Response

History, Theory, and Education

John L. Rury

The distinguished Africanist Robert Harms once observed that "we historians are a practical people who pride ourselves on our attention to facts and our painstaking attention to detail."[1] If this is the case in other parts of the world, it is certainly true of American historians, who have been periodically admonished for their disinterest in questions of theory and purpose related to their craft.[2] In this issue we have an opportunity to discuss the question of theory as it may pertain to the history of education, with particular attention to the United States. Regardless of whether one believes that historians should be ardent students of social theory, after all, there is little question about whether they should be cognizant of it. Indeed, there is danger in ignoring it. Quoting John Maynard Keynes, Harms suggested that practical people who feel "exempt from any intellectual influences" run the risk of "becoming slaves to some defunct economist."[3]

Keynes' metaphor in this passage is a useful starting point for a discussion of theory and history with respect to education. The implication is that scholars who do not carefully weigh the questions they ask, the types of information they collect, and the explanations they construct, may well find themselves uncritically (or even slavishly) serving a particular viewpoint or interpretive tradition. A less obvious point is that historians should be critical consumers of social theory, testing, and possibly refining it, but also sidestepping the pitfalls of clinging to particular perspectives, while mining them for insights into particular events, periods, and social or intellectual settings. In short, the

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[1]Robert Harms, "African History Research: Trends and Perspectives on the Future," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (June 1987): 25–33.

[2]For an example of the former, see David Hollinger, "Banality and Enigma," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (December 1994): 1152–56; on the latter see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) passim; also see Novick's responses to his critics in "My Correct Views on Everything," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (June 1991): 699–703.

[3]The quote is from Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (New York: Hartcourt Brace, 1936), 383; Harms, "African History Research," 25.

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object is to be (relatively) sophisticated in the use of theory, while not falling prey to its manifold charms.

Not all social theory is equivalent, of course, and in considering the use of such theories or theoretical frameworks, historians—like other scholars—must also weigh the matter of their utility. And this in turn raises the question of purpose, or "utility to what end?" For most working historians, being habitually practical, the answer is that theory should help to illuminate some problem in the past, make sense of a body of evidence, or tell a story in a compelling and convincing fashion. For some, historical research also can constitute a way of testing theory, refining it or even formulating it. Michel Foucault might even fall in the latter category, but we get ahead of ourselves. For now, the larger point is that historians are by disposition generally eclectic when it comes to matters of social theory in their own research and writing. The historian's credo, dating at least from Ranke, is to remain faithful to the sources, to the evidence that can be adduced, and to try to represent the past on its own terms. Even recognizing that this is ultimately impossible—in an absolute sense—does not mean that it cannot remain a goal. Social theory that threatens to complicate that objective consequently will appear impractical to many historians, and will likely not be deemed useful. This may make historians seem to be anti-theoretical or even insular and naïve, but such appearances are deceiving. Historians, like everyone else, have little choice regarding the use of theory; to one extent or another they must. The question is how much and to what end.[4]

As indicated earlier, the task herein is to consider the role of theory in the history of education. To that end, three of our colleagues have offered provocative essays examining the matter from different perspectives. They raise a host of issues to contemplate, ranging from the form of historical writing and discourse, to the role and use of memory, to questions of power and "regimes of truth." Along the way they demonstrate some of the ways that history of education may be informed by theoretical concerns, and some of the problems that theory can pose for historical inquiry. Eileen Tamura starts off with a discussion of the narrative form of historical discourse and some of the problems that theory sometimes presents for scholars working within that tradition. Caroline Eick and Roland Sintos Coloma explore the possibilities that particular theoretical orientations may offer to historians, and offer examples of how these perspectives have affected their own work.

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[4]For a thoughtful recent discussion of this question, see Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), chap. 4.

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Tamura's essay considers some of the tensions that seem to be inherent when theory and historical narrative encounter one another. As she notes, historical writing often assumes a temporal form of organization, and in this sense it reflects a core concern of the profession. As a discipline, historians share an abiding preoccupation with time; it is the dimension of experience that binds them together as a field of inquiry and exposition. As mentioned above, this is reflected in a heightened sensitivity to representing people and events in the past in their own terms, to better understand how experiences were interpreted and responded to. But it is also the source of an elemental asymmetry in the logic of historical explanation: the causal flow of events runs in one direction. Developments at one point in time cannot be said to have influenced events occurring earlier. Instead, a basic tenet of historical scholarship is that the force of causality or effect runs from earlier to later, even if in an instant.[5]

