

## **Review Article: Schama on Obama and American Renewal: Futuring Pre-existing Problem Sets**

---

---

PETER CLARK

### **The American Future: A History**

Simon Schama

*London, Bodley Head, 2008, viii+392 pp., UK£20.00, ISBN 978-1847-92000-3 hbk*

### **Introduction**

Since the transformation of the Soviet Union in 1989, America has been the focus of re-assessments of its national capacities for refolding and renewal.<sup>1</sup> Also, there have been many searching enquiries into the issue of hegemonic decline in its market empire.<sup>2</sup>

Excavating American history and inscribing key themes in diverse media reveals the commodification of history and its covert role in marketing the nation to its citizens and to the global constituency of its market empire. Simon Schama's<sup>3</sup> marshalling of the lived duration of Americans resonates with contemporary uses of narrative in marketing, but contrasts with the situation at the start of Cold War when geo-historical research programs such as those of Braudel were the possible templates.<sup>4</sup> One common element is the attempt to identify, anticipate and explain transformations. Another element is the post-1945 skepticism in the social sciences about the detachment and utility of historians and their histories. Economists became the new strategic timekeepers in the North Atlantic economies. Now, in the twenty-first century, historians have reformulated their role as strategic timekeepers of the nation's performative capacities and moral order. Economists are being upstaged. Moreover, the historian's notion of agency interrogates the low contextuality and rather a-historical research program proposed by Emirbayer and Mische.<sup>5</sup>

Recently it has become clear that histories of the rise of the West misleadingly commence their periodization too soon (e.g. fifteenth century). The studies of Michael Mann<sup>6</sup> exemplify this well-established tendency. Goodey contends that these Western-oriented histories exclude the rest of the world.<sup>7</sup> Now it is contended that the advance of the North Atlantic nations only became globally significant after the 1790s–1800s. If so, the conflation of North Atlantic political economies is a mistake.

European nations and America are unlike in many ways. This limitation is particularly evident in the ways in which business history has, so far, failed to contextualize the distinctive character and consequence of organizational innovation in America. It also fails to interrogate the role of business schools for articulating the critique of the administrative state whilst glorifying the market and globalization.<sup>8</sup>

The historian Simon Schama<sup>9</sup> knowingly, and with a wry humor, enters this contemporary agora of debate and revisionist counter claims. Schama is committed to closing the gap between the 'lived event' and 'subsequent narrative' through the imaginative jumbling of chronology. He achieves this by constructing vignettes of big processes and by inventing quotations to activate deep understanding and participation by the reader. The reader is increasingly imagined as a consumer and a television viewer to whom Schama can display his formidable analytical, oral and aesthetic skills. Schama contends that histories can never reconstruct the past in its completeness. His achievement in, *The American Future: A History*, published in late-2008, is of particular relevance because of its anticipation of the election of Barack Obama. Schama explores the capacity of the future to dominate the past. The book accompanies a TV series and various media forays. For example, to express his embodied pleasure and that of a great many Americans in watching professional baseball. Schama enjoys Fenway Park, but in ways that are very different to the *tifosi* in the Italian Series 'A' association football.

Schama's contention about the existence of powerful multi-level repertoires for renewal across a wide range of American organizations and institutions faces the stickiness and path dependency of 'problem sets' erected to win the Cold War. Moreover, many of the recent statements by American analysts about those repertoires frame them in terms of the role of American hegemony and European dependence. If so, in whose interests and with what consequences might Obama engage in renewal?

This review article has three principal themes.

