

Seeking a New Materialism in Australian History

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Abstract

Labour and economics are traditional strengths of Australian history, though in recent decades cultural history has instead dominated historical practice. This paper discusses the relationship between the economic and cultural in Australian history, utilising our own research as case studies that explore reasons to combine the structural and discursive. Inspired by settler colonial studies and other developments internationally, we propose a new historical materialism for Australian history. In particular, we argue for an increased attention to economic questions and data in combination with cultural history sources and analysis; for the greater historicisation of capitalism as itself a specific and contingent phenomenon; and for the application of Marxist tools, without discarding the lessons of the cultural turn and their specific value to Australian history.

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Scholars are heralding a new golden age in economic history. Once relegated to the side lines, the ‘material’ in history is back in fashion, evidenced by a spate of new work on debt, money, financiers, colonial economics, the stock market, tax havens, shadow banking or the social worlds of corporations. In the United States, Kenneth Lipartito writes of ‘a desire to take the material side of life seriously once again’.¹ In Australia, economic historians have recently published a new *Cambridge Economic History*. The reasons for this rising interest are clear: we live in a world that appears to be on the verge of significant political and economic change, where (for example) banks often trump elected representatives in their influence globally, with important effects locally. We observe significant injustices around us, grounded in problems of race and gender but also in emerging forms of economic marginality and financial disempowerment. Policy makers struggle with questions of economic compensation and transitional justice as governments fail to address climate change. Historians are seeking new ways of engaging with these issues. This paper gives an account of our own exploration of the economic and material in Australian history, against the background of our training in cultural history, ‘the predominant kind of history produced in Australia’, according to the cover of a 2003 collection.²

Labour and economic history have a strong tradition in Australia. Labour rights (arguably under threat in recent years) were the focus of generations of historians who traced the history of factory workers, wage inequality, union strikes, labour politics, workplace relations, management ideology, the history of technology and industrial efficiency. In the wake of the cultural turn, new approaches melded with, older, Marxist approaches, extending scholarly interest to engage more deeply with inequalities on the basis of gender, race and sexuality as well as class. Historians turned to social habits and cultural logics, gender and consumption, labor and

¹ Kenneth Lipartito, ‘Review Essay: Reassembling the Economic: New Departures in Historical Materialism,’ *American Historical Review*, 121(1), 2016, p.101.

² Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White *Cultural History in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003).

domestic life, maternity allowances, sexual dynamics in the workplace, female unionists and masculinity and left wing political cultures.

Australia's cultural turn, as was the case internationally, brought culture to the centre of historical analysis. 'The study of culture was the study of Australia,' wrote Richard White, reflecting on his ground-breaking book *Inventing Australia* more than two decades later in 1997.³ Although this historiographical development was observable throughout the discipline globally, it is obvious that it was a particularly apposite choice for Australian history.⁴ Rarely considered a central actor in global politics, cultural history came with Australia's specificity (and some cases national exceptionalism) built in – and thus its reason to exist. The discipline's preoccupation with the causes and nature of Australian national identity are a case in point, for Australia's national identity can only be Australian.⁵ But in order to claim this distinctive Australian cultural identity, historians pushed against the Marxist-inflected categories of analysis which had underpinned much of Australian history's earlier work. Cultural history in Australia was in part characterised by a rejection of the subordination of culture as 'superstructure' under Marxian categories that had shaped earlier radical nationalist historical perspectives, such as labour history.⁶

For much of the 1970s, the *Bulletin for the Society of Labor History* (later *Labour History*) was arguably the most influential journal in Australian historiography. Started in 1962 by academics Eric Fry and Bob Gollan at the ANU, along with Ian Turner, Russel Ward and Brian Fitzpatrick, its articles were celebratory affirmations of working-class protest and organisations – strikes and riots, unions, employer-union relations, labour and radical organisations, biographies of labour movement figures. Influenced by the 'new social history', labour historians in the 1970s were a part of a larger scholarly preoccupation with political economy, in line with the Marxist politics of the time that saw the working class as the most significant force for social change.⁷ The appropriate way to claim uniqueness for Australian history beyond empire was, it was felt, through class, and through a binary that pitted a bourgeois-British establishment history against a working class 'authentic' Australian one.

³ Richard White, 'Inventing Australia Revisited' in W Hudson and G Bolton (eds.) *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992), pp.12-22.

⁴ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob (eds) *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1994).

⁵ Eg. Richard White *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1981), John Hirst *The Australians: insiders and outsiders on the national character since 1770* (Melbourne: BlackInc, 2007); James Curran and Stuart Ward *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire* (Melbourne: MUP, 2010).

⁶ See: Ann Curthoys, 'Labour History and Cultural Studies', *Labour History* 67, 1994, pp.12-22; Frank Bongiorno, 'Real Solemn History' and its Discontents: Australian Political History and the Challenge of Social History', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 56(1), 2010, pp.6-20; Grant Michelson, 'Labour and Culture – An Overview', *Labour History* 79, 2000, pp. 1-10. See also Verity Burgmann, 'The Point of Change and the Health of Labour History', *Labour History* 76, 1999, pp.171-180.

⁷ See John Merritt, 'Labour History', in G. Orbourne and W. F. Mandle, eds., *New History: Studying Australia Today* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 117; Gavan Butler, Evan Jones, and Frank Stilwell *Political Economy Now! The Struggle for Alternative Economics at the University of Sydney* (Sydney: SUP, 2009); Eric Hobsbawm 'From Social History to The History of Society' *Daedalus* 100(1) 1971, pp.20-45; See also Ann Curthoys, 'We've just started making national histories, and you want us to stop already?' in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking With and Through the Nation* (Durham: Duke, 2003), p.79.

