
COMMENTARY

Where's the Beef? Culture without Power in the Study of U.S. Foreign Relations

There is little with which I would disagree in Andrew Rotter's article, yet just as little that I find historically important, a conclusion all too frequent when reading articles and books based on the types of methodologies, and ideologies, he uses here. Applying theories from sociology, anthropology, or literary criticism, examining languages, cultures, or, in this case, religions, can be interesting, even illuminating, but how, in the final analysis, does it explain state action, which presumably is the basis of the study of foreign relations? It seems clear that policymakers, in North America and South Asia, had ideological beliefs, preconceptions, and prejudices based on religion. Still, one wonders how important these were to the conduct of U.S.-Indian-Pakistani relations. What about the impact of the Cold War? Neutralism? Nationalism? South Asian geopolitics? Trade and military aid? In what kind of larger context do religious symbols and beliefs take on a larger meaning?

U.S. activities in South Asia have been generally overlooked by U.S. historians, so studies of the area are ripe with possibility. Dennis Merrill and Robert McMahon have produced excellent books on U.S. plans for and policies in India and Pakistan, and Andrew Rotter is now studying these areas as well, but his approach differs markedly.¹ Rather than study economic relations, geopolitics, Cold War alliances, and such, Rotter, in a 1994 article in the *Journal of American History*, placed U.S.-South Asian relations within the context of gender images, arguing that Americans felt more comfortable with "masculine" Pakistanis than they did with their more "feminine" counterparts from India.² Here, religion is added to the mix, and Rotter submits to us that U.S. leaders, mostly Protestant, favored monotheistic Islamic Pakistan over polytheistic Hindu India.

Studies of this nature can have firm merit. Those national officials – overwhelmingly white, male, and Protestant, not to mention wealthy – who

1. Dennis Merrill, *Bread and the Ballot: The United States and India's Economic Development, 1947–1963* (Chapel Hill, 1990); Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India, and Pakistan* (New York, 1994).

2. Andrew Rotter, "Gender Relations, Foreign Relations: The United States and South Asia, 1947–1964," *Journal of American History* 81 (September 1994): 518–42.

determine U.S. policy surely do so within a cultural context, and by ignoring such factors, the historical record remains incomplete. At the same time, however, it is a greater omission to neglect considerations of the power relationships between states. Trade, military aid, intervention, and political alliances, as well as cultural relations, remain the “stuff” of international politics, and power is still the currency that states use in world affairs.

With regard to U.S. relations with India and Pakistan, such issues of power are prominent in their postwar histories. The United States helped facilitate the entry of Pakistan into the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Baghdad Pact in 1955, forging an anti-Communist alliance with Karachi for the Cold War. India, meanwhile, had sinned by choosing neutrality, rejecting Soviet and U.S. overtures for a closer relationship because, as Jawaharlal Nehru put it, his state would not be a “pawn” or a “plaything” of the major powers. Both the Soviet Union and the United States, Nehru believed, “have little appreciation of any attitude of neutrality and are inclined to think that those who are not with them are against them.”³ By the early 1960s, however, India, nonaligned but also non-Communist, had become a prime candidate for “modernization,” and so U.S. funding poured in, with New Delhi becoming a major recipient of U.S. aid. By decade’s end, though, the Nixon administration “tilted” toward Pakistan amid the Bangladesh separation crisis, but that period is beyond the purview of Rotter’s study.

Foregoing many of the characteristics and methods of traditional studies of U.S.-South Asian relations, as well as of foreign policy research generally, Rotter focuses not principally on trade, politics, or military affairs but on the social, cultural, and religious *perceptions* Americans held toward India and Pakistan, and those that South Asians held toward the United States. *Darsan*, the “seeing” of an image of a god, or *sanyasin*, renouncing worldly comfort, join Hindu and Islam as organizing principles in this study. These innovative ideas form, at once, the strength and even more the shortcomings of this work. While it is refreshing to see the inclusion of religious-cultural concepts, it is distressing to see the exclusion of concepts of power in an examination of relations between major states. More telling is the manner in which the author couches his claims for this article: perceptions of others are formed *in part* by perceptions of other religions, and religious thinking *had influence* on the policies formulated in the period 1947 to 1964.