First, it proposes a historical sociology framework which is comparative between different spatial-territorial contexts, especially national contexts, and which is comparative and evolutionary in a longitudinal format. Each form of configuration *periodizes* problem sets and problem solving sequences in contingently enduring configurations. The notion of culture as a repertoire of problem sets for the unit of survival is central.<sup>10</sup> The nation is treated longitudinally as possessing a discontinuous problem set albeit with certain enduring repertoires of contestation. The framework is suffused with the collisions, contests and overlaps between the past, present and future. There are therefore multiple social morphologies, in which cultural activity possesses a wide spectrum of contingently recursive temporalities. A more limited conception of social morphology was evident in Braudel's account of the recurring seasonal movements of the Mediterranean year in the long sixteenth century,<sup>11</sup> but is now rarely replicated. The reconstruction of the seventeenth century repertoire of four generic structural poses amongst the Cherokee nation by Gearing<sup>12</sup> is a robust template, which can be analytically stretched into the analysis of larger processes and structures.<sup>13</sup> Its application to national contexts is challenging and tentative.<sup>14</sup>

Schama's lived history of American culture contains features that accommodate this possibility. Clark contends that the position of agency, especially of entrepreneurial agency from across many sectors, reveals the significance of strategic time reckoning.<sup>15</sup> Strategic time reckoning is an everyday activity of certain occupations and obligatory points of passage in, for example, the state, its infrastructure and its international networks. The framework, which incorporates elements drawn from

both structuration theory and critical realism, clarifies the conception of agency and temporality proposed by Emirbayer and Mische by locating agency within place-based problem sets and problem sequences. Time–place periods as cases for sequential problem solving are conceptualized and explained.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the article examines Schama's optimistic, bold and hope-filled linking of America's big projects in the past, including the establishment of the four-year electoral cycle, to its international role after the era of the Bush problem set. At the time of writing his book, Schama did not know that Obama would be elected. We can conclude however that his sympathies and his politics of hope were grounded in and surrounded by Obama and the voting in of the Democrats to Congress and the House of Representatives. The First Hundred Days have provided an intriguing test of Schama's understanding of national cultural repertoires.<sup>17</sup> Schama's book largely excludes the abstraction and abduction suggested in the first section of this review article.

Third, the article re-assesses the role of historians as strategic time reckoners and savants who imagine the nation state. Since the early twentieth century, the historians' established and now contested role has been at the core of the tournament between the social sciences and history over the analysis of big processes and large structures.<sup>18</sup> Self-defined hybrids such as historical geographers use 'time' as a mnemonic, which has challenged those historians' commitment to calendrical chronologies. As already indicated there is an anti-history epistemic community in the social sciences whose theoretic achievements are highly relevant to explaining the emergence of America as a Market Empire and Consumer Polity with powerful colonizing corporations.<sup>19</sup> Three concepts extend the meta-framework: affordances,<sup>20</sup> external memory devices and infrastructure,<sup>21</sup> and the perspective of heterogeneous actor networks.<sup>22</sup> These can fruitfully explicate Schama's project.

Schama's lived history shows that the problematization of time and place is less developed in the social sciences and history—including business, organizational and management history—than is required.

### **Longitudinal and Comparative Geopolitics: Periodizing National Cultural Priorities**

Schama's focus upon five major threads in the American national cultural repertoire significantly clarifies and enriches ordinary understanding. However, his claims about renewal as an enduring repertoire require contextual location in a longitudinal and comparative framework permitting forms of periodization of national problem sets and culturally defined problem-solving capacities. If Obama has a repertoire for renewal then that repertoire is emerging whilst America's geopolitical position in unfolding and refolding. Therefore, this section formulates a longitudinal and comparative geopolitics, which periodizes national cultural repertoires as problem sets whose temporal wholeness characterizes the dynamics of competition and conflict.