The move away from Marxist and Structuralist methodologies that began with the influence of EP Thompson's work in labour history, shaped up as a source of conflict by the late 1980s and early 1990s, drawing lines between 'purist' labour historians and others who were embracing gender studies and the linguistic turn.⁸ Whether seeking kindred spirits or just a job opening, in this period many labour historians moved into industrial relations and political science departments where they remain today. On the back of these conflicts Verity Burgmann controversially declared 'the death of labour history' at the Australian Historical Association Conference in 1990.⁹

Feminist systems of inquiry reinforced this trend and flourished as a result of it.¹⁰ Women's, gender and feminist histories have repeatedly demonstrated that there were ways of looking at the past that did not need to be constrained by older metanarratives. They defined themselves against the narrowness of political and labour history as it was then practised and understood. Their scholarship developed further, enriching our understanding of the historically-contingent power of discourses of gender and sexuality as well as normative systems in families, politics and patterns of social interaction.¹¹

Using a sometimes-similar logic, some other scholars rejected the large, often faceless structures that characterised some 1970s labour histories, in favour of micro-history and oral history. Local histories of single urban neighbourhoods, factories or rural districts proliferated.¹² These exposed how 'power is structured into the most basic and usually unspoken assumptions through which we perceive our relationship to the social world and the practices of the everyday.'¹³

While the cultural turn led some to focus their attention to the local, for others it expanded horizons. Reading cultural artefacts and interpreting historical trends through a postcolonial lens brought Australian cultural history closer to studies of Empire and Imperialism, shifting focus away from the nation and its specificity. This moved the discipline still further from the intellectual neighbourhood inhabited by colleagues in economic and labour history.¹⁴ Historians began to 'think big' again,

⁸ Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates, 'Is Labour History Dead?', *Australian Historical Studies* 25(100), 1993, pp. 470-481; Frank Bongiorno 'Australian Labour History: contexts, trends and Influences', *Labour History*, 100, 2011, pp.1-18.

⁹ Verity Burgmann, 'Review Article: The Point of Change and the Health of Labour History', *Labour History* 76, 1999, pp.171-180.

¹⁰ See Kate Murphy 'Feminism and Political History', *Australian Journal of Political History* 56(1), 2010, pp.21-37.

¹¹ Ann Curthoys, 'Gender Studies in Australia: A History', *Australian Feminist Studies* 15(31), 2000, pp. 19-38. See also WH Sewell, *Logics of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) p. 61

¹² Eg., Janet McCalman, *Struggletown: Public and Private Life in Richmond, 1900-1965* (Carlton: MUP, 1984); Grace Karskens, 'Spinning Yarns: Oral History of Working Life at Bonds Cotton Spinning Mill, Pendle Hill, 1928-1988', in John Shields, *All Our Labours: Oral Histories of Working Class Life in Twentieth Century Sydney* (Kensington: UNSW, 1992), pp.10-47; Grace Karskens, 'We Thought it was Fantastic! Concord, Sydney in the 1920s', in D. Bairstow, (ed.), *Archaeology of Colonisation: Australia in the World Context* (Sydney 1988), pp.187-201.

¹³ Geoff Eley and Keith Nield *The Future of Class in History: what's left of the social?* (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 2007), p.142. See also: Lucy Taksa, 'The Cultural Diffusion of Scientific Management: United States and New South Wales', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1995, pp. 427-261; 'Scientific Management: Technique or Cultural Ideology?' *Journal of Industrial Relations* 34(3), 1992, pp.365-395.

¹⁴ Eg. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (eds.), *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire*, (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1989); Kirsten McKenzie *Scandal in The Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town, 1820-1850*. (Melbourne: MUP, 2004).

suggesting innovative ways of enriching the field while also keeping in mind the need to view power through quotidian and intimate encounters and relationships.¹⁵ The result was a growth in comparative studies and histories of colonial encounter.¹⁶ Later, this extended to transnational histories, though these tended to retain a historicist framework and lean on cultural sources.¹⁷

Through these historiographical developments, scholars did not fail to notice that cultural histories represented a turning away from class and political economy. This is not to suggest that *all* Australian historians ignore economics. Histories such as Stuart Macintyre's *Australia's Boldest Experiment* and Frank Bongiorno's *The Eighties* have combined economic analyses with social and political history. Cultural historians, moreover, have sometimes made economic matters their subject: James Boyce, Grace Karskens, Graeme Davison and Gail Reekie have all explored economic subjects. Nevertheless, as Angela Woollacott suggested, 'With the muting of political economy in recent colonial studies, class too has often been relegated to the sidelines, held constant, sometimes ignored.'¹⁸

As Australian history moved away from its labour history roots, the division between mainstream historical studies and economic history also widened. It is a division that is not as stark as it might have been however, for Australian economic historians have been less inclined than their international counterparts to cliometric approaches, preferring a more narrative style, exemplified by the much-read work of Geoffrey Blainey. This causes it to resemble historical studies more than their econometrician colleagues elsewhere, especially in the United States, where numerical modelling 'proved' the efficacy of economic theories through historical data – or sometimes produced elaborate counter-factual histories.¹⁹ Despite their more narrative tendencies, Australian economic historians nevertheless usually saw their craft as speaking into a growing understanding of *economics*, not history. This was partly a result of their structural separation from historians and their location in economics and commerce departments, to whom their history needed also to make sense.²⁰

In not seeking to speak primarily to history, economic historians instead developed tools to help navigate Australian economic policy. As Australian economic history developed then, many gave an account of the specific qualities of capitalism in Australia. In 1989 this tradition found continued expression in Andrew Wells' *Constructing Capitalism*, which accounted for the effect of Australia's specific material conditions on capitalism as it unfolded. As a discipline, Australian economic historians rejected what they perceived as an old British tendency to consider

¹⁵ Ann Curthoys and Clive Moore, 'Working for the White People: An Historiographic Essay on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Labour' *Labour History* 69, 1995, pp.1-29.

¹⁶ Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World*, (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2008), p.xiv; Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, eds., *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2005), pp.7-10.