Who can quibble with such modest claims? Don’t a good many factors “in part” influence policymakers’ perceptions? Aren’t there many ideas that “had influence” in the formulation of policy? Of course there are, but Rotter – perhaps implicitly, perhaps unwittingly – is indeed claiming more. One would not spend years researching and writing about the United States and South Asia via the lenses of gender, culture, and religion unless he thought it was an overlooked and essential, if not the principal, way to understand relations,

3. Nehru in McMahon, *Cold War on the Periphery*, 43.

alliances, enmity, miscommunication, hostility, and friendship between the states in question. If the more modest aforementioned claims are indeed the basis of this project, then one has to wonder why Andrew Rotter's work has been published in major journals previously and why it is the subject of a roundtable in the major journal in his field. Apparently, something is happening here and we are trying to figure out what it is.

Rotter's work fits within a much larger movement within the field of U.S. foreign relations in which many historians are now appropriating theories from other fields to study diplomatic history. Many of the best-known and brightest scholars in this subfield – including Akira Iriye, Emily Rosenberg, John Dower, Paul Boyer, Frank Costigliola, Frank Ninkovich, and Andrew Rotter – have moved in this direction and in the process have helped spark new interest in and virulent opposition to their work.⁴ Often, however, it is difficult to get a handle on these methodologies for they mean so many different things to different people and their emphases are not consistent. We thus do a great disservice by lumping together “culture,” “ideology,” “gender,” “postmodernism,” “deconstruction,” and other such concepts.⁵

Still, many partisans of these approaches have been struggling in their own right to explain such elusive concepts, to inform the rest of us about what they

4. Historians using cultural methods or ideas are far from a homogenous group, with different definitions, emphases, and conclusions, so one must evaluate each work based on its own merits rather than simply categorizing it. For various examples see Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 1981) and *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore, 1997); Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (New York, 1995); John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1987) and *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York, 1999); Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: U.S. Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York, 1986); Frank Costigliola, “Unceasing Pressure for Penetration: Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War,” *Journal of American History* 83 (March 1997): 1309–39, and “The Nuclear Family: Tropes of Gender and Pathology in the Western Alliance,” *Diplomatic History* 21 (Spring 1997): 163–83; and Frank Ninkovich, “No Post-Mortems for Postmodernism, Please,” *Diplomatic History* 22 (Summer 1998): 451–66. See also Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1996); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York, 1995); Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven, 1995); Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, 1998); William Walker, “Drug Control and the Issue of Culture in U.S. Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 12 (Fall 1988): 365–82; and Robert Dean, “Masculinity as Ideology: John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History* 22 (Winter 1998): 29–62.

5. Especially in commenting on an article of this nature, one has to be sensitive about the words and definitions one chooses to employ. Though it may be impossible to avoid a heuristic minefield, I will here ignore my own advice and use “culture” in a fairly comprehensive way to describe the methodologies that Rotter and other similar historians use. It is, I realize, a bastardization of the term to use it to describe so many disparate ideas such as postmodernism, language, deconstruction, gender, and so forth, but one must try to be concise. Indeed such difficulty, indeed anxiety, over word choices is one of the major characteristics of analyzing works of this nature and it is possibly to get so bound by language choices that the histories being studied become secondary. For an extended and compelling critique of such issues see Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990). I would like to thank Andy Rotter for bringing this book to my attention and for engaging in discussions of cultural history with me.

do. To Akira Iriye, "culture may be defined as communication, and the cultural approach as a perspective that pays particular attention to communication with and among nations."⁶ Frank Costigliola sees language and emotion, the way leaders feel about the object of their policies and the manner in which they explain their ideas, as a major part of cultural studies.⁷ Here, Rotter sees culture as "webs of significance" that include filaments such as gender, class, race, and religion. There is, it seems at least, no consensus on what culture is, or on how cultural studies should be constructed.

