In *Logics of History*, William H. Sewell Jr. critiques the method and theoretical underpinnings of the scholarship produced in the fields of the social sciences, and in the “amphibious” field of history, which straddles the line between humanities and social sciences. His reasons for doing this are roughly threefold. First, he chronicles creation of categories, and the subsequent rifts the 20th century wrought between the “social” and the “cultural,” between the social sciences and the humanities, and between the quantifiable and the linguistic. Second, he re-examines his own historical scholarship, and the anthropological research of Marshall Sahlins and Clifford Geertz. In these chapters he examines how theoretical structure can be blended with historical temporality, and quantitative and interpretive methods should be applied in unity to produce quality scholarship. Third, Sewell argues that, above all, scholars should be explicit about both methodology and ontology. He notes tendency of social scientists to ignore the ontology that governs their fields, or even their failure to account for the meaning of “social.” Likewise, recent historians have been guilty of a wholesale rejection of the quantitative and structural methods of social science, while unreservedly embracing semiotics (usually linguistic), and cultural anthropology. Used in isolation, these approaches are only part of a whole, an incomplete and ultimately unsatisfying picture.

Sewell attempts to address these problems, not definitively, but at least through a lifetime of work. His dual position as an historian and political scientist give Sewell a unique perspective on the benefits and shortcomings of both history and the social sciences. In addition, he admits to an evolution of thought in his own work which mirrors

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academic trends between the 1960s and the 2000s, and which is based in changes in thought and historical circumstances over those four decades. Through case studies and personal examples, Sewell is able to explore his own early dissatisfaction with the purely quantitative of work in the social sciences, and in the new social history of the 1960s that ignored historical temporality or eventfulness. He is also able to talk about the shift in the field of history towards a cultural approach, which was initially tied closely to the trajectory of the anthropological field in the 20th century.

Because historians have, to a greater extent, engaged the concepts, structures and theories of the social sciences in recent decades, Sewell’s argument places a greater burden on the social sciences to adopt or integrate historical thinking into their own scholarship. The dialogue between history and the social sciences has been largely one-sided, and thus is no dialogue at all. He doesn’t let historians off the hook, however, for their own rejection of quantitative or structural methods. He calls for an end to what he sees as the artificial distinctions between quantitative methodology and interpretive methodology (or hermeneutics). Strongly against “epistemological dualism,” Sewell bridges the gap with a theory of hermeneutic quantification. Furthermore, in a most collegial way, Sewell has asked for further debate by professionals in both the humanities and the social sciences. While Sewell’s objective in Logics of History is more or less explicit, his writing is imbued with genuine awareness of the shifting nature of history and the social sciences, and humility about the place of his own scholarship within those contexts. In the spirit of engaging with Sewell’s conclusions, I will attempt to the best of my ability to trace the evolution of his theoretical approach, describe the concepts that are essential to it, and then talk about the implications of Sewell’s theory for existing scholarship, and for my own work as well.

The Case for Hermeneutical Quantification

To make the case for hermeneutical quantification, Sewell has assembled ten pieces of work that span seventeen years—a period between 1988 and 2005. Clearly Sewell’s own

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2 See Sewell, 5.
3 Sewell, 370.
interest in the topic is long-standing, and has evolved alongside the changes in the historical and social science fields over those seventeen years. His premise is dually stated in his second and his final chapters—that cultural historians would benefit from reintroducing quantitative data, mechanical structures and theory into their work; similarly social scientists would benefit from the introduction of historical temporality, and hermeneutic investigation. It comes as no surprise, then, that these two chapters represent the culmination of the work in *Logics of History*. They were the last two chapters to be written, in 2005 and 2001, respectively.\(^4\)

Sewell’s arrangement of the book in non-chronological order says something about his intended purpose. *Logics of History* begins in a relatively concrete way, and finishes in the abstractions that are so familiar to social scientists. Sewell begins with an introduction to a problem between the field of history, and its relatives in the social sciences—including anthropology, political science, economics, and sociology. In many ways his first and second chapters (“Theory, History and Social Science,” and “The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History, or, Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian”) seem directed at historians. He first illuminates the different ways historians and social scientists approach the world, and the strengths of each group. In the case of historians, their understanding of social temporality “as fateful, contingent, complex, eventful, and heterogeneous,” is the basis for an implicit theory of history.\(^5\)

The problem with this theoretical approach is that historians don’t consider it a theory at all, but see it as “professional common sense” based on “reading other historians and internalizing the ways they narrate accounts of historical change and continuity.”\(^6\)

While Sewell appreciates the unstated, intrinsic historical understanding of social temporality, he is troubled by the lack of explicit conceptual grounding in most historical narratives. Historians themselves would benefit from an increased awareness of their own thought processes and ontological assumptions. Furthermore, readers in and outside the


\(^5\) Sewell, 11.