¹⁷ Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds) *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: ANU ePress, 2005).

¹⁸ Angela Woollacott, 'Whiteness and the Imperial Turn', in Katherine Ellinghaus, Jane Carey and Leigh Boucher, eds., *Re-Orientating Whiteness* (New York: Palgrave 2009), p.27.

¹⁹ William Coleman 'Historiography of Australian Economic History' in Simon Ville and Glenn Withers (eds) *Cambridge Economic History of Australia* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), pp.11-28. Eg. Robert Fogel *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964).

²⁰ Sewell notes this pattern internationally, see *Logics of History*, pp.1-6.

economic history to be an account of the emergence of capitalism out of a feudal agrarian past. Noel Butlin, the economic historian most influential in shaping the field in Australia, famously declared that ‘Australian economic history was not a footnote to the Industrial Revolution’.²¹ In so arguing, Butlin may well have encouraged Australian economic historians to place capitalism as the backdrop to local economics, rather than as a historically contingent subject in its own right.²²

Despite Australian economic history’s limitations in historicising capitalism, there is no disputing the reality that it has been more effectively focused to Australian political decision-making than cultural history, though rarely to address inequality specifically. Cultural history has not (of course) been apolitical, but unlike their economic counterparts, cultural historians have rarely raced to Canberra to persuade politicians to embrace certain policies, as Edward Shann and Noel Butlin, among others, were wont to do.²³ In turning to a new materialism, we seek historical tools that will help us understand and speak into the changes and inequalities that we see.

Case studies: finding economics and culture in histories of inequality

We have each sought to understand the historical systems that underpin contemporary inequality in society – one in Australia’s economic relationship with Asia, the other in the Australian labour market. Here we offer two small case studies based on aspects of our research that are illustrative of the problems we encountered, armed with the cultural history tools in which we were trained. We found that to understand contemporary inequalities through history, we needed new tools to think with. What we did not find, as our case studies will show, is a need to wholly discard cultural history. This, despite embarking on some of the economic-based activity that cultural historians have often critiqued; and seeking structural explanations in history for present inequalities, which cultural history’s embrace of historicism previously gave us cause to reject.

Case study 1: problems of scale and source in Australia-China trade relations

I (Sophie Loy-Wilson) became interested in labour and economic history as a graduate student, by excavating Asian perspectives in Australian history. Inspired by the work of Donald Denoon and Frank Broeze, which similarly looked to economic ties as a way of rendering Australian dependencies on their non-white neighbours more visible, I did a lot of my research in China, reading Australian history through Chinese language sources, “coming from the outside in,” in Mae Ngai’s words.²⁴ But, while I worked transnationally, many of the debates I read about Australia in Chinese language newspapers, were framed in national terms. What could Chinese and

²¹ Coleman ‘The Historiography of Australian Economic History’, p. 26. N.G. Butlin, A. Barnard and J.J. Pincus, *Government and Capitalism: Public and Private Choice in Twentieth Century Australia*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1982), p.10. See also Bruce Stave, ‘A Conversation with Graeme Davison: Urban History in Australia’, *Journal of Urban History* 5(69), 1978, p.71.

²² Andrew Wells *Constructing Capitalism: an economic history of Eastern Australia 1788-1901* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989).

²³ Coleman ‘Historiography of Australian Economic History’, p.27.

²⁴ Mae N. Ngai, ‘Promises and Perils of Transnational History,’ *Perspectives on History*, 2012.

Australian unionists learn from each other *vis a vis* demanding better rights for working people? Could an Australian-style Factory Act be implemented in Shanghai cotton mills?²⁵

Reading Australia in a Chinese context, it struck me that that Sino-Australian migration and mobility moved both ways. Chinese migrants travelled into white settler societies, but white settlers also went to China, influencing Chinese nationalism and nation building.²⁶ Later, during the Great Depression, China's ports attracted Australian labour migration and Australian internationalists and mission networks clustered in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Chinese Australians were important too. From the 1880s, Chinese-Australian companies forged economic links between Australia's and China's port cities. In the 1940s many left-leaning Chinese Australians returned to China to assist in early Communist agricultural efforts. These Chinese Australians translated Australia for their Chinese students and friends – discussing what they saw as the positive and negative aspects of the Australian state.

These stories were important in challenging canonical ways of thinking about the history of Sino-Australian relations. This history is often reduced to two key moments: Chinese miners in Australia during the Gold Rushes and the resulting Australian racism, the introduction of the White Australia Policy in 1901; and Australian diplomats traveling to China to re-establish ties with Australia's newly powerful neighbor at the end of the Cold War.²⁷ Gough Whitlam's 1972 trip to Peking – two months before Nixon – is the subject of at least two books in recent years, and numerous newspaper articles.²⁸ This foundational history is convenient, providing a redemptive narrative for Australian politics, a way to throw off the long shadow of White Australia and usher in a new era of Australia-China friendship.

But this narrative only holds if we excise commercial exchange from the historical picture. If we come in at an economic register – if we treat trade as a cultural matter – we uncover a long history of interconnection and China-Australia trade relations rarely acknowledged in Australian national histories.²⁹ And if we take economic archives seriously, Chinese language sources reveal new elements of Australian history. Thrown up against more secure nationalist narratives which position the Chinese as victims of white Australian racism, we can trace the trade routes of Chinese 'coolie' traders from Macau to Sydney, merchant capitalists and bankers such as Penang-born Lowe Kong Meng prospering in Melbourne and Malacca, and wealthy Chinese-Christians who founded the four most famous department stores in

²⁵ Sophie Loy-Wilson, 'Liberating Asia': Strikes and Protest in Sydney and Shanghai, *History Workshop Journal*, 72(1), 2011, pp.74-102.

²⁶ Kate Bagnall, 'Crossing Oceans and Cultures,' in David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska, *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century* (Perth: UWA Press, 2012), pp.121-145.

