The American Civil War has long claimed scholarly attention for the basic questions the crisis raises about our national identity. What was the significance of the political compact represented by the Constitution if society were sufficiently divided in institutions and values to go to war at great material and human cost? What flaws in the political process and national character were revealed by Americans’ inability to resolve social conflict by ordinary legal means? How could the federal government’s unprecedented social initiative in Reconstruction, particularly its effort to guarantee minority rights, be justified within a republican tradition that included a strong, though not exclusive, commitment to minimal activity by the state in a free society?

In modern America, we continue to concern ourselves with precisely these issues of accommodating pluralism, facilitating peaceful progress, and balancing the common good against private liberties. All draw attention to the relationship of the political process to society and of the formal structures of nationhood to Americans’ identity as a people. In *Alternative Americas: A Reading of Antebellum Political Culture*, Anne Norton looks back at the Civil War era and analyzes this key period in American history from an appropriately interdisciplinary perspective.

Norton’s study epitomizes the current trend in the humanities

† Assistant Professor of History, Carnegie-Mellon University. For helpful comments on this essay, I am grateful to Lizabeth Cohen and Adam Rose.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

and social sciences toward interdisciplinary borrowing of methodologies and especially theories, a strategy based on the related convictions that scholars share a common task in explicating human experience and that old problems may profitably be reconsidered with new intellectual tools. With the particular impetus and rationale provided by developments in linguistic philosophy ordinarily designated "deconstruction" boundaries between disciplines once defined by subject matter and approach have been opened as scholars engage in the task of comprehending "meaning" too generally conceived to be pigeonholed in any academic department. The eclecticism of *Alternative Americas* reflects these trends. A political scientist, Norton writes on the symbols of American identity that were once considered within the particular scholarly domain of cultural historians. She owes theoretical debts to linguistic philosophy, cultural anthropology, and Marxism. The result is a remarkably broad-ranging view of the way antebellum Americans saw themselves, and particularly, the way their conflicting perceptions contributed to political crisis.

*Alternative Americas* strikes this reader (a cultural historian by profession) as successful to the extent that it synthesizes prior statements on sectional differences with clarity, a clearness of vision produced by the author's conviction with regard to the historical significance of cultural images. Yet in her effort to use diverse methodologies on material provided by a discipline other than her own, Norton risks overreaching her ability to master her tools with enough expertise to produce a satisfying interpretation of the aspect of American experience she studies. The central issue is less Norton's conclusions about history than her adaptation of theoretical premises to historical explanation. One wonders in particular whether culture can with justice be treated as a nearly autonomous entity.

This essay uses *Alternative Americas* as a touchstone for discussion of the possibilities and limitations of interdisciplinary analysis in general and of the specific theories Norton employs. I focus on three main questions provoked by the study. If, as in recent linguistic theory, the assumption that mind mediates experience renders the traditional distinction between texts and historical contexts problematic, can evidence provided by language in practice describe a culture accurately without the rich social data collected by historians in the past two decades? In other words, how is the idea that meaning may result from the autonomous play of other meanings tested by the discipline of history, a discipline with a particularly strong empirical tradition of viewing meaning
as at least in part the consequence of other factors? Second, can
theories evolved by scholars unconcerned with change over time,
such as philosophers and anthropologists, be adapted to allow
scholars to understand dynamic aspects of human experience and,
in particular, to grasp the causes of events? Third, can premises
that give preeminence to opposing archetypes rather than to indi-
vidual actors be accommodated by historical scholarship's human-
istic tradition? In sum, my concerns center on the exegetical rela-
tion of the subjective and objective record, of static and dynamic
social models, and of deterministic and humanistic assumptions.

I. Norton's Method

A brief explanation of the premises and conclusions of Alter-
native Americas must precede discussion of these general issues.
Significantly, Norton rarely acknowledges her debt to specific theo-
retical work. This is less poor scholarship, I think, than a function
of the currency of certain ideas articulated independently in sev-
eral disciplines. One would like more self-awareness in Norton of
her scholarly sources; in fairness, however, even my efforts in the
paragraphs that follow to attribute assumptions to particular
schools of thought are tentative, in the sense that more than one
group of writers may have developed similar views.

