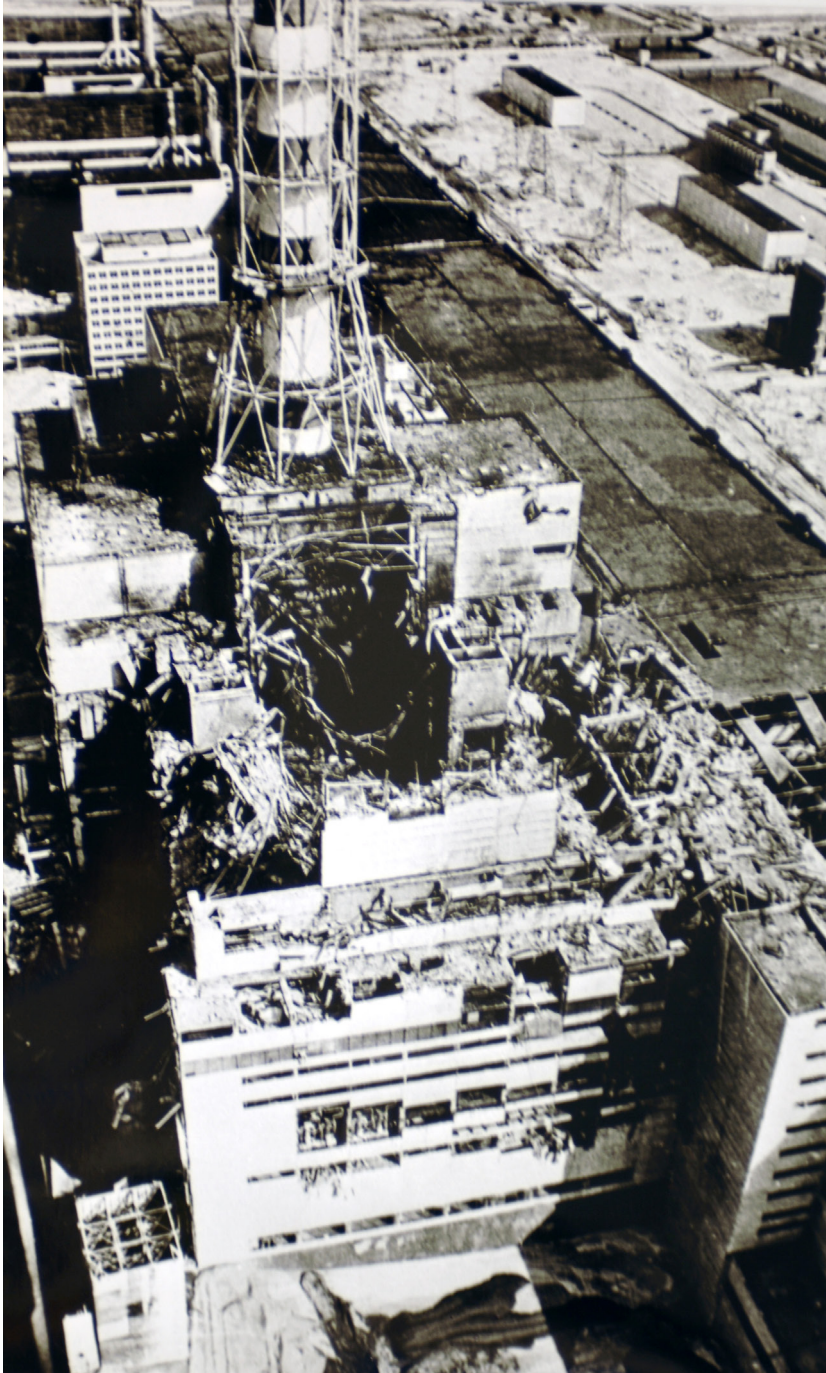


Illustration 1 The destroyed Chernobyl reactor, one of four units operating at the site in Ukraine in 1986. This photo was taken from a helicopter several months after the explosion in 1986. (source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/iaea_imagebank/5613115146.)

The book became an instant classic because its title and analysis seemed to be validated directly by the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster that happened the same year the book was published in German (1986). The book is about nuclear energy and risks, about accidents that are not supposed to happen in a thousand years according to the technocratic, modernist thinking of the time. Reading this book, one is struck by the fact of how early Beck identified structural changes that are nowadays much clearer to see, having become dominant at the beginning of the twenty-first century. He was, of course, witty, smart and intelligent, but he could only have written the book because these things did occur.