This a is big reason why historians have been preoccupied with the flow of events, and indeed, much of narrative history is concerned with linking developments that appear in some sort of discernable temporal succession. The explanation of sequence, of course, is where theory often comes into the picture. Much social theory has been cast in this fashion, with Marx's grand succession of class structures being perhaps the best known. More mundane social concepts grounded in history, such as industrialization or urbanization, are also related to large-scale change over time. Narrative historians, as Tamura uses the term, are more comfortable with theoretical constructs that lend themselves to this sort of temporal explanatory frame. Combining the impulse to fully describe the experience of a period, including as much of the relevant context as is feasible, with the chronology of developments preceding an event or condition, historians often are preoccupied with gathering as much evidence as possible to construct compelling explanations. They also prefer to create accounts that are accessible to nonspecialists. It is when theory begins to break this narrative mold of carefully linked events and context that they seem to fret about whether a study is sufficiently "historical."[6]

Tamura also raises the question of education and theory in historical scholarship. Like other large-scale social phenomena, education clearly has been influenced by a wide range of antecedent

[5]For classic discussions of historical reasoning, see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), passim; E. H. Carr, *What is History* (New York: Vintage, 1967), chap. 4.

[6]A survey of debates over theory in history and the narrative form can be found in Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory and Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), passim.

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developments and conditions that require illumination and explanation. This makes social theory particularly important for historians of education. As Tamura notes, these scholars speak to an audience of social and behavioral scientists, along with practitioners, who share an interest in understanding and resolving problems in schools and other educational settings. History offers untold opportunities for examining topics and related theories that are interesting to such readers.[7] By and large, this is theory with a small "t," concepts and propositions intended to account for behavior in specific circumstances and settings, rather than universalistic principles of human experience. My own work has utilized such theoretical constructs as social and cultural capital, along with somewhat broader conceptions of urbanization and workforce development, as have other educational historians. Yet others have focused on political structures and processes related to school policy.[8] This sort of interaction with social science has long been characteristic of the field, dating at least to the revisionist era, when issues such as systemic inequality, bureaucracy, and the organization of schooling became major concerns.

Of course, historians are hardly the only group of researchers interested in these questions. Social scientists have examined the past to test and refine theory, and they also utilize theory to understand and explain historical change. This is hardly a new development, but it appears that such cross-disciplinary incursions have grown more commonplace.[9] For their part, however, historians have not always welcomed these developments. As Tamura notes, Lawrence Stone—among others—issued a reproof to social science style quantitative

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[7]A recent demonstration of this can be found in Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, *The Race Between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), passim.

[8]On social capital, for example, see John L. Rury, "Social Capital and Secondary Schooling: Inter-Urban Differences in American Teenage Enrollment Rates in 1950," *American Journal of Education* 110, no. 4 (August 2004): 293–320; Nancy Beadie, "Education and the Creation of Capital, *or* What I have Learned from Following the Money," *History of Education Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (February 2008): 1–29. On politics, see Jeffrey E. Mirel, "After the Fall: Continuity and Change in Detroit," *History of Education Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 237–67; or Mirel's article on school reform, "School Reform Unplugged: The Bensonville New American School Project, 1991–93," *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 481–518.

[9]One need only peruse past issues of such interdisciplinary journals as *Social Science History* (starting 1976), *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1970) or *Historical Methods* (1967) to see evidence of this. The founding of the Social Science History Association (SSHA) in 1976 provided an organizational platform for this sort of work across conventional disciplinary lines. Today the SSHA annual meeting brings researchers from a range of academic traditions together to discuss problems in history and historical social science—including education—from different methodological perspectives.

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history, suggesting that it did not provide the richness and nuance of more conventional approaches to historical inquiry. Heralding a "return to narrative," Stone found social scientific approaches to historical analysis to be of limited value, declaring that the "usefulness of the results seems—up to a point—to be in inverse correlation to the mathematical complexity of the methodology and the grandiose scale of data collection."[10] With this a figurative line was drawn in the sand. On one side stood the conventional historians, resolute in their commitment to constructing chronological accounts of people-centered events, and on the other the social scientific community, interested in broader theories of social and behavioral change and using more systematic data than the ideographic evidence more typically used by their historian colleagues. It is a distinction that continues to operate today.[11]