\(^6\) Sewell, 11.
discipline would benefit from an unambiguous discussion of the theories and assumptions at work in the texts.

If historians have trouble making clear their assumptions about the nature of the world, Sewell would argue that social scientists have the same problem. Prefacing his discussion of the meaning, uses and reintroduction of the social into the social sciences, Sewell suggests that social scientists have overemphasized their methodology and left their ontology unspecified. This is a gap for which there is no accounting, because “methodologies in fact always imply ontologies, whether stated or assumed.” Furthermore, Sewell believes that social scientists should “conceptualize the social explicitly,” rather than let “conceptualizations be unstated an unexamined corollaries of . . . methodological positions.”7 This is a very similar message to the one he espouses for historians.

Ultimately, Sewell does not believe that historians are doing their work without using structure, theory, or quantitative methods—but rather they are hiding those things from view . . . or even have failed to recognize their existence at all. Likewise, even the most positivist social scientists use hermeneutical investigation to gain “enough sense of the inherent structures of their quantitative ‘texts’ to be able to ‘read’ them effectively, to plumb their depths.”8 And social science methodologies imply both ontologies and assumptions about the meaning of “social,” regardless of whether they have been made explicit in the scholarship, or if, in fact, the scholar in question is aware of them. Sewell approaches the historical audience first—as it is more likely to be receptive of the ideas herein, as neither convinced positivists or resolute postmodernists9—and finishes with his appeal to the more entrenched social sciences. Sewell advocates explicit hermeneutical quantification, or the integration of interpretive and structural methods. But how has this been done, or can this be done effectively?

Case Studies

7 Sewell, 320.
8 Sewell, 371. Here, Sewell’s use of quotation marks around “text” and “read” is meant to imply a linguistic, semiotic use of quantitative data to show that there is little incompatibility between quantitative and interpretive evidence, and how we understand them.
9 Sewell, 177.
Between the two parallel statements of intent at the beginning and end of *Logics of History*, Sewell has included essays intended to bridge the gap between the fields, clarify the terms which are essential to history and the social sciences but which remain undefined, and to provide case studies of what a more seamless blending of history and social science concepts would look like. His first case study is really an exploration of the popularity of Clifford Geertz among historians. An anthropological ambassador to history, Geertz has provided several ideas which are ontologically crucial to contemporary historians, and which provide a bridge between practitioners of semiotic analysis, and mechanical or structural analysis.¹⁰

First, Sewell talks in a more general sense about the “revelation of anthropology.” In this case, the revelation he is referring to is the concept that the world is “contingent rather than necessary.”¹¹ Historians feel a particular affinity for this concept of the world because their own concept of the past as unfamiliar can be considered analogous to the anthropological investigation of the (contemporaneous) exotic and foreign. Both fields can portray an open-ended, non-deterministic view of the world. The second concept Sewell addresses is Geertz’s use of synchrony in his work. Sewell describes synchrony not as a moment in time, but as a suspension of time, in which (for Geertz, and others) it is possible to draw together the multiple symbols and practices that make up a culture. These threads come not from one moment, but from many, and yet they are all present at any given moment Geertz chooses to document.¹²

On the face of it, synchrony has the appearance of being ahistorical. History is generally conceived as diachronic: a series of unfolding events. Sewell argues that the concept of synchrony is essential to history, even as diachronism is acceptable, but not essential. Here, Sewell gives examples of acclaimed historical work that is almost solely synchronic, such as Robert Darnton’s article, “The Great Cat Massacre.” Rather than simply tell the story of the event itself (the massacre) and then explain the ramifications of it for the individuals involved, Darnton, chooses to explain the specific *gestalt* of the period

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¹⁰ One of several ambassadors of anthropology to history. Sewell mentions Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict as well. Sewell, 175.
¹¹ Sewell, 179. The phrase “revelation of anthropology” comes from Gayle Rubin. A second revelation from the world of anthropology to the historical field might be the introduction of the term “culture,” as we use and understand it in contemporary history. I will address this later on in the paper.
¹² Sewell, 181-182.
through language, jokes, art, literature, assumptions, class structure, ceremonies, superstitions, and other elements that come together from a variety of times and places to affect this one particular moment.13 In this way he gets at why the event might have occurred in the first place.