The world he analyzed became our world: the nuclear incident near Harrisburg, PA, in 1979; the many environmental scandals like the Bhopal disaster in 1984, where 500.000 people were exposed to a highly toxic substance, resulting in an immediate death toll of 2259; the problem of acid rain from the 1970s and 1980s; the arrival of AIDS in the beginning of the 1980s; the new techniques in medicine: heart transplantations (since the end of the 1960s), in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment (at the end of the 1970s); social changes and new social movements like the peace, anti-nuclear, women's, environmental, and squatters movements (again from the 1970s and 1980s);¹⁸ structural changes in the economy that caused deindustrialization and suburbanization;¹⁹ huge unemployment figures (at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s),²⁰ causing people to consider that structural unemployment could be permanent, thereby starting the discussion on a guaranteed minimum income.²¹ To be sure, it is not difficult to add similar twenty-first century experiences to these. In the meantime, the 'real existing communism' had lost its spell after Prague 1968, after the genocide in Cambodia in the second half of the seventies, and after the proclamation of martial law in Poland in 1981.

All these events and developments asked for new explanations beyond modernization theory, Marxism, and structuralism – beyond the mainstream thinking in the social sciences. Postmodernism tried to do just that, as did Beck and Giddens. Modernization theory was too much

18 Wim van Noort, *Bevlogen bewegingen. Een vergelijking van de anti-kernenergie-, kraak- en milieubeweging* (Amsterdam 1988).

19 Scott Lash and John Urry, *The end of organized capitalism* (Cambridge 1987); Max-Stephan Schulze, *Western Europe. Economic and social change since 1945* (London 1999).

20 Lutz Raphael, *Jenseits von Kohle und Stahl. Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte Westeuropas nach dem Boom*. Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen (Berlin 2019).

21 Ulrich Beck, *Schöne neue Arbeitswelt. Vision: Weltbürgerschaft* (Frankfurt, New York 1999).

about progress and voluntarism; structuralism was too deterministic and a-historical; Marxism too reductionist and too ideological. The new events and developments since the 1970s listed above showed a contemporary world that was more ambivalent, hazardous, contextualized, entangled, and open. They revealed a world much more difficult to capture with universal and causal methodologies.

Beck disagrees, however, with the rejection of the Enlightenment project as such by the postmodernists. Instead, he proposes a distinction between first and second modernity or simple and reflexive modernity. Simple modernity is the period of the nation-state, of hierarchy, of authority, of the sexual division of labour, of class societies, of life dominated by labour, of the exploitation of nature, of the belief in progress; reflexive modernity is an increased awareness that mastery and control are not possible. It is the period of 'thick globalization', of identity politics, of individualization, of transformed gender roles, of flexible employment practices, of nature seen as part and parcel of society.²²

Beck is cautiously optimistic about our contemporary society. In his writings he concedes to the postmodernist that the role of and vision for knowledge has changed, as we experience nowadays on a daily basis, for instance, in discussions on how to handle Covid-19, or how to react to climate change, or how to manage inequalities. Beck acknowledges uncertainty and the changing role of knowledge and science, but he does not reject the successes of modernity. He therefore proposes to make a distinction between the basic principles of modernity and its basic institutions. In his view we should keep the basic principles (e.g., the universal human right of the sanctity and dignity of life, individual autonomy, the obligation to provide rational justifications in public discourse, the legal restriction and democratic legitimation of political power), but the basic institutions (e.g., nation-states, family) have to be adapted.²³

As he wrote in his revision of his 1986 book:

All the "crisis phenomena" with which the countries of the West are struggling – reforms of the welfare state, falling birth rates, ageing societies, loss of definition of national societies, mass unemployment, not to mention the self-doubts of science and expert rationality, economic globalization and advances in individualization that undermine the foundations of marriage, the family and politics, and, finally, the environmental crisis, which calls for

22 Ulrich Beck, Wolfgang Bonss and Christoph Lau, 'The theory of reflexive modernization. Problematic, hypotheses and research programme', *Theory, Culture & Society* 20:2 (2003) 3-7.

23 Ulrich Beck, *World at risk* (Cambridge 2009) 223.

a revision of industrial society's exploitative conception of nature – can be understood in terms of that distinction as transformations of basic institutions in which the basic principles of modernity retain their validity.²⁴

Since the publication of *Risk society*, Beck has been promoting his ideas of simple and reflexive modernity. In this way he suggests a diagnosis and positioning in time different than what the postmodernists do, along with a different explanation, but he preserves their critique of modernization theory and on Marxist theories as grand narratives and as believers in progress. He emphasizes the limits of knowing and the unintended consequences or, as he would say, side effects (*Nebenfolgen*) of our actions.