The history of education did not experience such dramatic methodological conflicts, but quantitative and overtly social science oriented research in the field appears to have subsided since about the time of Stone's remarks, at least in the United States. At roughly the same time, the controversies that Tamura identifies in respect to historical writing and "poststructuralist" frameworks of interpretation also emerged, leading some historians to erect a different set of ramparts, against yet another perceived threat. In this case, the challenge came from relativism, framed in the assertion that narrative history is little more than literary creation, a product of investigators' imaginations and representational talents. Of course, the idea that history is a creative reconstruction of the past was hardly new, but new critics suggested that the very act of writing could impose a form on events that otherwise bore little connection to one another or shared meaning. As Tamura indicates, historians have responded by emphasizing the empirical groundedness of their research and their responsibility to remain true to the documentary record when writing. Prominent American and British historians have issued broad defenses of traditional historical inquiry, emphasizing its scientific character and the wide range of evidentiary sources upon which it rests.[12] Even so, the issue remains

[10]Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present* 85 (November 1979): 11–12. For an early critique of social science approaches to history, also see Jacque Barzun, "History: The Muse and Her Doctors," *The American Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (February 1972): 36–64.

[11]This, for instance, was the topic of a lengthy discussion during the 2006 meeting of the Social Science History Association, at the University of Minnesota Population Center.

[12]Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: Norton, 1997), passim; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), passim.

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somewhat unsettled, simply because the historical record is almost always fragmentary and open to a variety of interpretations. If anything, the debate over narrative and "truth" in history may have engendered ever greater vigilance to professional norms. As long as historians are vulnerable to the charge of imposing interpretation on the available evidence, they are inclined as a group to be inherently cautious in method and interpretation.

As in the case of quantitative or social science history, controversy over the narrative form of historical inquiry and writing does not appear to have appreciably affected the history of education as a subfield. The larger historical profession, on the other hand, has found itself wedged between the historically minded social scientists on one side and the literary critics of narrative on the other. The boundary disputes of the 1970s and 1980s may have helped to give the field somewhat greater coherence, at least on methodological grounds, but it also may have occasioned a narrowing of perspective. And this seems to have trickled down to particular specialties, including educational history. In my own work, I have found less openness—and even occasional hostility—to quantitative analysis, especially if it entails somewhat advanced statistical techniques.[13] And as Tamura indicates, there is evidence of outright resistance to the explicit use of theory in the history of education as well. All things considered, there can be little question that traditional forms of research and writing have remained predominant within the historical profession, and in topical areas such as our own.

It is against this backdrop that Eick and Coloma undertake their treatments of theory in the history of education. For her part, Eick considers the contributions of oral history to understanding educational problems in the past, utilizing a particular theoretical framework. Her point of departure is "intersectionality," a theoretical perspective derived from the work of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. In perhaps the most basic sense of the term, Collins argues that intersectionality refers to the ways that multiple categories of identity, such as race, class, and gender, interact to affect the experience of any given individual or social group.[14] Eick undertakes the employment of this perspective to understand the experiences reported to her in a study of students at a comprehensive high school spanning a fifty-year period.

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[13]In the past decade or so I have received reviews from historical journals indicating that quantitative papers I have submitted are not sufficiently historical in method or exposition. On the other hand, I have also received reviews from social science journals suggesting that such papers are too historical to be of interest.

[14]For an overview of this theoretical framework, see Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771–1800.

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Oral history is a methodological tradition that offers great insight, but also one fraught with potential hazards, ranging from faulty memories to self-serving testimony. Eick is aware of this, and utilizes a number of sources to contextualize her interviews. She also notes that oral history is well suited for identifying subjective impressions, insofar as they can be recalled, and claims this as a purpose of the study. Her interest in intersectionality is linked to the goal of identifying ways that youth in a desegregated school thought about one another across the period, although she is interested in institutional responses as well. In this light, she examines the views of a Russian immigrant student, a number of African Americans, and white, middle- and working-class students. In separate sections of the essay she considers the testimony of these individuals to identify and assess the manifold identities they came to represent.

Eick's account is rich in its detailed description of the school, her methodological choices, questions she encountered as a researcher, and in her treatment of student views representing a variety of perspectives. Her use of intersectionality as a theoretical frame, however, seems strongest in the discussion of issues of class, where cross-cutting identities and shifting circumstances made categorical assignments fluid, especially regarding black and white students. Relationships definitely changed, especially with the emergence of a black middle class group of students by the 1990s. Even though Eick does not state a conclusion in these terms, it appears that social class and race came to operate somewhat independently in this setting. With respect to students in other categories, it is less obvious just what an intersectional perspective adds to the analysis. Perhaps it might have been clearer if Eick had offered alternative interpretations of specific events, groups, or individuals. If the point is to demonstrate the value of a particular theoretical perspective, after all, it might be helpful to contrast it to a different type of interpretive framework, perhaps a more conventional one.