²⁷ See for example: Shirley Fitzgerald, *Red Tape Golden Scissors: the Story of Sydney's Chinese* (Sydney: SLNSW, 1996), pp.124-155; Keir Reeves and Jan Tsen Khoo, eds., 'Special Issue: Chinese Australian History', *Australian Historical Studies* 42(1), 2011.

²⁸ Billy Griffiths, *The China Breakthrough: Whitlam in the Middle Kingdom* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2012); Stephen Fitzgerald, *Comrade Ambassador: Whitlam's Beijing Envoy* (Melbourne: MUP, 2015).

²⁹ The work of John Fitzgerald, Paul Macgregor and Marian Diamond are rare exceptions. See: Marion Diamond, 'Tea and Sympathy: Foundations of Australia/China Trading Networks' in Regina Ganter (eds.) *Australians in Asia*, *Queensland Review*, 6(2), 1999, pp.24-30.

Shanghai from their fruit-market head quarters in Sydney's Haymarket.³⁰ We see how businesses knit together diverse places and peoples and 'offered the minority and the oppressed a measure of agency,' even against the most repressive forces of colonial racism.³¹

Two historical images exemplify the shift I made. First, this cartoon (figure 1), depicting a white Australia closing the door on the Chinese migrant, is a classic cultural history source redolent of discourses about race and exclusion. This is an Australian perception of China, proof of Australia as an 'anxious nation' in Asia, in David Walker's classic formulation. Then, by contrast, this document (figure 2), shows Broken Hill Proprietary signing their first trade deal with a Chinese company in 1891. By using an economic lens, I began to move from my cultural history habit of reading representations of race and instead see this history of China-Australia interconnectivity through the eyes of Chinese Australian merchants in the late 19th century. Here, archives document sinuous networks between Hong Kong, Melbourne, Sydney, Shanghai, Cooktown and Fuzhou. Cooktown did more trade with Hong Kong than any other port in the world in the 1890s. These sources have not featured much in Chinese Australian history writing, in part as a result of historians' focus on representation of Chinese immigrants in Australian popular culture rather than their material and economic relations.³²

By contrast to Australian historiographic trends, contemporary public debate over Sino-Australia relations is thick with references to economic numbers: iron ore prices, Chinese imports and investments, property prices, the growth of the Chinese economy, Chinese greenhouse gas emissions and China's population. Of course, there is much obvious historical continuity here. As many historians have pointed out, an obsession with numbers has long stalked Australian anxieties over China – in the histories of immigration and labour, for example; and, in the work of 1890s intellectuals and their debates over China population, Chinese invasion and a colour war.³³ Mary Poovey writes that one reason for the power that comes from quantifying experience is that numbers are 'modern facts' which appear to 'solve the problem of induction' by at least seeming to 'bridge the gap between the observed particular and general knowledge.'³⁴ A second reason is that certain forms of public enumeration – census taking, tax accounting, and so on – are indispensable to modern governments and become the film through which complex, knotted processes – such as Australia's economic connections to China – are tidied for public consumption. What kinds of stories do numbers tell and what do they obscure? Is it possible to employ economic data while simultaneously abiding by the tenets of cultural history, that is, by being

³⁰ John Fitzgerald has written about some Chinese merchant families with Australian connections in his seminal publication, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: UNSW, 2007).

³¹ Lipartito, 'Reassembling the Economic', p.123

³² Eg., an influential Special Issue of *Australian Cultural History* was dedicated entirely to Australian perceptions of Asia but did not address economic ties. See David Walker (ed.) 'Australian Perceptions of Asia', *Australian Cultural History*, 9 (1999).

³³ David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999), pp 98-113.

³⁴ Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems and Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 25. See also Frank Trentmann, 'Crossing Divides: Consumption and Globalization in History', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9(2), 2008, p.202.

attentive to meaning, to the 'instability of language, the subjectivity of human thought, the social construction of gender, race and class?'³⁵

I grappled with these questions through an archive of letters to successive Australian governments about trading wheat with China in the 1950s and 1960s. A decade after the Communist party took power in China in 1949 the greatest famine in twentieth century history claimed the lives of an estimated 43 million people.³⁶ As China's need for food became apparent, Australians tended to watch a set of different and yet connected numbers – counting all the wheat that China bought from Australia in the wake of the famine; 15.3 million tonnes in 1961.³⁷ Australia's wheat export to China tripled between 1958 and 1961. On the advice of the Australian Wheat Board, more wheat was sown and more land opened for wheat farming. So that most iconic of Australian masculinities –the farmer – was intimately tied to Chinese populations, and Chinese lives, in ways that receive little historical attention.

So how to square these two stories? In cultural history terms, both these sources are 'cultural texts'. One narrates China's famine without reference to Australian wheat while the other depicts Australia's wheat sales in dehumanised terms; all structure, no people. And yet both sources, in their own ways are about economic and human survival, and representations of the struggle for each. Australians wrote to the government about Australia's wheat trade. They penned thousands of letters between the late 1950s and early 1970s. Some pointed out the obvious contradiction of an anti-Communist government feeding a Communist country, arguing that trade was 'always a moral question, always ideological'. Others pleaded the case of the Chinese people saying the wheat should be gift wheat, economic aid and not an opportunity for profit; others asked why their sons were fighting in Vietnam if Australian farmers were feeding the 'Red Army.' These letters reflect a *rejection* of numbers as 'observed particulars' and 'modern facts.' Their authors took economic connections and rendered them intimate and tangible on a human scale; as a type of moral panic over trade.