Anthony Giddens – Radicalized modernity

Likewise, Anthony Giddens engages with postmodernism in his book *The consequences of modernity*. His criticism on postmodernity, as he prefers to call it, is more scholarly than Beck's. He uses the criticisms of postmodernism to disclose the weaknesses of the classical sociological theory of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim – who viewed the process of modernization almost exclusively in positive terms. They and their followers had been blind to the dangers of ecological crises, totalitarianism, and industrialization of war – dangers that became more explicit during the twentieth century. Their theories are too unilinear, too reductionist, too strongly convinced of progress, too Europe-centric, too rational. Thus, Giddens proposes that social scientists should move away from evolutionism, historical teleology, and the favourable position of the West in their theories.

Like Beck, he argues that we are still living in modernity, though no longer in the classical modernity but rather in a 'radicalized modernity'; like Beck, he sees this as a continuation of modernity – radicalization – and not as a rupture with modernity as the postmodernists would have it. In his book Giddens compares post-modernity with radicalized modernity.²⁵ The features of radicalized modernity are characterized by the understanding that its conditions are the result of historical processes and agency, while the features of postmodernity are mostly explained in terms of epistemology and powerlessness. In the way Giddens characterizes radicalized modernity, he concedes that the future is uncertain and risky, but at the same time he attacks the idea of

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

²⁵ Giddens, *Consequences of modernity*, 150.



Illustration 2 Heads of delegations at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris. (source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/presidenciamx/23430273715/>.)

powerlessness. This is typically Giddens and fits with his structuration theory.²⁶ In this theory he highlights the relationship between structure and agency. He emphasizes the open character of developments by saying that structures are constraining and enabling – in other words, always opening new opportunities even when they are closing others.²⁷

Thus, both Giddens and Beck agree with the post-modernists that a new period started in the last decades of the twentieth century, but both underscore that this new period does not imply a rupture with the modern period. Instead, they see it as a transition within the modern period. Beck is perhaps most close to the postmodernists with his emphasis on the role of knowledge in the contemporary world and, more to the point, of not knowing. His view on the future is therefore cautiously optimistic. Giddens agrees with Beck that the future cannot be planned, and that more knowledge does not imply more mastery and control of the historical process, as the Enlightenment and modernity would have it. New knowledge changes the situation, and there is no chosen social class predestined to master the future, as Marx thought and taught. In other words, like Beck, he distances himself markedly from modernization theory and Marxism. Giddens characterizes radi-

²⁶ Cfr. Anton Schuurman, 'Mensen maken verschil. Sociale theorie, historische sociologie en geschiedenis', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 22 (1996) 168-205;

²⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The constitution of society. Outline of the theory of structuration* (Cambridge 1984).

calized modernity as a 'high opportunity, high risk society', but he also explains how humans are not powerless and can change their world.²⁸

Giddens' creed is that, although the future is open, we can try to create a preferred situation by utopian realism. Utopian, that is, because there is no certainty that it will succeed, realism because collectively we can make plans that have a probability of success. A prime example of utopian realism in the spirit of Giddens is, in my view, the Paris Agreement from 2015. This climate treaty does not represent a modernist treaty, which prescribes everything, but rather a roadmap which asks for the continuous input, monitoring, and interplay of science, experience, and political action.²⁹

In their discussion with postmodernism, Beck and Giddens do not just take postmodernism seriously and provide alternative approaches, but, perhaps even more important, they identify significant developments that became prevalent around the 1970s and have become dominant nowadays. Their work helps us to see that the changed circumstances of the 1970s are another cause for the paradox De Vries observes and another reason that social science history encountered headwinds. In a sense, social science history was linked with a strong belief in technocracy, with planning, with a secular belief in automatic and enduring progress – its accomplishments and beliefs perhaps best symbolized by the successful moon mission of Apollo 11 in 1969. Social science history's claims, however, seemed at odds with the events and experiences of the time, as I demonstrated above. Its focus on quantification, definitions, causality, universality was too one-sided, making it appear to belong more to the world of simple modernity than to the world of reflexive or radicalized modernity that was coming into being and in which we are still living.