In the end, Eick intends to construct a "relational" history of education by documenting the subjective perceptions of different groups of students toward one another. Yet in doing this, she appears also to be treating her interviews as objective data—and not purely subjective impressions—in the construction of a coherent narrative account of student experience. The very fact that she endeavors to identify three distinct generational experiences from these interviews betrays an interest in forming generalizations beyond individual perceptions and experiences, and in demonstrating change over time. In this respect she reveals a historian's instincts. Her task, after all, is not to simply record, but also to interpret and draw conclusions about the events at issue, while developing a chronological argument. As a

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sociologist, on the other hand, Patricia Collins ultimately is interested in understanding how various forms of identity interact in terms that contribute to her theoretical perspective. In this regard the goals of the historian and social scientist can be quite different.[15] Eick, the historian, seems interested in using theory to offer a compelling and insightful historical analysis of the student experiences she discovered in this school. However, promising it may seem, the utility of this particular theoretical perspective to that end remains unclear.

In the final contribution to this trio, Roland Sintos Coloma wonders why educational historians do not utilize theoretical perspectives derived from the work of Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, historian, and social critic. He begins by arguing that Foucault is a central figure in disputes over the nature of historical inquiry and particularly the role of theory in historical explanation. After reflecting on his own training and early experiences in the field, he examines the content of several journals in the history of education for evidence of Foucault's influence, concluding that there is little sign of it. Coloma interprets this as indicating the subfield's "isolation" from debates and controversies that are reshaping the larger discipline of history. After discussing various ways that Foucault has informed his own work, Coloma issues a call for greater openness to theoretical concerns—and to Foucault in particular —among educational historians.

There are many issues to consider in this engaging essay, but I will address just a few. Perhaps the most important is the choice of Foucault as a focal point. It is readily evident that Coloma may overreach in making a case for Foucault's significance in debates about historical method and interpretation, particularly in the United States. In undertaking this, he misrepresents a discussion of Foucault by Lisa Duggan and leans heavily on a treatment by Mark Poster published twenty-five years ago and now out of print.[16] While it is certainly true

[15]For an interesting historical discussion of relations between the two fields, see Andrew Abbott, "History and Sociology: The Lost Synthesis," *Social Science History* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 201–38.

[16]Duggan, in fact, was referring to the place of Foucault in debates over the history of sexuality in the 1980s, as indicated from this passage from the pages Coloma cites: "It was not until the early 1980s, when the English translation of Michel Foucault's History of Sexuality, volume 1, appeared in Philadelphia bookstores and on university reading lists, that I figured out what the fuss was about. The theory wars as they appeared to me then pitted various strains of British-influenced Marxism, proceeding from the work of Raymond Williams or E. P. Thompson, against French-inflected theories, from the Marxist structuralism of Louis Althusser to the post-May 1968 post-Marxist poststructuralism represented in history departments in the United States primarily by Foucault." Duggan goes on to suggest that Foucault eventually proved much less influential among women's historians than others working in the area of sexuality. See Lisa Duggan, "The Theory Wars, or, Who's Afraid of Judith Butler," *Journal of Women's*

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that there has been much discussion of "poststructuralism" as a perspective for historians to consider, it is hardly clear—as Coloma asserts—that Foucault is the central figure in this development.[17] With regard to the history of education, Coloma devotes considerable effort to a quantitative survey of several journals, but fails to place the findings in a context. To gauge this, I conducted a quick ten-year review of articles published in the *Journal of American History*, one of the larger profession's "flagship" publications. Although not as thorough as Coloma's, my survey produced similar results; Foucault was mentioned rarely, and was "mobilized" as a theoretical frame just once.[18] This casts new light on the charge that educational historians are "isolated" from developments in the larger discipline. They were hardly alone in their "indifference" to Foucault as a theorist.[19]

Coloma's manner of assessing influence, of course, is curiously uncharacteristic of the methodological contributions of Foucault and others concerned with "regimes of truth." Had he considered a wider timeframe, he would have encountered David Hogan's 1989 article, "The Market Revolution and Disciplinary Power," which features an

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History 10, no. 1 (1998): 9–19. It is possible to view a copy of Poster's book, *Foucault, Marxism and History*, on his website: http://www.hnet.uci.edu/mposter/books/

[17]It is important to note that others have made a similar assessment, however. See the brief discussion of Foucault and his influence in Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 107–8, although they are European and not American historians.