Nonetheless, such work has become more popular in recent years and is perhaps the most widely used new methodology in diplomatic history, though it is not, as the alarmist cries of many traditionalists might indicate, taking over the field and wielding hegemony over nonculturalists.⁸ Since these developments have been relatively recent, it is still difficult to discern how deep the appeal of cultural studies in diplomatic history is, and hard to evaluate how strong its impact has been. Any conclusions or criticisms, therefore, are necessarily tentative, for projects such as Andrew Rotter's are surely works in progress and it will take time to fully analyze them.

Such disclaimers notwithstanding, there are some clear ideas we can draw from examining new cultural methods. Using Rotter's article as a prototype, I would like to express a few thoughts on the larger issues of doing cultural history.

RESEARCH METHODS.

Not long ago, I was talking with a friend who is a founding member of the Historical Society, a new group that, for the most part, consists of traditionalists strongly, and at times virulently, opposed to the new cultural studies.⁹ This new group, he assured me, had no ideological axes to grind, but was simply concerned that cultural historians were eschewing traditional archival research and were instead basing entire arguments on the reading of texts, on, as Bryan Palmer puts it, the reification of language on a broad scale.¹⁰ This criticism may have a little merit, but it aims at the wrong target. One need only to look at Andrew Rotter's notes, or Frank Costigliola's or Akira Iriye's, to see that they have pored over the files of the National Archives, Public Record Office, and

6. Akira Iriye, "Culture," *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 99.

7. Costigliola, "Unceasing Pressure for Penetration," "The Nuclear Family," and "Culture, Emotion, and Language: New Approaches to Diplomatic History" (paper delivered at 1999 conference of American Historical Association, Washington, DC).

8. I earlier grappled with some of these themes in "What Happened to the New Left? Toward a Radical Reading of U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 23 (Fall 1999): 575-607.

9. Much of the bluster over culturalists, I believe, is based more on opposition to the critical conclusions they reach than their methodologies. *Ibid.* I would like to again qualify my comments on the Historical Society to account for the membership of a number of excellent progressive historians. The majority of those listed as members of that organization, however, tend to be fairly conservative and traditional.

10. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*.

scores of other relevant collections. Their work, in that regard, certainly meets the standard of research for which we all aim.

There is, however, the matter of evaluating and using the information collected, both archival and textual, that is troubling. In his 1994 *Journal of American History* article, Rotter sets up a nineteenth-century play, *The Cataract of the Ganges*, as a paradigmatic representation of U.S. views of India in the late twentieth century.¹¹ In this piece, he cites, among others, Billy Graham, J. B. Mathews, G. Broxley Oxnam, Clarence Hall, Reinhold Niebuhr, Katherine Mayo, Henry M. Field, Abbé J. A. Dubois, John Muehl, and Harold Isaacs to buttress his claims about U.S. Protestant traditions and suspicions of Hinduism. Except for Graham and Niebuhr, these names remain unknown to a general audience, and only Mathews, an ex-Communist turned investigator for HUAC, held a government position. It is not until the last few pages that Rotter, to demonstrate that diplomatic officials believed that Islam made Pakistan "less susceptible" to communism than Hinduism made India, cites ambassadors, State Department reports, or British Foreign Office representatives. These methods, again, raise questions about the impact of Rotter's findings. Compared with, say, McMahon's or Merrill's work, Rotter relies less on officials who were in a policymaking capacity and more on ministers, writers, and other observers of the religious nature of the U.S.-South Asian relationship.¹² His conclusions, subsequently, have to be weighed against the importance of his sources, as all work does of course, but in a more impressionistic manner. Akira Iriye has written that "power and economy are concepts as elusive as culture," but I would disagree. Investment and trade figures, military aid amounts, the location of bases, or troop deployments can be measured empirically with much more facility than the impact of a play that opened in 1824 in New York, a nineteenth-century traveler's accounts of India, or the anti-Hindu sentiments of a 1927 bestseller. While such sources can surely add important context to a larger study, can we make *prima facie* conclusions based on them?

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS.