The dominant theoretical influences in Alternative Americas
are ideas associated with "deconstruction," analyzed with clarity in
a recent article by John Toews.² By Toews' account, those with a
commitment to deconstruction accept that

language can no longer be construed as simply a medium, rel-
atively or potentially transparent, for the representation or
expression of a reality outside of itself and are willing to en-
tertain seriously some form of semiological theory in which
language is conceived of as a self-contained system of "signs"
whose meanings are determined by their relations to each
other, rather than by their relation to some "transcendental"

² John E. Toews, Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of
Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience, 92 Am.Hist.Rev. 879 (1987). The ideas associ-
ated with deconstruction have been translated for historians with particular conviction by
Dominick LaCapra. See Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., Modern European
Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives (1982); Dominick LaCapra, Re-
thinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language (1983); Dominick LaCapra, History
and Criticism (1985).

As Toews notes, 92 Am.Hist.Rev. at 881, historians of American culture have generally
been less interested than other academics in applications of theory. See, for example, John
or extralinguistic object or subject.

At its most radical, such a commitment would seem to imply that language not only shapes experienced reality but constitutes it, that different languages create different, discontinuous, and incommensurable worlds, that the creation of meaning is impersonal, operating "behind the backs" of language users whose linguistic actions can merely exemplify the rules and procedures of languages they inhabit but do not control . . .

In Norton's own words, the premise most important to the structure of her book is that "matters of fact and material condition figure in culture through the mediation of experience and intellection" (p. 8). Her conviction follows the semiological view that mind, and particularly language, shape the reality encountered by a society, and although she does not deny the possibility of analyzing an objective world, her reliance on works of high culture suggests that Norton thinks this mediated experience is the source of society's meaning. Thus she provides the texts she explicates with little context, and she asserts that this realm of culture "is susceptible not of proof but of interpretation" (p. 8).

One consequence of Norton's intent to understand culture disengaged from specific events is her small sense of change over time. Norton depicts social conflict, in this case the Civil War primarily, as the result of static and diverging viewpoints—"alternative Americas"—more than of evolving conditions. Here Norton does acknowledge a specific and important intellectual debt: she accounts for the centrality of conflict in her research premises by reference to the notion of liminality Victor Turner has developed in cultural anthropology. In an argument typical of her method, Norton contends that the South defined its nationhood in opposition to the North by identifying with such liminal groups as Indians, blacks, and women (pp. 13-14). An emphasis on the interplay of contrary tendencies is an essential component not only of Turner's anthropological theory, but also of a deconstructive approach. Whatever the source of Norton's perspective, opposing cultural archetypes divert attention from historical change.

One last assumption follows from deconstructive thinking.

---

3 Toews, 92 Am.Hist.Rev. at 881-82.
4 Norton explains that the term liminal "corresponds roughly to the terms 'marginal' and 'peripheral,' designating an individual or (and more often) a group, whose inclusion in the community is ambiguous." Norton, Alternative Americas at 12 (footnote omitted).
Norton believes that individuals live in tension with collective assumptions, since they “construct themselves against [culture] as well as according to it” (p. 9). She stresses their activity as “vessels comprehending” culture, yet admits in the introduction that her principal use of an individual is “to illustrate the aspect of the culture with which I am then concerned” (p. 9). Her text adheres to her promise. Melville is a representative of the past, for example, when he reconstructs the national identity shattered by war by referring to the Founders’ values; Whitman, with his faith in man’s boundlessness, foreshadows America’s future (p. 277). Norton’s work manifests the precarious balance between free will and determinism in theories that so strongly credit the creative power of language that individual producers are subordinated to common discourse. Ironically, some historians turn to linguistic theory to contest the deterministic implications of the French *Annales* school, whose followers contend that unconscious structures of thought dominate the *mentalité* of a period. Yet in Norton’s hands at least, language’s users risk manipulation by their tools as much as an individual conceived in the *Annales* tradition might be subject to inherited culture.