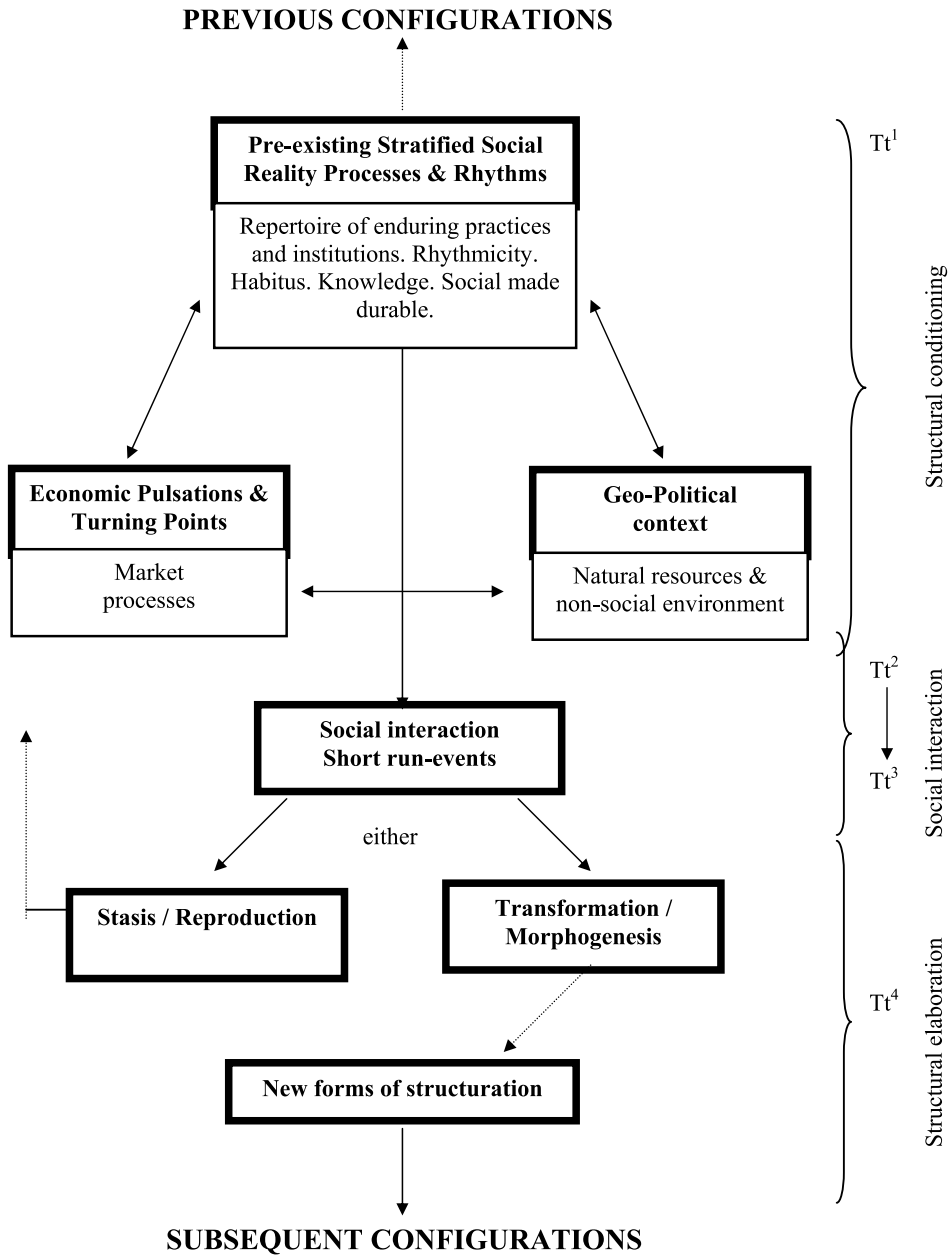
Constructivist theories define *culture* as covering all known human activities, material and spiritual, embracing all human action and beliefs.<sup>23</sup> This contrasts sharply with Weber<sup>24</sup> and hence with much in the organizational sciences. The intention of this article is to periodize a relatively durable although contingent concatenation of structures and processes that can be characterized as the national cultural repertoire for a spatially recognizable territory. Cultural repertoires are problem defining and problem solving. They therefore possess problem sets even though those sets cannot typically be solved by so-called rational means. In a

seminal, small-scale example, Diamond<sup>25</sup> contends that the competing tribal configuration living on Easter Island in the sixteenth–seventeenth century spent immense physical resources, organizational resources and time carving immense stone statues which could only be transported by cutting down the light forest and using tree trunks as rollers. The problem set led to deforestation and deprived the cultural repertoire of its capacities to sail way from Easter Island and to catch the big fish that were some way off the shore. The performativity of the cultural repertoire within the Pacific oceanic world was starkly reduced. Their problem set meant that Easter Island did not provide the long-term affordances for their cultural repertoire. Impending disaster could not be resolved within the religious commitments and the political relations between the competing clans. Diamond informs us that his West Coast American students found it difficult to comprehend the inability of the Rapa Nui to apply the problem anticipation and can-do cultural repertoire that they believe is theirs.