Transitions and transformations. Processes and mechanisms of social change. The contribution of the discipline of history

Like the postmodernists, Beck and Giddens have made us aware that we are living in a different period of modernity that calls for its own way of approaching history. While postmodernism questions 'grand narra-

28 Anthony Giddens, *Turbulent and mighty continent. What future for Europe?* (Cambridge 2014) 12.

29 UN Climate Change, 'The Paris Agreement', <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>.

tives', Beck and Giddens highlight the importance of reflecting on our position in time and asking big questions. Within the discipline of history there have been similar discussions. In *Telling the truth about history* (1994) Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob defended history writing against its exaggerated rejection by postmodernists for trying to construct an overarching narrative that can be discussed using scientific arguments.³⁰ This aligns with the discussion that was started some years ago by Jo Guldi and David Armitage with their book *The history manifesto*.³¹ They claimed that history writing did not pay enough attention to long-term and important societal debates. This manifesto has been seen as an attack on micro-history and cultural history, as heirs to the postmodernists' revolution.³² The debate was more or less dead-on-arrival because it was convincingly demonstrated that Guldi and Armitage started from the wrong premise. Historians were in fact doing relevant research.³³ Jan de Vries' *Changing the narrative* article can be seen as a contribution to this discussion and as a rejection of its main thesis. In particular, he shares Guldi's and Armitage's criticism of micro-history, and has expanded his own criticism on micro-history in a follow-up article, 'Playing with scales'.³⁴ In his eyes, however, Guldi and Armitage are as much a part of the problem as of the solution. His assessment is that 'a re-engagement with the social sciences does not figure in their vision for the future of the discipline'.³⁵ In other words, the Guldi and Armitage manifesto suffers from the same problems as the micro-history that they attack.

The Guldi and Armitage manifesto, however, was not alone in questioning the relevance of writing history and in arguing for it. In 2011 Richard Wolin writes in the *American Historical Review*: 'Some historians turned to microhistory, unearthing vast stores of detail about the minutiae of historical life – to what end, however?'³⁶ A year later, in

30 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the truth about history* (New York, London 1994).

31 Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The history manifesto* (Cambridge 2015).

32 Lynn Hunt, 'Faut-il réinitialiser l'histoire?', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 70 (2015) 319-325.

33 D. Cohen, and P. Mandler, 'The history manifesto. A critique', *American Historical Review* 120 (2015) 530-542; Leo Lucassen, 'Working together. New directions in global labour history', *Journal of Global History* 11 (2016) 66-87.

34 Jan De Vries, 'Playing with scales. The global and the micro, the macro and the nano', *Past and Present* 242: Supplement 14 (2019) 23-37.

35 De Vries, 'Changing the narrative', 331.

36 Richard Wolin, "Modernity". The peregrinations of a contested historiographical concept', *The American Historical Review* 116 (2011) 750. The proliferation is well documented in: Peter Burke (ed.), *New perspectives on historical writing* (Cambridge 1991) and in Marek Tamm and Peter Burke (eds.), *Debating new approaches to history* (London 2020).

2012, Gary Wilder comments in the same journal: ‘disciplinary history today is distinguished by a proliferation of topical turns and a poverty of timely questions.’³⁷ Implicitly historians have engaged with these challenges and the societal challenges of the time and, in doing so, have created a field much richer than the one characterized by the antagonism of social science history versus narrative history, as highlighted by Jan de Vries.³⁸ They did work on new frameworks, concepts, and examples that help to construct a cumulative story and that help to understand our contemporary world in which these questions of transitions and transformations are central.

This section of my article, then, discusses three important ways of engaging with transitions and transformations, which I consider to be the dominating themes of the New History, and which fit with Beck’s and Giddens’ ideas on reflexive modernity. What is special about them is that they focus on the analysis of the transition processes proper. Often when historians or other social scientists discuss the transition from one period to another, they analyze them in terms of change from one situation to another, but the actual transition process itself is discussed less specifically. Our knowledge of transition processes is limited because there are so many variables and interactions. The three books discussed here provide concepts to study transition processes and to clarify, in fact, what Beck called the process of metamorphosis.

These books are written by well-known, established scholars – who continued to do social science history in the period that De Vries tells us narrative history was booming. North is a Nobel Prize laureate, Sassen has received many honours and awards, and McNeill received the Heineken Prize.³⁹ Moreover, they engage with themes that are central to our time: the organization of society, globalization and sustainability, or the importance of ecology. Finally, and significantly, they introduce stimulating concepts and approaches that are fruitful for analyzing large processes of change. I am not arguing that they follow the programme, theories, and concepts of Beck and/or Giddens. Yet they do react to the same societal and scientific challenges, and their concepts and approaches have a strong affinity with Beck’s and Giddens’ ideas. They, too, address and contest the dominant theories of the post-

37 Gary Wilder, ‘AHR Forum: From optic to topic. The foreclosure effect of historiographic turns’, *American Historical Review* 117 (2012) 744-745.