Despite Norton’s focus on culture, a book on the genesis of a major political conflict inevitably takes account of tangible trends. Ill-equipped by her research design to deal with objective events, she falls back on a Marxist paradigm to explain change. The ante-bellum North, dominated by industrial capitalists, was in the process of transforming “man into machine,” not only its own native and immigrant workers, but also the population of the South, characterized as agrarian and republican. The conflict between linguistic theories and dialectical materialism is to some extent resolved by Norton’s emphasis on the Puritan roots of Northern culture: industrialization was a function of the Protestant ethic described by Max Weber (p. 20), and dumb Southern nature was conquered by a machine culture empowered by its mastery of language (p. 20).

Norton closes discussion of her method with the caveat that North and South were in fact more complex than “two monolithic opponents” (p. 16). However, an investigation, as is presented in the next section of this review, of recent scholarship in social history forces one to question whether Norton’s account of North and

---

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

South adequately appreciates the sectional characteristics recognized by current historical discussions.

II. THE QUESTIONABLE AUTONOMY OF CULTURE

A. Subjective and Objective Records

The idea that culture is not merely a manifestation of social structures but rather depends upon the mind’s shaping power is on first encounter attractive because it offers the possibility of an escape from determinism. Similarly attractive is the related idea that both texts created by language and their social contexts are problematic human products, and so cannot be recovered without recourse to interpretation. Norton’s insistence on the importance of language, most significantly in the form of the Bible and the Constitution, in the history of the American people draws attention to a key and, at that time, unique condition of America’s founding—the writtenness of American political culture (p. 19). Yet one wonders if culture and context are as indistinct in practice as in concept. More specifically, what is the significance of the conflict between Norton’s view of antebellum culture and the findings of social historians?

Social history that explores the institutions and mores of local communities with the aid of quantifiable records has dominated historical scholarship for the past two decades. Social history’s miniaturist technique might invite concern that it proves the insignificant, were there not enough individual analyses by now to allow some generalizations. Those conclusions contradict Norton’s image in major ways. Alternative Americas poses a North that was industrial, statist, and individualistic—in short, modernizing—against a South that was traditional in its agrarianism, republicanism, and family-orientation. Social historians present a contrary view of tradition’s erosion. Rather than perceiving the early American South as a besieged state close to nature, as Norton does, the historians see America in 1800 as patriarchal in family, workplace, community, and nation. So far as the South lagged behind Northern progress, its society remained restrictive; rather than displaying the familial relations between the races Norton describes, slaveholders’ paternalism was an apology for power exercised with only little government control. To the extent that the North more quickly cast off patriarchy, it not only traded personal hierarchies for impersonal ones, but generally enhanced liberty by opening national markets, facilitating geographic and social mobility, and assuring literacy’s social value.
Social history qualifies these sectional differences by similarities, similarities one would anticipate in a society sufficiently unified to form a political compact. Even as slaveholders sensed their isolation in a world increasingly committed to free labor, they engaged eagerly as agrarian capitalists in free markets. Northern entrepreneurs were hardly modern industrialists, moreover, since as late as 1869, the average shop employed only eight workers, and the technology of the major antebellum industries, textile and shoe manufacture, was primitive by post-Civil War standards. More subtle than Norton's description of America's descent from natural freedom to industrial oppression, social history's account pictures both sections moving from patriarchy to bureaucracy at varying rates, yet with similar ambivalence.6