Figure 1 presents the framework in the form of diagrammatic reasoning. Each configuration, possibly lasting a number of generations (e.g. USA 1770s–1850s), is analyzed as a triad that contains but inverts orthodox sub/superstructure theorizing and gives priority over the social constructed market to cultural processes. The geopolitical position of a territory is postulated to be a crucially important ingredient in national performativity relative to rival national and regional contexts. For example, in North West Europe, from 1500 to the 1760s, the geopolitical position of London and other English ports away from Europe—and surrounded by turbulent seas—provided some defense against invasion by the kingly nation of Spain whilst locating the navy as the warrior (pirate) strata that also defended whilst making trade and commerce. In this long-term meta-framework, the geopolitical position provided more affordances at lower transaction costs than did Amsterdam for the Netherlands. Equally, the geopolitical position of emergent and the eventually unified States of America provided similar positive affordances. These were amplified by the almost total absence of dangerous, powerful neighbors who could conduct costly wars. Hence, West Point after 1817 became a focus for the highly consequential education of professional civil engineers who engaged, directly and indirectly, in major acts of exploration and the development of rivers, canals and rail as low cost infrastructural commercial routes. The implication of Hoskin and Macve's analysis of West Point suggests that the professional engineers enabled much that appears in Schama's account.<sup>26</sup>

Figure 1 indicates that the national cultural repertoires typifying any generation may contain the mechanisms and processes for the transformation of that repertoire. This might be through disaster as with Easter Island. In the American case, as Appleby<sup>27</sup> shows for the early nineteenth century and Chandler for the mid- and late-nineteenth century corporate activity, there were huge affordances for entrepreneurial agency at multiple levels and in different federal state contexts. Braudel observes that after the Civil War (1861–65) America shifted from a horizontal federation of loosely coupled states at Independence into a vertically organized national cultural repertoire.

Using the framework exemplified in Figure 1 requires a comparative dimension based on the competition between contexts.<sup>28</sup> Hence, the previous references to geo-political position. The presumption is that nation states are involved in contests of elimination—open and covert—for influence over one another.<sup>29</sup> Arguably, Obama considers that there is a China/USA struggle: CHUSA. This contention nests with Ferguson's timely highlighting of the role China is occupying



**Figure 1.** Stasis and transitions.

as the supplier of cheap made goods and of low cost debt to the USA.<sup>30</sup> The next section on Schama's America contains relatively slight attention to the geo-political position and to competition between contexts.

### Schama and the American Future: A History Thesis

Schama states that understanding is the condition of hope. His main intention is to understand where the America represented by Barack Obama has emerged from,

where it might be heading towards, and the implications of an Obama–Democratic victory for America’s latest attempt at renewal.

History is interpreted as a living theory in which social remembering has to be activated, negotiated and constructed. Implicitly, certainly not nearly explicitly enough, Schama is reporting and articulating a novel neo-Gramscian historical bloc and being an organic intellectual in its potential embryonic formation. The role of historians in imagining nations is an old craft and a modern profession. Schama contends that America is *so* different. There is exceptionalism, especially because it seems that each new problem set has, so far, been accompanied by a capacity to renew.

Evans<sup>31</sup> contends that three features define Schama’s histories. First, he deals with big structures and processes by interweaving small incidents from the personal histories of the famous and unknown into the broader narrative. There is a constantly shifting focus. Second, the detailed sub-plots and biographies are elaborated to illustrate the larger tendencies. There is a clear recognition that these are invented sections, which are not definitive. They are illustrative. Third, Schama conceals his thematic interpretation under the surface detail. Structuring the narrative seems to take priority because the interpretation requires attention and the capacity to work through diverse elements.