It seems undeniable that cultural misperceptions were common, maybe dominant, in U.S.-South Asian relations, indeed in U.S. relations with many areas. In Rotter's formulation, Protestant Secretaries of State Dean Acheson, John Foster Dulles, and Dean Rusk, along with many diplomatic officials, never understood Indian culture and were, congenitally it seems, predisposed toward suspicion and disrespect toward polytheistic Hinduism. Americans, Rotter contends, could not understand *darsan* in a political setting and thus thought

11. Rotter, "Gender Relations, Foreign Relations," 518-21.

12. In this regard, Rotter's article reminds me of Kristin Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood*, which relies heavily on nongovernmental, nondiplomatic sources to demonstrate that gendered ideas and the apparent loss of masculinity in U.S. society helped drive the country to war in 1898.

that Indian officials like Krishna Menon were boorish and arrogant when they expected to be given *darsan*. Is this, in fact, so unique? Perhaps not identical to *darsan*, there is an evident respect and deference given to, and often expected by, many Western leaders such as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Dulles, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and others. Sometimes paid out of fear, as with Johnson, sometimes due to charisma or affection, as with Roosevelt, Kennedy, or King, this U.S. "seeing" of a respected image was no less real. But, more to the point, were these expectations, of *darsan* or of deference, based on power or on culture? It seems that one would have to consider the roots of such a concept and the expectations it brought along with it before declaring it unique and essential. Perhaps Americans in fact did understand Krishna Menon's attitude toward them and, working from an ideology of power and privilege, resented a Third World man who acted as their equal.

Krishna Menon's behavior demands investigation as well. Was it really a cultural misperception that drove the Indian official and the Americans to dislike each other, are Protestants and Hindus inherently incapable of understanding each other? In U.S. history, there are many similar examples of policymakers expecting deference ["our" *darsan*?] and lashing out when it is not forthcoming. Consider U.S. outrage at the Depuy de Lome letter, Woodrow Wilson's messianic attitudes, the cold arrogance of Robert McNamara, or the political tantrums of Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton and one sees examples of U.S. officials expecting others to defer to them, and pique when it does not happen.

A larger conceptual question concerns the key component to Rotter's argument – the primacy of religion. Hinduism was, according to U.S. observers of India, stagnant, both weak and despotic, passive, and, worst of all, morally relativist and polytheistic. In short, it was everything that Protestantism was not. Conversely, Islam, the religion of India's rival Pakistan, was virile and powerful, as expressed by Mohammed Ayub Khan's "strongman" approach to governing, and his penchant for golf, scotch, and barbecue. One need not deny the validity of such images to question their importance. Religious prejudices and preconceptions, Rotter strongly implies, formed the basis for more favorable U.S. policies toward Pakistan because, getting to the heart of the issue, Moslems were more reliably anti-Communist than Hindus. We dismiss these findings at our own peril, for cultural images and biases may indeed be factors in policy formulation and they are, at the least, notions worthy of consideration.

Yet, again, Rotter's theological analysis begs many questions and criticisms. Is anticommunism fundamentally a religious and cultural ideology, or does it flow from other factors like economic expansion, political control, or "national security"? If Moslems are better anti-Communists, what about Egypt's neutralism or Indonesia's nationalism in the 1950s? Perhaps more crucially, if Protestant perceptions of religious anticommunism were sincere and essential to understanding foreign policy, why doesn't the same hold true for concepts of democracy and

self-determination? If sincere Protestant beliefs led Americans to favor Pakistan in South Asia, why were those religious ideas apparently stronger than their commitment to democracy? In Pakistan, as in scores of other countries during the period covered here, the United States financed and supported scores of brutal, despotic, authoritarian, or anti-Communist regimes of all stripes – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and so on.¹³ Why, in the case of India and Pakistan, are religious perceptions so important when the United States tended to be very catholic in its Cold War alliances, so long as the targeted parties were friendly to U.S. capital and trade and anti-Communist? And, more importantly, why are Protestant, anti-Hindu beliefs more consequential to policymaking than the putative pursuit of democracy?

EVIDENCE.