This does not mean there isn’t a place for diachrony in history—simply that, on its own, it is not enough. Even in the most diachronic of narratives (and here I am thinking of David Hackett Fischer’s Champlain’s Dream, and Jonathan Spence’s God’s Chinese Son) incorporate synchrony into their narratives. If they hadn’t, they would surely have been less successful. Fischer and Spence solve the problem of synchrony in very different ways—but the fact that they do solve it is essential to the respectability and longevity of their work. Much of Fischer’s synchrony, in a narrative that is very eventful, can be found in his appendices, which give a fuller and richer picture of the world in which Champlain lived and worked, but which seemingly have no place in the narrative itself.14 Spence’s incorporation of synchrony is direct. Before introducing the Taiping movement, or even tracing the events that led to it, Spence immerses the reader in the world of 1830s China, which includes the non-temporal elements of ancestor worship, ethnic tension, Western trade, and the Confucian educational system—all elements that arrive from various times to affect a single moment.15 There is one type of work that lends itself almost solely to diachronic narrative, and in which there appears to be an absence of synchrony, and that is the field of “big history.” If there is a presence of synchrony at all, it is so large as to be meaningless.

If synchrony as an historical concept makes a great deal of sense,16 then what are its implications for the social sciences? Sewell correlates them in this way: the presence of synchrony indicates a cultural structure, or a system. Geertz, in particular, makes a connection between cultural patterning and genetic programming. This Geertzian relation of the biological to the linguistic or symbolic is the first part of Sewell’s attempt to bridge the theoretical gap—he writes that “semiotic systems are not unworldly or ghostly or

16 Sewell says this with aplomb on page 185.
imaginary; they are as integral to the life of our species as respiration, digestion, or reproduction. Materialists, this suggests, should stop worrying and love the symbol.”¹⁷ So, what makes Geertz so vilified by some in the social sciences is his willingness to understand the semiotic and the structural as parts of a whole. Presumably for Sewell, this too is a revelation.

Sewell doesn't allow us to linger too long in the world of synchrony. He follows a chapter reuniting the symbol with structure (through synchrony), with a chapter that intends to reunite structure with event.¹⁸ He does this using the work and theory of Marshall Sahlins, a structuralist anthropologist. To give the proper context for this, Sewell relates the turn away from an eventful narrative history, to a form of history that examines “structures of long duration,” a phenomenon which began with the French Annales school of social history. Sahlins, Sewell argues, returns the event to the structure, and in so doing provides a theory of event that is indispensable to historians.

Sahlins’s work, as related by Sewell in this chapter, proposes a theory of structure and event as related to one another: “Events, in Sahlins’s reformulation, are transformations of structure, and structure is the cumulative outcome of past events.”¹⁹ One cannot exist without the other—events can only occur within a cultural structure, and the cultural structure is created from prior events. Sahlins's work to demonstrate this has to do with Hawaiian tabu (cultural structure), the violation of tabu in Hawaii at Captain Cook’s arrival to the islands (the event) and the subsequent change in the cultural tabu system (the new structure).²⁰ It is important to realize that in this theory of event, the only events that are of any importance are those that shape and alter structures. While the case might be made that any event changes a structure, however slightly, this emphasizes “turning points,” or paradigms in history.

In some ways this concept of structure, and the influence that events have upon it, bears some similarity to Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.²¹ A text originally intended for the sciences to explain how paradigms (or critical changes in

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¹⁷ Sewell, 189.
¹⁸ It’s enough to make your head hurt, really!
¹⁹ Sewell, 199.
²⁰ Sewell, 202-209.
structure) occurred, Kuhn’s work was picked up quickly by the social sciences, and to some extent history, in a movement that dovetailed with the rising schools of social history and the move away from event-based narrative. However, Sahlins’s theory incorporates culture (the crucial anthropological element) and its basis in symbol.