Sorting these matters out requires, as Lipartito notes, 'a rich narrative attendant to the complex relations between systems of meaning and material forces.'³⁸ Frank Bongiorno's recent treatment of the floating of the Australian dollar points towards such an approach, skillfully interweaving the 1983 currency float with the floating of America's Cup winner, *Australia II*. My case study, however, suggests that drawing cultural and economic history together requires something more than just pushing them up against one another. By committing to neither a purely structural nor a singularly cultural transformative impulse, a new materialism identifies new assemblages and connections between economic activities, cultural discourses and social and political context. It will need an economic history that is far more diverse in its practices and subtle in its effects than its practitioners have often imagined.³⁹

Case study 2: problems of work and survival in rural and Aboriginal Australia

³⁵ Appleby et al, *Telling the Truth About History*.

³⁶ Christina Twomey and Andrew May, 'Australian Responses to the Indian Famine 1876-78: Empire, Sympathy, Photography', *Australian Historical Studies*, 4(2), 2012, pp.233-252.

³⁷ Exportation of Wheat to China NAA/A1838/275 766/1/4/Pt6

³⁸ Lipartito, 'Reassembling the Economic,' p.112.

³⁹ Frank Bongiorno, *The Eighties: The Decade that transformed Australia* (Melbourne: BlackInc, 2015)

I [Hannah Forsyth] seek to understand the historical forces that structure work and opportunity in contemporary Australia: class structures, with an additional emphasis on race and gender. Since 2012 I have conducted archival and oral history research on work and educational opportunity in Broken Hill, in outback New South Wales. I saw that any understanding of work in rural Australia would be unacceptably skewed were I not also to consider the ways that economic activity, work and opportunity were a part of the structures of settler colonialism. Through conversations and interviews with local Aboriginal people since, I am pursuing a new angle on work and class that helps connect the history of employment with settler colonialism. I am calling this ‘the political economics of survival’.⁴⁰

One visit, I sat in the Broken Hill archives reading about Tibooburra, a nearby town. I was trying to understand the history of local economic activity and the relations between towns, as well as between the petty bourgeoisie, the white working class, Aboriginal workers and larger forces, like the City of London, whose investment in sheep and silver-lead mining helped shape these outback localities. Tibooburra was a gold rush town, characterised as much by starvation and suicide as gold, and later boasted a few very large sheep stations where many Aboriginal people worked (and many sheep died of thirst). It also had a pub, a tin-shed post office and a bank. I was puzzled: *why was there a bank in Tibooburra?*

Turning to our historiography for help, Ann McGrath, Anna Haebich and Minoru Hokari all provided significant discussions of Aboriginal station work, though I was unable to use these to make connections to rural banking or the larger structures of capitalism that made a bank in the middle of nowhere seem a good idea.⁴¹ I turned to recent cultural and economic histories of rural Australia. These told me repeatedly of the working of sheep stations and of mines, focusing on their significance to Australia at a national level.⁴² But I could find nothing to explain the bank in Tibooburra. I read localised accounts of people, trade and money. Alan Atkinson’s 1980s study of Camden provided significant detail about nineteenth century systems of credit, currency and exchange at the local scale I sought, though Camden’s proximity to Sydney made both economics and race very different to outback NSW.⁴³ At the other end of the scale, in some older labour history and in sociologies of rural Australia, I found descriptions of branch banking against the structures of money, trade and investment across the colonies and the Empire; though against such faceless structures, the specificity of Tibooburra’s agents disappeared.⁴⁴ What I *could* see was that the tools I had to work with, to study discourse and representation, would not help. The economic, as well as the cultural, needed to matter. Sitting at the heart of structures of work and Aboriginal survival was a history of capitalism that remained out of reach.

⁴⁰ This research is being conducted with Altin Gavranovic.

⁴¹ Ann McGrath *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987); Minoru Hokari *Gurindji Journey: a Japanese Historian in the Outback* (Sydney: UNSW, 2011); Anna Haebich *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the south west of Western Australia 1900-1940* (Perth: UWA, 1992).

⁴² Richard Waterhouse *Vision Splendid: social and cultural history of rural Australia* (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005); Simon Ville *Rural Entrepreneurs: a History of the Stock and Station Agent Industry* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

⁴³ Alan Atkinson *Camden: Farm and Village Life in Early NSW* (Oxford: OUP, 1988).

⁴⁴ Wells *Constructing Capitalism*. For sociology, see Ken Dempsey *Smalltown: a Study of Social Inequality, Cohesion and Belonging* (Oxford: OUP, 1990); S. Lockie and L. Bourke (eds) *Rurality Bites* (Sydney: Pluto, 2001).

The bank in Tibooburra was a symbol of the problem I encountered more broadly in using history to understand present inequalities, particularly in the nearby Aboriginal community of Wilcannia. At the height of colonisation, Wilcannia had several banks, and sandstone edifices of New South Wales colonial power adorn every corner – there is even an Athenaeum. Yet this jewel of colonisation is now one of the State’s most impoverished communities. It has a poor reputation among white people in Broken Hill, who were often shocked that I was going there at all, let alone unaccompanied.

By contrast, local Aboriginal people were lovingly determined I see Wilcannia with the generosity that they often give it. As a result, without hiding the town’s problems, I have also generously been shown the best aspects of Aboriginal community and survival, in the shadow of the colonisers’ crumbling sandstone. For some that I spoke to, capitalism really was a transitory phenomenon. The term ‘cockies’ for landowners (denoting the cockatoo’s tendency to fly in, eat everything in sight and fly away) is particularly apt there, and it is still used frequently, though few consider the cockies to have gone – yet. Despite the ravages of capitalist interests to land and culture, survival for many is grounded in an older, deeper historical consciousness. ‘Mother nature’ one older man reassured me, as he gestured across the town, ‘will out last *all* of this’.⁴⁵

My cultural history training would have led me to think about representations of power and the navigation of agency between Wilcannia’s sandstone edifices. But as both symbols and structures, those banks bother me. Beyond theories of Indigenous agency, which I don’t ignore, I want to understand the nature of the structures that capitalism forged in rural Australia. This requires some economic questions: did capitalism fail in Wilcannia (and possibly elsewhere in rural Australia) allowing Aboriginal survival? Did the ‘cockies’ take all there was to offer before moving on, so that Aboriginal survival is incidental; or worse (from a political perspective), the direct result of poverty and isolation? Or was there something more active at work in Aboriginal survival of the structures of colonial capitalism?