One could write a history of U.S.-South Asian relations, as Merrill, McMahan, and others have, stressing the geopolitical basis of U.S. policies toward India and Pakistan. Frustrated by Nehru's neutralism, optimistic about a Pakistani alliance in Middle East conflicts, especially as the Suez crisis emerged, and impressed with anticommunism in Karachi, the United States consistently sent huge amounts of economic and military assistance to Pakistan following the end of World War II. But, to muddy the issue up a bit, despite the preference for Pakistan, which Rotter stresses, the United States actually sent twice as much economic assistance to New Delhi – though much less military aid – and almost twice as much overall aid compared to the amounts Pakistan received.¹⁴ Such evidence – material, measurable, tangible – calls into question further the idea that polytheists in India were unreliable, weak, passive, and morally indecisive while Muslims in Pakistan were steady allies. Indeed, India, from the late 1950s until the mid-1960s was the *largest* recipient of U.S. aid. Why, if they were so religiously different and untrustworthy, if not repugnant, would Indians receive billions of U.S. dollars?

Andrew Rotter is under no requirement to include these data in his work – one writes the articles and books he/she wishes. These figures, however, add a challenging element to an examination of this article. When one chooses to focus on religious ideas or gendered language or textual deconstruction, to the exclusion of material interests and information, the work remains incomplete.

13. See, for an excellent introduction to U.S. support of anti-Communist and antidemocratic states in the Cold War, David F. Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-1965* (Chapel Hill, 1999).

14. Between 1946 and 1975, Pakistan received total military and economic assistance from the United States of about \$5.2 billion (\$4.45b economic and \$710m military), while India received about \$9.3 billion (\$9.1b economic and \$144m military). U.S. Agency for International Development Statistics and Reports Division, *U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants and Assistance from International Organizations*, 1976. I would like to thank Vivek Chibber of the New York University Department of Sociology for providing these figures to me and for discussing U.S.-India relations generally. See his dissertation, "Locked in Place: State Building and the Failure of Industrial Policy in India, 1940-1970" (Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin, 1999).

Call me an Essentialist, but I think we learn more about the motives for, and the execution and consequences of, foreign policies from studying trade and investment statistics, income levels, military aid amounts, strategic alliances, or battlefield results than from the ideas of ministers or travelers. As Eric Hobsbawm, the renowned British Marxist historian, observed in calling for a “supremacy of evidence,” the difference between historical facts and less reliable information “is not ideological. It is crucial for many practical purposes of everyday life, if only because life and death, or – what is quantitatively more important – money, depend on it.”¹⁵

CULTURE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci referred to intellectuals as the “deputies” of the established dominant class. A crucial way in which they exercised “social hegemony” was by establishing cultural customs and norms that became generally accepted, by creating a “spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses . . . to the general direction imposed on the social life by the dominant fundamental group.”¹⁶ Such ideas could provide a rich addition to cultural studies of U.S. foreign policy, and in some cases already have. Emily Rosenberg, Reinhold Wagnleitner, and Thomas O’Brien, for instance, offer compelling demonstrations of the ways in which culture is disseminated transnationally as an instrument of larger goals, though none of these authors explicitly invoke a Gramscian analysis. Buffalo Bill Shows, World’s Fairs, cultural institutions like the Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Little League Baseball, Jazz, and 4-H Clubs were but a few ways by which representatives of the corporate liberal state attempted – often with great success and often in the face of local resistance – to create a comfortable environment for U.S. economic investment and trade, establish an “industrious” working class for U.S. corporations abroad with U.S.-style work habits, or show the supremacy of the capitalist, democratic U.S. way of life in the Cold War.¹⁷

Diplomatic historians using cultural methodologies might do well to pursue these kinds of ideas, or at least think about them. In promoting certain policies, especially during the Cold War, cultural, religious, or gender images often had important roles. In various ways – by questioning an enemy’s, or even a neutral’s, manhood, religious views, language, national symbols, or emotional disposition – U.S. state, media, and intellectual figures engaged in a broad “manufacture of consent” along cultural lines. Indeed, as I write this I recall an experience from

15. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York, 1997), 272.

16. Gramsci goes on, “this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.” In Quintin Hoade and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York, 1987), 12.

17. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream*; Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, 1994); Thomas O’Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission: U.S. Enterprise in Latin America, 1900–1945* (New York, 1996).

third grade when the nun who taught me asked what I would do if Josef Stalin (long dead by then) came to my house and gave me the choice of renouncing my faith or being tortured. Clearly, religious perceptions were a vital way of inculcating Cold War values, at least to young children at a parochial school in Ohio, but was that hatred of the "godless" Russians *the* cause, even a noticeable cause, of the Cold War? Nuns do not make foreign policies, but I can attest to the power they can have in spreading the word about them.

MATERIALISM AND LEFT HISTORY.

Without repeating ideas and arguments that have already been dissected and attacked,¹⁸ I would briefly argue again for the primacy of material interests and submit that this is the basis of Left scholarship. Without provoking an internecine fight among those of us who are critics of U.S. foreign policy, or starting an intellectual pie fight over the legacy of William Appleman Williams, it is still the *sine qua non* of Left diplomatic history that material factors be emphasized. While cultural studies may provide illustrations to the ways in which diplomatic decisions are made or carried out, they must be fashioned within a context that takes account of the material factors shaping foreign policies. To do less is to eat dessert before the meat and potatoes (a sentence surely to be deconstructed by culturalists reading these comments).

Should we, then, simply toss cultural history into the dustbin of history, in the same manner in which so many traditionalists would like to dump economic or Marxist histories? I would not argue that. If conceived in a specific fashion, with particular emphasis on the ways in which culture is an *instrument* of foreign policy, these methods may have significant merit. But they must be used in tandem with other factors and methods. Andrew Rotter's conclusions seem legitimate; U.S. leaders probably did have a cultural bias against India (though their attraction to Islam in Pakistan is more difficult to accept). But U.S. policies in Asia after World War II, as Howard Schonberger has argued, were based principally on integrating that region into the capitalist global economy, containing the Soviet Union, and repressing revolution.¹⁹ Andrew Rotter need not accept Schonberger's formulation, but to ignore it is perilous. Indeed, to ignore the material forces shaping foreign policies, as many cultural historians do, while focusing on languages, images, texts, representations, invites an effective counterattack.

The radical scholars Ellen Meiksins Wood and Bryan D. Palmer have offered effective and powerful rejoinders to this new direction in the academy. Wood proposes that a critique of capitalism is still urgently needed and that historical

18. See my Bernath Lecture, "What Happened to the New Left?" and the responses to it on H-DIPLO and Frank Costigliola's letter in the December 1999 issue of the *SHAFR Newsletter*.

19. Howard Schonberger, "The Cold War and the U.S. Empire in Asia," *Radical History Review* 33 (September 1985): 140. It is ironic that I am citing an article by Schonberger in *RHR*, a journal that now publishes, almost exclusively, cultural and social histories and does not frequently address issues of diplomatic history, although this field was, arguably, the midwife to the New Left.

materialism remains the best foundation upon which to construct it, for it “approaches capitalism in a way exactly antithetical to the current fashions: the systemic unity of capitalism instead of just post-modern fragments, but also historicity – and hence the possibility of supersession – instead of capitalist inevitability and the end of History.”²⁰ Palmer, lamenting our “descent into discourse,” attacks the notion that language especially, but also “representations” rather than historical materialism, creates and defines the past, that it orders relationships between classes, races, genders (and religions). Language and perceptions are, Palmer asserts, nonreferential; they are also created by humans and as such reflect the biases of class, status, wealth, and power. “Critical theory,” Palmer reminds us, “is no substitute for historical materialism; language is not life.”²¹ Words, images, prejudices, perceptions all convey certain ideas to us, but those ideas reflect other, larger interests. Did religious perceptions “in part” affect U.S. policymakers looking at South Asia? Can we believe that such views “had influence”? Yes, we can. But what does that really tell us? Do we know yet what the principal reasons for policy were, what interests were at stake and who was promoting them, what the consequences of U.S. policies were? No, not from this article, and probably not from these methods.

20. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (New York, 1996), 2–3.

21. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, xiv.