[18]Using JSTOR through my university library website, I surveyed the *Journal of American History* for articles mentioning Foucault between 1993 and 2003. These years were selected because 2003 was the last full year of the journal that could be surveyed in this manner, and I wanted to replicate Coloma's approach in examining a ten-year period. Foucault was mentioned in twenty-one articles, out of a total of two hundred fifty-three, or 8.3 percent. While this is somewhat higher than the rate he found in history of education journals, it is important to note that just one article utilized Foucault for a conceptual orientation; Laura Ann Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (December 2001): 829–65. Several others included him in lists of social theorists that historians do *not* generally consult, another mentioned him as a historical figure in social thought, and the rest cited his work in connection with research on sexuality, prisons, or power. All of the latter featured just one or two references to his work without utilizing his theoretical perspective for purposes of analysis or exposition.

[19]Coloma is correct in asserting that Foucault and "poststructuralism" are not mentioned in the introduction to the book that I edited with William Reese on the historiography of American education. He fails to point out, however, that we do not discuss *any* theoretical orientation or methodological preferences among educational historians apart from the "radical" or "new left" proclivities of the revisionists. Indeed, given his findings about the neglect of Foucault in the field, it would have been quite odd if we had considered him in that light. We do mention "an emerging body of work that employs the perspective of postmodernism" in introducing Barry Franklin's essay, which as Coloma notes, addresses some of these issues but also does not invoke Foucault's name. See William J. Reese and John L. Rury, eds., *Rethinking the History of American Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), "Introduction: An Evolving and Expanding Field of Study."

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extensive critique of Foucault's ideas with respect to the history of education.[20] And this raises some intriguing possibilities. It is likely, after all, that Hogan affected subsequent readings of Foucault by American educational historians. Hogan's treatment is a forceful assertion of structural analysis in the social history tradition, and it is conceptually sophisticated. Could Hogan's discussion of Foucault be partly responsible for the unresponsiveness of educational historians to the latter's ideas? To determine this would require a different type of analysis, one more historical and textual, interrogating the silence surrounding Foucault.[21] This is what Foucault himself likely would have recommended, given his methodological proclivities. Instead, Coloma is content to simply identify the silence, and to interpret it as evidence of the subfield's "isolation." This hardly seems to represent the sort of theoretically informed methodological sophistication that he calls for.[22]

The examples that Coloma provides regarding his work utilizing Foucault are compelling, but hardly conclusive from the standpoint of theory. While these accounts appear promising, it is not entirely clear just what the theoretical advantage of a Foucault-like analysis will be in the end. The history of education literature, after all, is replete with discussions of domination along lines of race, nationality, ethnicity, and gender, both in the United States and abroad. The question is how Foucault can help us to see these issues differently, especially with respect to analyzing relationships of power in educational settings shaped by imperialism.[23] As in the case of Eick's discussion, it would have been helpful to feature a comparison of how these questions have been treated in a conventional analysis, to highlight just what Foucault's ideas bring to the historical account.

In the end it appears that Coloma's essay exhibits some of the hazards of an enthusiastic commitment to a particular social theorist in conducting historical research. Had he been a bit less strident and

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[20]David Hogan, "The Market Revolution and Disciplinary Power: Joseph Lancaster and the Psychology of the Early Classroom System," *History of Education Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 381–417.

[21]For a revealing discussion of Foucault's method, see David Garland, "Review: Foucault's 'Discipline and Punish'—An Exposition and Critique," *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 11, no. 4 (Autumn, 1986): 847–80.

[22]As a final point, Coloma also seems to contradict himself in asserting that Foucault and poststructuralism are major influences in debates over historical method and discourse, and also suggesting that these issues are not a focal point in courses dealing with methodological matters in history departments.

[23]For an alternate approach to this question, see Matthew Lange, James Mahoney and Matthias vom Hau, "Colonialism and Development: A Comparative Analysis of Spanish and British Colonies," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 5 (March 2006): 1412–62.

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narrowly focused on one theoretical perspective, he might have made a stronger case for considering alternatives to the narrative tradition. Eick is somewhat more circumspect, but she too fails to clearly demonstrate the advantages to be gained from adopting a distinctive theoretical standpoint. Both are to be commended, however, in their calls for greater attention to questions of social theory among historians of education. If indeed there is a "regime of truth" in history today, it is tethered to a particular conception of science associated with narrative explanation.[24] As Tamura notes, theory can be helpful in seeing beyond the constraints of this tradition. And as Robert Harms would remind us, failure to consider this question in an ongoing fashion can render us "slaves" to outdated ideas.

[24]On history as science, see Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, chaps. 2–4.

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