My concern is not only to challenge Norton's interpretation, but also to underscore the point that specialists equipped to discuss historical contexts offer a different reading of antebellum history than the one Norton discovers in texts. Her book would have been not only richer, but more accurate, had she set culture in relation to society. If, against a social-historical background, one finds Northern writers obsessed with industrialization's social, moral, and aesthetic impact, one must ask why the industrial process gained symbolic significance in a society that remained to a significant extent agrarian, with expanding commercial activity but proportionately little industry. Whereas Norton cites Emerson's perception that machines dominate men to demonstrate the oppression of industrial routines, one would learn more about this culture by wondering why Emerson, peacefully situated as a literary man in the quiet town of Concord, was so concerned with technology's consequences. Part of the answer is that Emerson was not a disengaged observer, but was caught himself by the long arm of wealth; the intent of his trip to England in 1848, from which a number of Norton's examples are drawn, was to lecture in lyceums largely sponsored by entrepreneurs for workers' edification. Emerson sensed, moreover, that his popularity grew from misapprehen-

sion of his theme of individualism, heard not as a message of transcendent protest and self-mastery, but as a spur to self-betterment. Thus attention to Emerson’s biography reveals the complex relations of society and culture. No doubt so powerful a voice as Emerson’s determined public attitudes, but his concern with machine culture grew from his experience as a thinker making a living. Deconstructive premises that de-emphasize contexts, in this case biography, miss the social antecedents of culture as well as the nuances of formal prose.

Similarly, one may ask whether it is possible fully to grasp the meaning of images of gender in antebellum culture without a firm view of social relations between the sexes. A command of the history of women and the family has been one of social history’s main accomplishments. Anne Norton is astute in her argument for the symbolic importance of gender; contemporaries did describe the industrial initiative in masculine terms and associated tradition with the feminine. No doubt she is correct to sense allusions to domination in gender images that appear in political discourse, but a question at least as interesting as what sexual symbols mean is why they should so prominently figure in culture at all. Social history suggests that women and the family were, in the modernizing context of the antebellum years, not so much besieged as resilient. Though the family’s function as the center of economic production decreased, disrupting traditional roles, families adjusted socially and intellectually. Middle-class women, for example, learned how to nurture sons able to compete in a demanding world and, for the most part, took satisfaction in domestic work conceived as separate but equal to their husbands’ market labor. One suspects that the attraction of gender symbols grew from the elegance of this solution, especially since other cultural languages relevant to colonial communities were less easily transformed to suit the early nineteenth century’s more mobile and individualistic society. So much as Americans saw and experienced the family as a refuge in changing times, images generated by domesticity carried assurances of social and even cosmic order. 

---


8 On social and intellectual transitions in gender, see Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class (cited in note 6); Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New
A deconstructive approach that assumes language's creative power is not the first critical technique to provoke historians to worry about whether the concept of culture absorbs objective trends within the sphere of experience and hence blurs their independent action. Studies of American culture proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s, nurtured by the vitality of intellectual history and American studies, with their respective assumptions that ideas exert historical power and that interdisciplinary work can best elucidate America's past. As Robert Berkhofer, Jr., observed in a 1973 essay, critics of this cultural history argued that it obscured both conflict and causality in analyses of perceptions that represented a multifaceted reality. Berkhofer looked to social history to restore an understanding of the external structures in which culture is contained. I suspect that the same kinds of questions recur in current discussions of deconstruction because there have been few successful efforts to combine social and cultural methods. Academic disciplines remain specialized despite calls to cooperate in exploring the meaning of human experience. Nonetheless, some classic studies indicate profitable ways to see culture and society in mutual relation, and so supplement the approach developed in *Alternative Americas*

Traditional cultural history rests on a more precise view of the difference between texts and contexts than critics allow. In a study of Americans' reception of technology, *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx saw that writers tried to comprehend industrialization in images borrowed from pastoral conventions, yet failed to achieve literary resolution because the relentless drive of modernity made their social experience qualitatively different from the static contrast in premodern life between city and country. Similarly, Bernard Bailyn saw in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* that American society changed the meaning of European thought. Whereas in Britain the Whig tradition remained a dissenting philosophy, because entrenched hierarchy precluded the

---


social application of republican values, works of the Country party spurred revolution in America, since such concepts as popular vigilance and government accountability captured political ideas appropriate to American circumstances. Other scholars emphasized the dynamic aspect of the interplay of society and culture. William R. Taylor wrote in *Cavalier and Yankee* that diverging sectional myths were created in antebellum America. Against a shared background of commercial growth, religious revivals, and sentimentality, Northern and Southern writers who worried about the erosion of traditional values evolved conflicting ideal types of the Yankee and Cavalier to provide society with moral direction.\(^{10}\)