38 Cf. Pim de Zwart, ‘The future of global economic history. Regional comparisons to address global questions’, *TSEG* 15:2-3 (2017) 129-142.

39 Cf. KNAW, ‘John R. McNeill’, <https://www.knaw.nl/en/awards/heineken-prizes/john-r-mcneill>.

war decades and at the same time want to preserve the basic principles of modernity. In this way they have improved the rather timeless social science history at the same moment that the social sciences themselves have tried to get rid of their ahistorical approach.⁴⁰ Most of all, though, they showed us the way to do something in which scholars seldom succeed: analyze processes of transition and transformation themselves.

The organization of society – North, Wallis, and Weingast

In recent decades economics, too, has become less abstract and acknowledged the importance of context and actors – the work of and the Nobel prizes for North and Fogel, Oström and Thaller bear witness to this. Within history institutional economics plays a dominant role.⁴¹ Especially Acemoglu and Robinson with their book *Why nations fail* as well as North, Wallis, and Weingast with their book *Violence and social orders* try to use long term historical analyses for a better diagnosis of what is happening in our time.⁴²

The book by North, Wallis, and Weingast stands out for their main innovation and central attack on sociological theories: the monopoly on violence by the state is not a given but has to be acquired. One cannot define it away by saying that the state has the monopoly on violence as the sociologists do, following Weber. This shift opens the way for making a distinction between two kinds of societies: those in which the monopoly on violence is in the hands of the state and those where this is not the case. The latter they call ‘limited access societies’ or ‘natural states’ and the former ‘open access societies’. This distinction is of a totally different order than the one between traditional or modern. It is much more open to empirical investigation and unlocks many new avenues for interpretation of past and present developments.

Moreover, it is really helpful that they not only make a distinction between ‘open access societies’ and ‘limited access societies’ or ‘natural states’ but that, in order to get a better idea of the process of change, they also make a distinction among fragile, stable, and mature natural states

40 Drukker, *The revolution that bit its own tail*.

41 Jan Luiten van Zanden and Arthur van Riel, *The strictures of inheritance. The Dutch economy in the nineteenth century* (Princeton 2004); Bas van Bavel, *Manors and markets. Economy and society in the Low Countries, 500-1600* (Oxford 2010); Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Nederland en het poldermodel. Sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland, 1000-2000* (Amsterdam 2013).

42 Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why nations fail. The origins of power, prosperity, and poverty* (New York 2012); Douglass C. North, John J. Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and social orders. A conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history* (Cambridge 2009).

based on the support of organizations. In this way they give more depth to the past which is necessary to gain more depth in a view of the future.

Even so, they do not stop with simply characterizing societies – it would saddle us with the same problems as, for example, the distinction between feudalism and capitalism. When does the one end and the other begin? They pay attention to what is in fact most difficult to analyze: the transition process proper. To do this they conceptualize three ‘doorstep conditions’: rule of law for elites; perpetually lived forms of public and private elite organizations; consolidated political control of the military. By formulating these doorsteps, they open an immense field of research.

North, Wallis, and Weingast also do not consider the open access society to be the end of history, as modernists do, and demonstrate their radical rupture with the idea of progress. They emphasize on the one hand that the natural state is the default, not the open access society. On the other hand, they are aware that, apart from the fact that open societies can become natural states again, open access societies will need to adapt themselves to new circumstances and, by their very nature, cannot remain the same over time:

We are continually faced by the fact that our world is changing so rapidly that we have to employ adaptive efficiency to keep up with it. What we mean by adaptive efficiency is that we create an institutional framework that encourages experimentation when we run into new problems, such as the financial crisis we face today. Since the problems are new and novel, we do not have a theory to explain them, so we experiment with new ideas, new policy measures, and new intuitional arrangements.⁴³

This way of approaching contemporary problems is not that different from Beck, who told us to keep the principles of modernity but change the institutions. In a speech, North demonstrated the practical value of his analysis. He told his audience about his experience as an advisor to the World Bank and how the Bank has attempted to change societies into open access ones. These attempts have failed.