It would be interesting to see how Sewell (or Sahlins) might see a work like Donald Worster’s *Dust Bowl*, in which the event, which appears natural and not culturally created on the surface, is portrayed as the result of a cultural structure—capitalism. *Dust Bowl* appears to me to be a peculiar application of this theory of event. Clearly Worster believes that the event, the dust bowl, occurs because of the overfarming of land that is directly correlated with the capitalist ethos that pervades America. However, it is difficult to see a change in structure based on the event. This is surprising, since clearly the event is a momentous one—but perhaps it cannot be classified as event using Sahlins’s theory, because capitalism retained its hold on American culture. On the other hand, small changes in structure may be noted—the rise of regulation, and of government subsidies—which can surely be classified as a structural change in American politics.

Following his introduction of Sahlins’s theory of event, Sewell provides a case study from his own work, which uses an historical event (the taking of the Bastille) to explain the transformation of structures by events. Sewell begins the case study with what amounts to a narrative account of the taking of the Bastille. He then follows this narrative with a complex account of how he has used the historical events in question as “dislocations and transformative rearticulations of structures.” While this can seem cumbersome, Sewell sees this as an important process of making explicit the author’s assumptions, and his use of categories to create meaning from the event. In addition to events rearticulating structures and transforming culture, he explains them as shaped by particular conditions, as characterized by heightened emotion, as acts of collective creativity, as punctuated by ritual, as spatial and temporal processes, and more. His conclusions, based on the discussion he provides, still leave the event, the taking of the Bastille, breathtakingly open for other interpretations. This is because the transformation that Sewell has chosen to link

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23 Sewell, 245.
to the event is not the only transformation that came from the taking of the Bastille. In this way, event, structure, narrative and synchrony can exist in exciting fluidity, always ready for further exploration by social scientists or historians.

Sewell ends his case studies with the oldest piece of work included in Logics of History, and the one that probably speaks most effectively to social scientists. Still dealing with “eventful temporality,” Sewell approaches the connection between events and structures from an opposite standpoint from that of his previous essay. The appeal for social scientists in Sewell’s case study of Marseille’s dockworkers’ trade unions in the 19th century is how certain structures can transcend periods in which structures are being radically transformed by events. In addition to the emphasis on a specific structure to shed light on the nature of structures, generally, the article also makes use of the sort of quantitative, physical data to which social scientists are accustomed. But lest the article seem solely in the realm of the social sciences, Sewell would argue that in order to read the data, he first had to apply some semiotic interpretation to it—and in order to situate the reader in the period, apply both synchrony and diachrony, fully in the realm of history.

*A Search for Meaning*

Perhaps understanding that case studies alone cannot fully articulate a theory, or blend a body of work written over seventeen years into one volume, Sewell has spent some time more fully elaborating the concepts he uses in those case studies. In order to write effectively about the perceived (if imaginary) break between “social” and “cultural”, Sewell understands that his readers need to understand the historical changes the two terms underwent, and their most commonly accepted or most useful definitions. These definitions are useful to explain the ownership of the term “culture” by anthropologists, or to document the near rejection of the term “social” by social scientists, as well. What appear to be simple, shared concepts are in fact two complex terms which have undergone substantive changes over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries.

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24 Sewell, 261.
25 Sewell, 273.
The most salient point in all of this discussion is the fundamental connections between the two concepts. It is important to view culture as an outgrowth of anthropology, and cultural history to some extent a logical progression from what is termed “social history,” or the history of groups of ordinary people. Because historians in most fields lack an overabundance of sources from which information about ordinary people (the lower classes, marginalized groups, ethnic groups, non-literate groups and more) can be gleaned. However, in defining culture as removed from its anthropological context, Sewell finds the two most useful meanings to be: culture as a system of symbols and meanings, and culture as practice—or “practical activity shot through by willful action, power relations, struggle, contradiction, and change.”