Common to all these works is an appreciation that society and culture stand in a relation to each other that may be complex. While Norton assumes a straightforward correspondence between words and facts, and infers social trends from literary texts, an older generation understood better the errant human impulses and flawed intellectual tools that contribute to the ill fit of perception and reality and, in consequence, to the irony of history. Though Norton’s individual “vessels comprehending” culture are active interpreters, their personalities are problematically neutral. Precisely because society is less orderly than its culture, the two must be set in the kind of dialectical relation typified by the best of classic cultural history.

B. Static and Dynamic Models

It is essential to see contexts clearly as well in order to understand change over time. The dynamics of experience are the historian’s particular concern, and why things happen at the time and in the way they do is judged by the convergence of relevant trends.\(^{11}\) The extent to which Norton’s Civil War is a conflict of perpetual archetypes reflects her idealized notion of culture.


\(^{11}\) Norton is not the first to interpret history with premises borrowed from disciplines inattentive to change. The origin of much anthropological theory in static, premodern societies has made the social history it influenced interested at least as much in slowly evolving structures as in the direction of specific events. For an interesting example, see John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (1982). For a similar perception of change in time in a study influenced by psychology, see Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (1977).
Though her ostensible theme is the early nineteenth century, she ranges widely in time, nearly equating Puritan and industrial opposition to nature and Cavalier and slaveholders' resistance to threats to their freedom (especially pp. 20, 33, 101, 118, 124). In another case, Norton argues, in an effort to pose Northern religious self-righteousness against Southern secularism, that seventeenth century Cavaliers, eighteenth century Southern Founders, and nineteenth century planters all adhered to irreligious republicanism. She underestimates the religious issues of the English Civil War and the Southern impact of the Second Great Awakening (especially pp. 124-27). One cannot answer key questions about events without a more serious interest in time. Most important, how did a people so divided agree to form a union, and what happened between 1787 and 1861 to sever its bonds?

It is to Norton's credit that she is willing to offer a general theory of the sectional crisis, since scholars who grasp the historical process more accurately often decline to address questions that require detachment from the records of particular localities or groups. For example, Jean Baker's Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century is an exciting model of how to achieve a dynamic view of culture, yet her intentions are comparatively modest. Interested in theories of political culture, Baker shares some assumptions with Norton (for example, that language is a form of action), but so firmly believes that perceptions and values are specifically human products (rather than the products of, for example, an autonomous play of meanings and ideas) that she grounds her analysis in collective biography. She argues that to think and behave in a partisan and specifically Democratic way was a lesson rooted in the childhood of a generation who reached political maturity at mid-century. She uses the life cycle, in short, to connect culture with changes in time and to emphasize that the Democratic mind-set and manners grew as part of the lives of men. Though Northern Democrats were accused of disloyalty during the Civil War, Baker concludes that their participation in bipartisan politics, as a matter of emotional commitment and habit as well as rational choice, worked to channel their loyalty to the Union.12

Thus Baker opts to bypass general questions on the causes and timing of the Civil War to explain a particular point about how the formation of political culture affected the crisis: partisan identities that evolved in time contributed to the strength of the national effort. Rather than try as ambitiously as Norton to combine disciplines within her own work, Baker handles her subject as an historian, with an awareness of political theory, and effectively invites cooperation among scholars to explore the implications of her conclusions.

An essay by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, one in a collection discussing the significance of gender in Victorian America, provides a second instance of how theory may be adapted to explicate change in time. Whereas Norton uses Victor Turner's idea of liminality to elucidate static oppositions, arguing that the South saw itself as marginal to the Union and identified with other liminal groups such as Indians, blacks, and women, Smith-Rosenberg emphasizes the temporal aspect of liminality in anthropologists' view of the ritual process. During phases of anti-ritualism, conventions no longer bind society's members, who may freely explore roles that at other times are proscribed. Smith-Rosenberg argues that the recurrent religious revivals of antebellum America were a liminal setting, characteristic, moreover, of a society that was itself mobile, individualistic, and intuitive. Encouraged by men, women rose to kinds of prominence judged "disorderly conduct" both before and after the anti-ritualistic interlude permitted by society's rapid transition.