Those crumbling, vanished banks in remote towns like Wilcannia and Tibooburra in fact help with the task of allowing both cultural systems of power and capitalist systems of power to be seen in the same frame. The now-absent banks tell of the transience of capitalist enterprise and of government dismantling of services to the rural economy, in which Aboriginal Australians were only ever partially included. Silently, they remind us that even slow-changing structures have a history – or at least, in Wilcannia, they have a past.

What our case studies suggest

Our historical toolkit, as we inherited it from Australian cultural history traditions, only took us so far in understanding the historical forces that have shaped contemporary problems. We began to discuss the need to consider *structures* not just of power, but also of economics if we were to get at the causes and consequences of inequality in Australia and in Australia’s race relations. And yet, our cultural history tools remained useful. Although we began to explore both economic and Marxist historiographies and techniques, we did not wish to revert to a form of historical practice that would exclude lessons derived from the cultural turn.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, by

⁴⁵ Interview with Woddy Harris, September 2015.

⁴⁶ See Lipartio ‘Reassembling the Economic’, p.105.

looking for causalities and their material consequences in seeking to use history to speak into the present, we encountered oft-observed limits to cultural history.

Limits of Cultural History

It is not news that some historians find cultural history inadequate – ‘sometimes illuminating’, Stuart Macintyre suggested, but also ‘sometimes redundant’.⁴⁷ History seminars worldwide have been sites of debate over the explanatory limits of discourse, the inadequacy of theories of agency in the face of inhumane structures (like slavery) and our inability to use cultural meaning as a causal agent: criticisms often levelled at cultural history by its own practitioners.⁴⁸ There is no need, we think, to re-hash these debates, though it is evident in our case studies that we have encountered them in our historical practice. We found we needed economics to locate causalities for events that our discursive interpretations had only allowed us to observe – and even then, without economics, our observations were only partial. Such partial observation is a moral matter, just as it would be to look at Australian wheat export trends without also seeing the lived reality of Mao’s great famine. Seeing Aboriginal survival in the face of colonisation, we could harness the concept of agency for historical and political purposes, but we agreed we must also consider the structures of the economy to identify the forces of oppression and the strategies of survival in the real, experienced world.⁴⁹

Despite our need for economic histories to achieve these goals, we have often encountered reasons for upholding cultural historians’ traditional antipathy to numbers. Numbers alone would not tell of the various forms of protest and debate over selling Australian wheat to Communist China during the Vietnam War. Nor would it tell of the lived experience of poverty and starvation through the famine. Numbers, cultural historians rightly told us, cover a multitude of sins.⁵⁰ By seeing and experiencing the limits of both culture and economics in our history, we therefore seek to avoid the problem of ‘turns’ that Judith Surkis warns of, as historians reject historiographical traditions wholesale, in pursuit of a new idea.⁵¹ We seek a bigger toolbox for Australian history, not a full set replacement of the tools we already have.

Yet it is also the case that problems within cultural history limited what we could do with our research. Cultural history, by ‘reading against the grain’ was always conceived as a fundamentally political project. Despite this, it has several elements that, as William Sewell has pointed out, have tended to be complicit with the very structures it sought to critique. The increased focus on the individual and her lived and negotiated agency aligned too-well with the patterns of flexible accumulation that characterised post-1971 capitalism.⁵² Similarly, as Geoff Eley suggested, the

⁴⁷ Stuart Macintyre *Concise History of Australia* (Cambridge: CUP), 3rd Edition, p.57.

⁴⁸ See Sewell *Logics of History*; Walter Johnson ‘On Agency’ *Journal of Social History* 31(1), 2003 pp.113-124; Geoff Eley ‘The Past under Erasure? History, Memory and the Contemporary’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 46 (3), pp.555-73.

⁴⁹ See Miranda Johnson ‘Writing Indigenous History Now’, *Australian Historical Studies* 45(3), 2014, pp.317-30.

⁵⁰ Catherine Hall ‘Gendering Property, Racing Capital,’ *History Workshop Journal*, 78(1), 2014, pp.22-38.

⁵¹ Judith Surkis ‘When was the Linguistic Turn?’ *American Historical Review*, 2012, 117(3), pp.700-22.

⁵² Sewell *Logics of History*, p.60

‘transnational turn’ followed capitalist trends to globalisation and partly made sense because of it.⁵³ Indeed, it was understandable, Sewell argues, that these new historiographical approaches resonated with historians as their world changed.⁵⁴ But if we hope for a history that seeks a better world we need to historicise, rather than reinforce, these changing economic systems and understand their relationship to the living, acting, thinking and feeling humans within them. In this we hope to build on Australia’s significant ‘activist’ histories, drawing on a materialist framework to offer a historical understanding of inequality, a tendency that has been especially strong in Aboriginal history.⁵⁵

Historicising capitalism in Australia

This is a problem, because broadly (and acknowledging there will always be individual exceptions) there are competing epistemological systems at work between cultural and economic approaches to history. Cultural history sees historical events as specific and contingent. Causality (where it matters) is located in the specific choices of autonomous agents who navigate their way through the discursive realm. Economic history is also specific to time and place, but seeks to use each instance to better understand the larger structures of economic cause and effect, which are thus universalised. These divergent epistemological frameworks are the likely source of the eye rolling that cultural and economic historians have performed against one another for the past two or three decades.⁵⁶

This firm epistemological separation caused problems on both sides. Labour and economic history in Australia produced histories of industries, big business and the relationships between public and private money, but these often sat against a background in which capitalism was positioned as a static constant rather than as a contingent historical subject.⁵⁷ In Ian McLean’s recent history of Australian prosperity, for example, the book’s fundamental question is how to ensure prosperity internationally; it is not an account of capitalism or its market as a contingent event, characteristic of a specific (albeit long) period of history.⁵⁸ This is not to suggest that historians have not given good account of the specifics of capitalism in particular eras of Australian history – indeed, describing the particularity of Australian economic conditions has been a key theme from Brian Fitzpatrick’s incisive observations about Empire in Australia through Noel Butlin’s expansive histories to include sociological accounts of the growth of the Australian market.⁵⁹ This is what imbued Australian

⁵³ Geoff Eley ‘The Profane and Imperfect World of Historiography’ *American Historical Review*, 113(2), 2008 pp.425-37.