Schama organizes his analysis of collective public remembering in five narrational vignettes whose themes are powerful categories yet whose selection is not explained. Within each vignette, there are contrasting biographies of highly agentic actors and of typical Americans. The conflicting imperatives are underlined. These are seductively set in diverse contextual settings such as the complex geography of Civil War. However, the contextual narratives rarely move outside America. The focus is more upon what is coming into America (e.g. immigrants from Europe and China), or is already there, rather than the American impacts externally (e.g. Tokyo Bay 1853–54). Each vignette contains traces of a problem set and the creative pragmatism directed at that problem. One example is the transforming of the Colorado River into the core of an electricity power network. This network became the infrastructure of westward expansion.

### *A Belief in Plenty*

Schama switches backwards and forwards between historical periods.

Nineteenth century America was about the richness of natural resources and the capacity to transform waterways, rich soil landscapes, coal and oil into profitable revenue streams. The wilderness was tamed. American optimism about resources was contrasted with war torn parochial Europe. Land had a symbolic role as a source of present well being and of future wealth. America was perceived as a land of plenty in which earth and water were widely available at low cost. The West occupied a symbolic role for the future. Schama then inserts the collapse of plenty in more recent times. For example, the Colorado River, which once served the farms of seven states and contained valleys that could supply fresh vegetables all the year round, became dry. Paradise lost became a challenging problem set. The construction of the Hoover Dam exemplifies the can-do approach to problem solving.

Schama then restarts with the 1820s. Eastern capitalists anticipated making money in the west and sought to incentivize migrants into the fast westward moving frontier. The migrants travelled on trails in Conestoga wagons used to transport pared down agricultural goods (e.g. seeds). These trails (e.g. Oregon) established

new towns. Later, in 1869, the railroad established a link between New York and San Francisco. Also in 1869 an expedition attempted to navigate the Colorado River which was then unmapped. The River, which was tortuous and difficult, terrified the crews. John Wesley Powell argued that the waters could not be conquered and should be preserved for small farming enterprises. The alternative of exploitation would bring disaster. However, in the 1890s the land around was opened up. The 1893 Chicago Fair displayed the new powers of electrification. The success of oil field exploration, which began in 1901, generated wells that were left uncapped. Was there enough water? An International Irrigation Conference in Los Angeles proclaimed the theme of turning deserts into plenty and, in 1902, the Bureau of Reclamation was established. Later, Congress passed a bill and in 1931 the heroic engineering project of constructing the Hoover Dam was commenced.

The template was agricultural capitalism. Coincidentally the model for that template was industrial farming in Kansas where the prairie dried out in 1933 and on Black Sunday in April a storm of airborne soil turned the sky brown over Washington. Thirty years later, in the era of Route 66, there were fertile valleys: the biggest producers in the world yet located in the middle of a desert. The desert bloomed. Unsurprisingly Jimmy Carter, a farmer from Georgia and one-time President, failed to convince Americans that there were deep problems. Instead, Regan the optimist, contending that the land would always provide, was elected. Now the Colorado cluster has run out of water and has been experiencing an eight-year drought. Water inspectors patrol the gardens to check on waste.

This new reverse salient<sup>32</sup> is in the problem set facing the incoming Democrats and Obama.