Smith-Rosenberg is brilliantly provocative in her application to a modern, progressive culture of an analytical tool designed to describe a process with no necessary relation to historical change. Even so, there is tension between cyclical and linear notions of time: though most middle-class women retired after 1850 from the prophetic stances that typified the irrationality of the liminal phase, some later mixed domesticity with suitably bourgeois forms of protest such as suffrage agitation. Real progress, in other words, qualified the return to structured roles. Smith-Rosenberg does not try to relate cultural to political transitions, once again indicative of historians' caution and of the specialization of historical subfields. Yet despite difficulties, both Smith-Rosenberg and Baker of-

14 Id.
fer creative directions for research that aims to place culture in
time. The advantage of Anne Norton's analysis is her effort to link
culture to the sources of political conflict; could she ground her
discussion better in an evolutionary view such as Baker's or an
identification of abrupt turning points such as Smith-Rosenberg's,
she would strengthen her case.

C. Determinism and Humanism

The last issue provoked by *Alternative Americas* is how we
are to conceive of the relation of society's members to their cul-
ture, whether they generate a world view as free agents or whether
they are bound by determining traditions. In large measure, this is
a false dichotomy in practice: the alternatives are significant in
principle, but an appreciation of the complexity of change suggests
that we both inherit values and forward progress. What is prob-
lematic about Norton's book is her apparent lack of awareness of
the collateral question of who, within a society, creates culture.
For, assuming that people are neither altogether at liberty nor
without options, the issue becomes whose cultural power predomi-
nates and how situations may be changed. Does an intellectual
elite exercise hegemony by its capacity to articulate common sensi-
bilities and by its alliance with wealth? Should one instead concen-
trate on the *Annales* school's *menu peuple*, on the assumption
that their actions express shared mental structures in a form least
obscured by intellect? Or, must scholars observe the interaction of
such social groups as masters and slaves in order to understand
how struggles for domination affect culture, and how culture, in
turn is made a weapon of control or resistance?

On the whole, *Alternative Americas* inclines to a kind of de-
terminism not shared by the historiographic debate, since Norton's
sources, while they are active speakers, serve as agents of reified
ideas. My concern is that most are representatives of high culture,
and Norton does not help her reader handle the difficulty of
presuming their views represent the outlook of whole groups
within antebellum society. One is skeptical, for example, that all
classes of Southern men identified with the eccentric politician,
John Randolph, as a symbol of Southern decline, as Norton argues
(pp. 176-99).

Southern history is an excellent field for gaining a sense of the
dynamics of cultural pluralism, perhaps because of the poignancy
of the issue of slavery and freedom. Studies by Eugene Genovese,
Steven Hahn, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown mark out different op-
tions for assessing the role of free will in the formation of culture.
In *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, a classic work that brings subtlety to Marxist theory, Genovese insists that black and white world views must be seen in dialectical relation, because the parties were defined by their opposition, ironically mixed with their mutual dependency. The master class, ostensibly in control through a paternalistic ideology as well as raw force, could not secure its identity without the cognitive, if not willful, assent of subordinates, who in fact jeopardized the system by asserting their independent interpretation of shared values. Genovese succeeds in provoking essential questions about human liberty by casting light on the weakness of the free and the resilience of the enslaved.