This is not so removed from the currently dominant form of the term “social,” which, defined by Durkheim, is a “collective reality that acts upon individuals as a restraining force.” While this implies a structure, Sewell demonstrates again and again that structure is not something that occurs alone, on its own terms, but is a product of human semiotic constructions, and of the events that change them. The terms “social” and “cultural” need to be perceived as two halves of a whole—completing a picture, not dividing it.

Sewell also talks at length about the semiotic and the structural—two more concepts that have been used in opposition, but that can be used to complement each other. Sewell includes, in the last chapter, some discussion of the semiotic, not just as linguistic symbol, but also as nonlinguistic creation of meaning—through politics, or the built environment, or, in fact, social structures. Umberto Eco’s The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana can be used a tool for concretely understanding Sewell’s integration of semiotics with structures. In it, the protagonist Yambo awakens with no semblance of personal memory, but instead with a memory of what he has read, and of the basic structures of the world that can be gleaned from them. In the process of trying to reconstruct his own personal memories, Yambo returns to his childhood home in Solara, and proceeds to reread his books and comics, and listen to his old phonograph records, hoping to ignite those mysterious flames of memory which are tied directly to texts which on the surface have no

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26 Sewell, 160-161.
27 Sewell, 322.
relation to Yambo’s personal life. However, because of their larger implications, and their personal effect on him, they are able to reconstitute his life.

Thus this work of fiction operates as a personal history of Yambo in the biographical form—created solely from external sources as if the subject had left no writings of his own. It is also the synchronic history of a period, painstakingly recreating a life formed amid Italian Partisans during a Fascist regime. It demonstrates not only the effect that language and the products of language have upon an individual, but also the structural composition of Solara in the years of World War II. The “texts” that Yambo uses to recreate his life were created by, and in turn changed a political and societal structure. In this way, semiotics and structure coexist, once again, as parts of a whole that need not have been divided.

Implications for Existing and Future Work

Although all of these essays are couched in terms that invite further discourse, it seems clear that Sewell intends his work to have implications for new work being written in history and the social sciences. What does all this discussion of integration mean for the future of history, and for the future of the social sciences?

This brings us back, full circle, to Sewell’s agenda for hermeneutical quantification. He chastises social scientists for obscuring their own use of interpretive methods in their work, as well as cultural historians who he finds guilty of veiling or downplaying the importance of quantitative data. In either case, the methods they obscure may help form the questions they ask, or the assumptions they make about their period of research. For example, Alice Fahs’s work of cultural history, The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865, is a work based firmly in the cultural rubric, but it seems unlikely that Fahs was unaware of, or failed to use quantitative sources or structural assumptions to ground her work. However, she did not fully explore them in the text. Sewell would argue that including the assumptions that she makes about her texts, based on quantitative data, would only increase the quality of scholarship.

In my own work regarding the Works Progress Administration federal art projects in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sewell’s theory would have helped me discover which questions were important to ask, and might have changed my approach to the writing, or
even my conclusions. For example, I might have asked the question: what were the responses to the controversial artwork that was commissioned and executed in the Bay Area?

To answer this specific question, my sources were primarily the artists themselves, the project administrators, and a smattering of “public” responses. If I had pursued some quantitative data about the demographic composition of the Bay Area, and the visitors to those sites, I would have had a richer understanding of, at the very least, the viewers of the art. Had I added to that the structures of life (for the working classes, for artists, or for immigrants) in and outside the Bay Area at the time, I would have had a more synchronic picture, and a comparison to other parts of the country. And if I included these observations in my narrative, I would not only have been able to more successfully interpret the data I did have, but I would also have provided my readers with an explicit and clear justification for the assumptions and conclusions I made. Incidentally, I find it extremely likely that my conclusions would have been different. For this alone, I find Sewell’s theory useful.

In the end, Sewell’s argument won’t convince all historians. Some will see it as needless obfuscation of a narrative, which can be interpreted by the reader without explicit claims about theory. Authors may choose not to consider Sewell’s theoretical approach because they see it as unnecessary to their audience (for example, historians who write for a popular audience). But for professionals speaking to other professionals, Sewell’s clarity of intention, combined with his integration of concepts that have been split for so long, is enticing. The beauty of *Logics of History* is its applicability. I find myself making connections between this work and a myriad of others. It prompts questions, and demands clarity from other works. This level of engagement with a work is surely what all authors hope for.