The reason is very straightforward. The policies the Bank encourages are policies that work in open access societies: competition, free markets, property rights that are secure. In a limited access society, in which the

43 Douglass North, ‘Violence and social orders’, *The Annual Proceedings of the Wealth and Wellbeing of Nations* 1 (2009) 19-28, 27. Retrieved 12 July 2021 from <https://www.beloit.edu/live/files/124-upton-annual-proceedings-volume-i-2008-2009>.

doorstep conditions are not fulfilled, policies that work in open access societies undermine the very security of the elites. Violence becomes the order of the day. The problem is evident in Iraq today. Iraq is a classic case of having broken down a limited access society and not having replaced it with anything, and we are in the midst of trying to figure out how to deal with such a situation—not very effectively, I might add.⁴⁴

By analyzing these processes with the help of their framework North, Wallis, and Weingast avoid the essentialistic discussion that some societies are not fit for democracy and, on the other hand, the voluntaristic position that every society can be changed overnight. In other words, they provide us with a framework that is not teleological, explain a mechanism (the doorsteps) by which natural states can become open states, in addition to another mechanism within open societies (adaptive efficiency) that helps these societies to adjust to changing conditions without a guarantee of success.

Globalization – Saskia Sassen

Saskia Sassen has risen to fame with her work on global cities.⁴⁵ She is not trained as a historian, but her book *Territory, Authority and Rights* is an example of social science history. Sassen analyses how, from the Middle Ages onward, territory was governed and how rule by law was implemented.⁴⁶ Her point is to remind her readers that before the world was organized into nation-states it was organized differently, and that nation-states will not be the final form of governance. She puts considerable effort into arguing that the new forms of governance are the outcome of processes of change by which capabilities get new meaning, because they function within a different context. Her main example is the contemporary process of globalization. She offers a new interpretation of this process: in her view, globalization implies not just the creation of new global organizations and institutions but, and perhaps even more so, implies a new role of nation-states and existing institutions within the context of globalization. Like Beck, she wishes to stress that the present evolves from the past – what Beck, again, calls metamorphosis.⁴⁷ To analyze this she uses concepts such as capabilities and tipping points.⁴⁸

44 *Ibid.*, 24.

45 Saskia Sassen, *The global city. New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton 1991).

46 *Idem*, *Territory, authority, rights. From medieval to global assemblages* (Princeton 2006).

47 Beck, *The metamorphosis of the world*.

48 Sassen, *Territory, authority and rights*, 6-11.

She interprets (as do others – Rodrik, for example)⁴⁹ the Bretton Woods system not as the beginning of a global economy but, rather, as a capability that functioned after 1945 within an international order of nation-states.⁵⁰ The Bretton Woods system as such does not typify globalization. On the contrary, the Bretton Woods system contained international rules and organizations in order to protect the functioning of the nation-states. From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, however, the same Bretton Woods institutions started to function in a different way, supporting a global world where (almost) free movement of finances and goods existed. Although the US government had already in the 1950s urged for open economies with the intention of helping US corporations, from the 1970s onwards a global economy took shape in which the whole world became one workplace. In the fortunate phrase of Castells: ‘We are not living in a global village, but in customized cottages globally produced and locally distributed.’⁵¹ Sassen emphasizes that this transformation could only have happened because of changes within the nation-states. One change that she elaborates on in particular is the strengthening of the role of the executive, which received a boost after the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001.⁵² This analysis, published in 2006, puts the Trump presidency in a more clarifying and less accidental context.

Her concepts (capabilities and tipping points) enable Sassen to focus on processes of change; to explain how the new is not created from scratch but from existing organizations and institutions that acquire a different meaning; how, in a way, change is constantly being prepared but does not necessarily have to happen, because it is dependent upon many interacting developments and agents within changing power structures. Although these concepts are much more difficult to apply to ongoing processes than to historical ones, they sensitize our way of addressing contemporary social changes.

The role of the environment and ecology – John McNeill

The book *An environmental history of the twentieth-century world* by John McNeill is in a way the historical answer to the books by Beck and

49 Dani Rodrik, *The globalization paradox. Democracy and the future of the world economy* (New York 2011).

50 Sassen, *Territory, authority and rights*, 157-168.

51 Manuel Castells, *The information age. Economy society and culture*. Volume I: *The rise of the network society* (Oxford 1996) 341.