⁵⁴ Sewell *Logics of History*, p.60

⁵⁵ See Stuart Macintyre (ed) *The Historian's Conscience: Australian Historians on the Ethics of History* (Melbourne: MUP, 2004); Eg. Heather Goodall *Invasion to Embassy: Land and Politics in NSW 1770-1972* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996).

⁵⁶ see Sewell *Logics of History*; Geoff Eley ‘Historicizing the Global, Politicizing Capital: Giving the Present a Name’, *History Workshop Journal* 63(1), 2007 pp.154-188; Geoff Eley ‘The Past Under Erasure? History, Memory, and the Contemporary’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2011, 46(3), pp.555-73.

⁵⁷ Cf. Lipartito ‘Reassembling the Economic’, p.127

⁵⁸ Ian McLean *Why Australia Prospered: The Shifting Sources of Economic Growth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Brian Fitzpatrick *British Empire in Australia: an economic history 1834-1939*; N Butlin, A Barnard & JJ Pincus *Government and Capitalism: Public and Private Choice in Twentieth Century Australia*,

economic history with an especially potent political utility. Nevertheless, like their American counterparts, by the end of the twentieth century, economic historians tended to ‘emphasise the efficiency of financial markets and their contribution to growth’ in ways that de-emphasised ‘finance as a political and cultural matter’.⁶⁰

Nor did cultural history historicise capitalism in the ways we seek.⁶¹ Descriptions of cultural shifts that resulted from commodification, the growth of department stores, international relations, the entry of women into a growing mass market and mining as a power broker in Indigenous affairs and so on, all happened against a taken-for-granted capitalist backdrop.⁶² There are exceptions: Julie McIntyre sees wine production as part of the emergence of both economic discourse *and* economic reality since the Enlightenment.⁶³ McIntyre’s flexibility, moving between culture and structure, is unusual. For most cultural historians, the economic is primarily background information or powerful discourse rather than a structure. This, we argue, puts political limits on our work, especially in seeking structural change, which is our purpose in examining histories of unfair economic systems and racist structures in white Australia’s relationship to China and its rural and Indigenous communities respectively. Such change is difficult to envisage if we treat capitalist structures ahistorically.

It is an understandable problem to encounter, for as already noted, cultural history emerged as a reaction against historiographical patterns that often reified numbers, failing to recognise the power that numbers themselves asserted. Reading economic texts as discourse has been an important mechanism for overcoming the frequent one-dimensionality of power portrayed by history before the cultural turn.⁶⁴ It will be important, we realise, to continue to read economic texts in this way, even as we also seek to use economic data for explanatory purposes. Capitalism evidently has a human and cultural history that must be told. Nevertheless, as Lipartito noted, ‘unpacking capitalism cannot be done by deconstructing discourses alone’.⁶⁵

Our separation of culture and economics in Australia is at odds with current historiographical trends internationally, moreover. The 2008 global financial crisis alerted many scholars around the world to the historical contingency of capitalism. New histories of capitalism have been emerging, especially in the United States. Centres for the study of the history of capitalism have been established at Cornell, Columbia and Harvard universities, while histories of commodities, sectors and

(Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982); Philip McMichael *Settlers and the Agrarian Question: Foundations of Capitalism in Colonial Australia* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984).

⁶⁰ Lipartito ‘Reassembling the Economic’, p.117. Eg. Geoffrey Blainey *The Rush that Never Ended* (Melbourne: MUP, 1989); Erik Eklund *Mining Towns* (Sydney: UNSW, 2012); Grant Fleming et. al. *The Big End of Town Big Business and Corporate Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

⁶¹ Lipartito ‘Reassembling the Economic’, p.121

⁶² Eg. Gail Reekie *Temptations: sex, selling and the Department Store* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993); David Walker *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (Brisbane: UQP, 1999); Marcia Langton, Maureen Tehan, Lisa Palmer and Kathryn Shain (eds) *Honour among nations? Treaties and Agreements with Indigenous People* (Melbourne: MUP, 2004). This is consistent with Lipartito’s observation in the US, ‘Reassembling the Economic’, p.134

⁶³ Julie McIntyre, ‘Adam Smith and faith in the transformative qualities of wine in colonial New South Wales’ *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol.42(2), 2011, pp.194-211

⁶⁴ Richard Biernacki ‘Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History’ in Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds) *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (San Francisco: UCP, 1999), pp.62-92.

⁶⁵ Lipartito ‘Reassembling the Economic’, p.126

structures, often with a Marxist undercurrent, are achieving significant scholarly acclaim. In Europe, Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* drew on big data to historicise income inequality over four centuries of history and across continents.⁶⁶ Catherine Hall's history of slave ownership similarly produces big data and demonstrates the significant place of slavery in British capitalist interests.⁶⁷ Among cultural historians like Hall, who are now (re)turning to economic sources with Marxist tools to think with, the epistemological difficulties remain in theory, but in practice do not appear to matter very much.⁶⁸

Building history from people, grounded in the material

The 'materialist conception of history' as Eric Hobsbawm understood it, was already going out of fashion when he published his essay on 'Marx and History' in 1984. Historians rightly rejected a linear metanarrative describing an inevitable evolutionary growth from 'primitive communalism' through slavery, feudalism and capitalism to communist revolution. Most surprising to Hobsbawm was not the rejection of the inevitability of revolution, but the simultaneous rejection of the idea that material conditions shape the experience of humans individually and collectively.⁶⁹ The question of whether either discourse and ideas or the material and economic had the greater part to play in shaping human consciousness in society, became one of the key philosophical debates underpinning the separation of cultural and Marxist history.