Both Hahn and Wyatt-Brown explore the hold of tradition on Southern white communities. Hahn builds cultural interpretation on precise social history in *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*. He demonstrates that this class of marginal entrepreneurs, threatened by advancing capitalism, created an ideology of protest out of their allegiance to a prebourgeois ideal of agrarian independence. Kept on the margin of progress by stubborn traditionalism, they turned loyalty to the past into an instrument to reach out for freedom. In *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, Wyatt-Brown transforms the terms of discussion from the balance of determination and liberty to the ability of a shared commitment to tradition to bind the white community. Blending instances taken from high and low culture, Wyatt-Brown controverts a view of traditionalism as unthinking bondage by demonstrating that a coherent set of values, centering on "honor," gave positive definition to regional society. Southerners were made free, in a sense, by their culture's vitality.15

History has been much influenced by the social sciences in the past two decades, but scholars such as these continue the discipline's humanistic orientation when they trace culture to individuals constrained by circumstance, yet stubbornly willful, and hence, not powerless. Though Anne Norton is sensitive to the dilemma of picturing people as both creators and representatives of a society's experience, the way she thinks is unfamiliar to an historian used to considering freedom as a part of a complex social setting. A deconstructive faith in language's power may certainly be humanistic,

---

III. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, method and substance cannot be divorced in a re-statement of the conclusions reached in *Alternative Americas*. By ending with chapters on Melville, Lincoln, and Whitman, writers who experienced the Civil War and reconstructed myths of national identity, Norton seems to affirm language’s ability to redeem capitalistic hegemony. The magisterial quality of this vision is exciting and unnerving at once, and epitomizes the difficulty of achieving an even assessment of this book. It is refreshing, at a time when historians commonly choose subjects that are narrowly conceived, to have Norton show the relationship of great literature to public life; yet one cannot but wonder how deeply fine prose penetrated society and whether these elegant words represented the culture of the average person.

To phrase this ambivalent assessment of *Alternative Americas* more generally, Norton deserves praise for engaging in a classic debate on the causes of the Civil War at a time when historians worry publicly about their colleagues’ disinclination to confront the nation’s central political crisis. In doing so, she extends the work of scholars who emphasize sectional differences by exploring patterns of divergence in culture. I worry, however, that Norton constructs a coherent theory without questioning her discussion’s initial terms. Even if contemporary scholars fail to confront the significance of the political and military conflict between North and South, there is intense historiographic debate about the reality of the sections’ social differences, a debate that Norton ignores.\(^6\)

Caught up in securing the ends of theories unqualified by history’s ambiguities, *Alternative Americas*, despite its bold perspective, lacks an essential scholarly skepticism.

Nonetheless, an appreciation of theoretical work in such disciplines as linguistic philosophy and cultural anthropology greatly

---

benefits historical interpretation by inviting reflection on the general principles of human behavior. Deconstructive premises such as those that shape Anne Norton’s approach in *Alternative Americas* provoke essential questions about social history’s methods and thus spark critical debate. Attention to the real power of symbols, generated by the mind, challenges social history’s tendency to discount culture in explanations that can incline toward determinism by attributing predominant influence to social structures.

Yet a student of theory must realize that history is not a neutral ground operating without productive assumptions about human societies. Among the humanities and social sciences, historians have been comparatively uninterested in debating their premises abstractly. The result is both a misapprehension of historical scholarship as a discipline concerned only with facts and a perception of historical material as virgin ground for the testing of theory. Yet there is a distinctive historical perspective, I think, despite diversity within the field, that must be acknowledged if theories are to be translated for historical use. As scholars especially concerned with detail, historians have been tolerant of the complex interrelation of spheres of social experience, of trends in time, and of individuals and their culture. The systematizing function of theory may usefully order discrete observations, but theory betrays historical scholarship’s distinct contribution if it obscures the dynamic interplay of these aspects of human experience.

Anne Norton’s interpretation of antebellum experience in *Alternative Americas* demonstrates both the potential and current limitations of work indebted to speculation about the nature of culture. Ambitious in the scope of its questions and provocative in its implicit advocacy of language’s importance, the study must stir specialists to look beyond their fields’ usual concerns. If Norton’s resolution of tensions between disciplines is flawed, these shortcomings reflect the difficulties of a common task more than her individual failing. How to use theory effectively in particular settings—balancing texts and contexts, stability and change, and determinism and free will—is an exciting challenge that Anne Norton presents to the community of scholars.