52 Sassen, *Territory, authority and rights*, 168-184.

Giddens.⁵³ Although it is remarkably matter of fact, plain, and seemingly a-theoretical, it is not just story-telling. McNeill has written a methodological and analytical book – and the story it tells is impressive. The main message of the book is: ‘Modern history written as if the life-support systems of the planet were stable, present only in the background of human affairs, is not only incomplete but it is misleading’.⁵⁴

It is an important corrective to the progress view of history and how history has been taught for a long time at universities and schools. Like Beck, McNeill tells us that our ecological problems are the inseparable side effects of economic progress. He demonstrates that the (long) twentieth century was different from all preceding centuries not only because of the pace of economic growth, population growth, and growth of technology, but also because of the pace of environmental degradation. In a subsequent book he would call this the great acceleration.⁵⁵ Interestingly enough, we humans learn most from our direct experience, but this time we should ‘forget’ the recent successes of the twentieth century in which the Malthusian ceiling was shattered – it was a once in a civilization-time experience that cannot be repeated.

McNeill also makes no secret about who is to blame for environmental degradation: humankind. The only thing he did not do in 2000 was invent the term ‘Anthropocene’, which was popularized in that same year and which covers exactly what his book is about. He writes: ‘Many specific [environmental] outcomes were in a sense accidental. But the general trend of increasing human impact and influence [...] was no accident. It was, while unintended, strongly determined by the trajectories of human history.’⁵⁶

Like Beck and Giddens, he is not only aware that this outcome is the result of human actions but also that it has not been a planned outcome. In fact, at many places in his book he argues that the future is unpredictable. ‘The future, even the fairly near future, is not merely unknowable; it is inherently uncertain. Some scenarios are more likely than others, no doubt, but nothing is fixed.’⁵⁷ Variables are accelerating and interacting with each other in unforeseeable ways. Interestingly enough for our current situation, in which the world has been hit by the

53 John R. McNeill, *Something new under the sun. An environmental history of the twentieth-century world* (New York 2000).

54 *Ibid.*, 362.

55 John R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The great acceleration* (Cambridge (MA) 2016).

56 McNeill, *Something new under the sun*, 356.

57 *Ibid.*, 358.

Covid-19 pandemic, he discusses in his book one of the greatest success stories of the twentieth century, the defeat of diseases by preventive and curative medicine, though without getting triumphant. On the contrary, he warns that it remains a continuous struggle without guarantees. In this regard, too, we cannot trust that our experiences of the twentieth century will be repeated as a matter of course.

When he turns his attention to the drivers of twentieth-century history, he applies the term coevolution to the processes of interacting change in order to create some coherence and to give insight into what would otherwise be a surrender to chaos and ignorance: ‘Technologies, energy regimes, and economic systems coevolved, occasionally forming revolutionary clusters, but this was only part of the picture. These clusters in turn coevolved with society and the environment in the twentieth century, as at all times [...] while all three codetermined one another ...’⁵⁸ He then goes a step further and sketches the different roles technology, society, and environment have played in time:

In prior centuries, the environment played a stronger role in influencing society and technologies, whereas in the twentieth century, technology’s role [...] expanded and shaped society and environment more than in the past. But if certain environmental perturbations, [...], prove fundamental, then the equation will be revised again in the direction of a stronger determinative role for the (new) environment’.⁵⁹

In other words, he cautiously provides the reader with a grand narrative. What we see here is a historian who has learned the lessons of the past decades without conceding to postmodernism. He acknowledges the limitations on knowledge and agency, and he accepts that the future is uncertain due to interacting processes of co-evolution of technology, society and the environment. At the same time, though, he makes clear that humans can gain an understanding of what is going on and are therefore not powerless. There is no reason for despair or ossification.

North, Wallis, and Weingast, as well as Sassen, and McNeill are a heterogeneous group of social science historians. I bring them here together because they all practice a forward-looking way of history, as it was once advocated by Peter Laslett – one of the pioneers of the social

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 314.

science history.⁶⁰ They use history to inform and diagnose our current situation, which they therefore need to understand as an ongoing process, though not necessarily as a continuing process. North, Wallis, and Weingast analyze the metamorphosis of the limited access society into the open access society; Sassen, the metamorphosis of a world of nation-states into a globalized world; and McNeill, the metamorphosis of the motown cluster (as he calls the technology driven by oil, electricity, assembly lines, and automobiles) towards a genetic and informatic cluster. They all use former changes to inform later processes of transition and transformation. North, Wallis, and Weingast study developments within the limited access societies; Sassen, the transition from the medieval world to the world of nation states, and McNeill, among other processes, the transition from coketown to motown. Finally, they all address issues that are of fundamental interest for our contemporary world: the organization of society, globalization, and the link between the economic successes of the twentieth century and its environmental disasters.