It is not a debate that we find terribly helpful. Foucaultian studies have shown us for a generation how important discourse is in asserting power and we do not dispute it. But it is evident that money matters too, as well as all the other material conditions that contribute to the inequalities that we see. So we look for ways to combine, softly, the materialism of Marxist history with the analytic and interpretative tools of cultural history. We hope this helps us avoid disembodied structural histories of the past, which tended to draw big structural arcs with little concern for discourse or for its articulation in the specificity of everyday life, while also retaining their scope and causal insights. For [anonymous 1], this means engaging directly with the changing economic conditions in (and between) Australia and China, in which discourses and representations are shaped. For [anonymous 2], it requires an analysis of the economic aims of competing colonial and Aboriginal interests, and identifying the relationship of these to historical consciousness in the present. In this work, we seek a history from below that includes but is not limited to labour, which historicises capitalism, drawing loosely on Marx without pre-determining phases of capitalist and pre-capitalist development. This, we argue, will help us gain a new understanding of class, race and gender as both structure and discourse, which variously shape and are shaped by material and economic conditions.

Settler colonial studies has already marked out some of this territory, bringing theoretical frameworks that identify structures forged by culture. Informed by aspects of Marxist thinking about Imperialism, settler colonial studies in Australia has enabled scholars to combine cultural studies of place (for example), with structural

⁶⁶ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Harvard, 2014).

⁶⁷ Hall 'Gendering Property, Racing Capital.

⁶⁸ This is borne out by others internationally, see Lipartito 'Reassembling the Economic', pp.134-5.

⁶⁹ Eric Hobsbawm 'Marx and History', *New Left Review* 143, pp.39-50, 1984.

transformations associated with colonisation.⁷⁰ These structures contain parallel logics across the settler-colonies that, in Patrick Wolfe's last book, link to important historiographical developments in global history. Global history alerted us to the political economics of the 'great divergence' between the West and the rest: Wolfe used this to show that the history of capitalism is also fundamentally the history of settler colonies and the races they exploited or sought to eliminate. This is a key reason why a new materialism in Australian history specifically is so valuable.⁷¹ The case studies we discussed here can in part be seen as a growing habit of reading a labour history archive through a settler colonial lens.

Like historians of settler colonialism, we too seek to consider the structural and cultural dynamics of inequality in the present. This is the political imperative underpinning our experiments in understanding class, race and gender struggles for survival within structures like capitalism. We are influenced by William Sewell's theorisation of 'eventful' structures: that is, seeing structure as coercive and normative but also neither static nor stable.⁷² This has encouraged us to consider methodologies built from people, but grounded in the material. As a result, we have each begun experimenting with histories of place, oral histories and material culture in our research – a material, as well as a materialist approach to history. It is a growing pattern of beginning our research with the inheritors of history, whether Chinese-Australian descendants or current residents of Wilcannia. We hope in time, that this will be augmented by descriptive statistics, engagement with 'big data' and perhaps even collaboration with econometricians.

We were anxious that beginning historical investigations with present inequalities sounded dangerously teleological to our cultural history-trained minds. But as for Walter Benjamin, this is a key benefit of a historical materialist approach. The 'secret heliotropism' with which the historical materialist's head turned to the present, like flowers to the sun, was led, Benjamin argued, by the 'courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude' with which real people engaged in class (and, we would argue, race and gender) struggles.⁷³ This is consistent with 'Melbourne School' historian Rhys Isaac's description of a history that 'must, in its scholarly and many more public tellings, suggest a story as yet unfinished'.⁷⁴ It is also rather like the kind of cross-cultural encounter that Greg Dening alerted us to. But as well as 'present-ing' the past as Dening exhorted, it is also about past-ing the present, using the past to both explain and change what we see.⁷⁵

Conclusions

It is ironic that Benjamin's suggestion that 'a historical materialist... regards it as his task to brush history against the grain' was adopted by those who rejected materialism

⁷⁰ Eg. Tracey Banivanua-Mar 'Belonging to Country: Racialising Space and Resistance on Queensland's Transnational Margins, 1880–1900' *Australian Historical Studies* 43(2), 2012, pp.174–90; Lorenzo Veracini *Settler Colonialism: Theoretical Overview* (Houndmills: PalgraveMacmillan, 2010).

⁷¹ Patrick Wolfe *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016).

⁷² Sewell *Logics of History*, pp.124–51.

⁷³ Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Thesis IV.

⁷⁴ Rhys Isaac 'Inclusive History' in Macintyre (ed) *The Historian's Conscience* p. 64–74.

⁷⁵ Greg Dening 'Performing on the Beaches of my Mind' *History and Theory*, 41(1), 2002, pp.1–24.

in favour of the new historicism. In the same thesis Benjamin opposed historians who ‘blot out everything they know about the later course of history’ in order to ‘relive an era’, a habit later advocated by cultural historians.⁷⁶ The irony does not matter very much, but it does remind us that historical practice is capable of holding epistemological tensions together, with little damage to the final product. This is what we too find we need to do as we combine a new materialist approach with a cultural history toolkit.

In approaching a new materialism in Australian history, we advocate for both a flexible, inclusive methodology and a more historicised subject in the history of capitalism. In so doing, we do not seek to relinquish all we have learned from cultural history: we are not proclaiming a new ‘turn’. Rather, we are looking for history that, as Denning put it, ‘is a verb’: a new materialist history that works to understand capitalism as a historical subject and seeks justice within it, in the present.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Thesis VII.

⁷⁷ Denning ‘Performing on the Beaches of my Mind’.