Conclusion

I have argued that the rise of social science history was not just hampered for scientific reasons but also for societal reasons – as sociologists like Beck and Giddens were quick to show. Our world, the conditions in which we are living, has changed manifestly since the 1970s and calls for a more open, process-oriented attitude than modernization theory, Marxism, and structuralism could offer.⁶¹ We experience nowadays a world confronted with multiple challenges and promises – political, economic, social, environmental, cultural.⁶² Luckily, we have got past the simple choice between causal history and storytelling. As I have shown in my third section, significant new possibilities have opened up with the rise of social science history after the World War II, especially from the 1970s onwards. Historians and, in particular, social science historians are in a good position to answer big questions.

60 Laslett, 'The character of familial history'.

61 Cfr. E. Akyeampong, C. Arni, P.K. Crossley, M. Hewitson and W.H. Sewell, 'AHR conversation explaining historical change; Or, the lost history of causes', *American Historical Review* 120 (2015) 1369-1423.

62 Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The age of sustainable development* (New York 2015); Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank you for being late. An optimist's guide to thriving in the age of accelerations* (New York 2016); Thomas Hale and David Held (eds.), *Beyond Gridlock* (Cambridge 2017).

History has much to gain from approaches informed by social theorists like Beck and Giddens, in addition to guidance from examples and concepts like those of North, Wallis, and Weingast, as well as Sassen, and McNeill. These authors and their work can help us to handle our contemporary issues on the renewal of democracy, globalization, and sustainability. Their approach to history can help us to cope with uncertainty and with the limitations of knowledge and agency, yet without succumbing to a feeling of powerlessness, anxiety, and anger. This is so because they focus on the process of transition itself. They understand the present as an ongoing but not necessarily continuous process. In this way they practice, and show how to practice, what Beck and Giddens preach when they write about utopian realism and metamorphosis. Painstakingly, they try to understand processes and mechanisms of going beyond questions of continuity and discontinuity. They demonstrate that the new emerges slowly and not always progressively or successfully from the old.

Naturally, I am not claiming that they are the only ones. I hope the reader of this article takes joy in adding their own examples. Neither do I claim that this approach is restricted to contemporary history. A recent book that fits well into what I have analyzed here is Mischa Meier's *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung*.⁶³ One of the things he does in this book is to analyze the long transition from the Roman world to the Middle Ages, revealing how difficult it is to tell where the one ends and the other begins. His point, however, is not to complicate this transition but to clarify it.

History is not just about gaining better knowledge of and insight into the past. It is another way of engaging with the present. Historical knowledge by itself does not solve contemporary problems, but history certainly will help in providing a better diagnosis for contemporary problems and a firmer ground in formulating answers to those challenges. Moreover, it will contribute to an understanding of the historical process as a work of co-evolution between technologies, societies, environments, and cultures, as interactive processes that we shape but do not command. The historical process is therefore inherently uncertain. As in our own life, things may happen for better or worse; so, too, in our collective life we should not be amazed that besides prosperous times there will be drawbacks. This attitude should lead the way in how we write and teach history, so as to enable a better mindset for the challen-

63 Mischa Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung: Europa, Asien und Afrika vom 3. bis zum 8. Jahrhundert nach Christus* (München 2019).

ges that we will encounter in the ups and downs of the future. We are no sleepwalkers, as some would have it,⁶⁴ but based on the pluriform approaches developed in the last decades within history and the other social sciences, we can be self-conscious (reflexive, utopian realist) agents in an ever adventurous and hazardous world.⁶⁵

About the author

Anton Schuurman (1953) is an emeritus associate professor for the Rural and Environmental History Group at Wageningen University. Currently he is finishing a book, in Dutch, on the making of Dutch agriculture from 1840-1920. For more information see his website: antonschuurman.eu.

E-mail: anton.schuurman@wur.nl

64 Chris Wickham, *Sleepwalking into a new world. The emergence of Italian city communes in the twelfth century* (Princeton 2015).

65 Cfr. Schuurman, 'Mensen maken verschil', 204; Idem, 'Over ruimte en het publieke domein'; Idem, 'Blauwalgen en de eenentwintigste eeuw', in: Josephine Hoegaerts, Yves Segers and Siegfried Evens (eds.), *Bestiarium. Dieren, mensen en hun sociale geschiedenis* (Leuven 2018) 15-21.