#### *Fervor: Enrolling God in Moral Judgments*

This vignette is about American religion. Schama rightly berates Europeans for their ignorance about religion in America yet his account tends to confuse by conflating the separation of religion and politics with the separation of Church and State. The central category of civil religion is also glossed over. However, Schama does show that fervor is everywhere. God is constantly enrolled. Religious themes and churches are in a quasi-market whereby faith is constantly being renewed by new entrant sects and by the established churches. Religion is a potent force. In the history of the USA, there have been numerous occasions when the collapse of a belief in God has been proclaimed and then followed by innovative religious events and organizational forms across most sections and strata. The image of moral collapse is a powerful switchman. Schama suggests that conservative evangelicals are a 'mega church movement' which offer services so that its members shop for a church and a life style. Enrolling the conservative evangelicals was a focus for the Regan-Bush regimes. Moreover, the role of religion in the recent election has been immensely significant. So have the media technologies which once gave the evangelicals an edge. These technologies have been used to recast religious hegemonies. McCain might regret labeling evangelicals as 'agents of intolerance'. Claiming to have God on your side can be effective.

#### *War: Warrior Culture?*

Outgoing Vice President Cheney claims that America has never been a warrior culture because it has mainly been defended by volunteers. Schama explains and



illustrates how that claim can be made whilst linking war with the theme of fervor. America may aspire to possess a market empire, but not to undertake the kind of empire project typified by the British, French and Dutch. Until the Civil War, the size of the military procurement was miniscule by comparison with European states. The major military activity was to corral the indigenous population of Indian tribes from their cherished hunting grounds into less resourceful reserves where their activity was pacified. Europe was viewed as a war torn cluster of tyrants. The other and very significant roles were twofold. First, designing and developing means for producing standardized guns that unskilled personnel could repair. Second, West Point was established (in 1802) as an officer training facility whose main output was civil engineers possessing strong capacities in using external memory devices such as documents, maps, grids and archives.<sup>33</sup> West Point became a school for democratic citizens who became tutors in the arts of road, canal and bridge building. West Point graduates significantly contributed to surveying of the American landscape and the making of public maps about the useful waterways. Since the late nineteenth century, the graduates became major analysts and architects of the Mississippi River system and the control of its flows to enable transportation and the control of flooding.

The four-year Civil War transformed the military. More than 600,000 died. The war activated and generated a range of innovations in gunnery, fortification, in battle formations and especially in logistics. Arguably, its role in shaping American management and organization has been understated. Schama focuses upon Montgomery Meigs who graduated from West Point in 1832 and became the Quarter Master General for the North in 1861. During the Civil War Meigs displayed an extraordinary entrepreneurial competence of the systematic and pragmatic provisioning of the Northern armies, in their logistical supply systems and in the design of exploding ordnance. Meigs transformed logistics and the public/private interface of military materiel. After the defeat of the South, he established the Arlington Cemetery for all ranks. This became the template of exceptional sites of patriotic remembrance and rituals of assent to being an American. Their audio-visual choreographing of the graves and the rituals articulated the aesthetic dimensions of American self-confidence. These provided a crucial tie between deep patriotic memory and the future claim about 'just wars'. The combination of photography and popular journalism provided key capillaries for diffusion.

### *Being an American*

This theme potentially plays to Schama's narrational strengths and insights. Yet the theme also exposes Schama to the American claim that Europeans cannot understand what being an American is even after living and working there for many years. Barzun recommends that understanding baseball is essential.<sup>34</sup>

Schama rightly highlights the distinctive 'mystic memories' and their mnemonic role in governmentality and being embodied as an American. This section documents how difficult it is to be American in thought and action. Two threads are woven and juxtaposed. One thread focuses upon the state of Texas. The other thread revolves around Crevecoeur's experiences and writing about being an American in the early nineteenth century.

Schama commences with an encounter with George Bush in 2008 during an assembly of historians in London at Downing Street. Their host, Gordon Brown,



has a doctorate in history. Bush encounters Schama who uses one word—‘Texas’—to establish a conversational linkage. Bush is on the left of the Republican Party on the issue of immigration so his quoted comments to Schama are a powerful rhetoric. Texas was once part of Spanish America and the then new nation of Mexico, yet was occupied by Americans who ‘elected’ to join the USA. Schama observes that the borders of the USA crossed Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. More recently, Mexico has become America’s major source of low cost goods and services. Mexico is caged in NAFTA. Now Mexicans want to enter the USA to work and live. Thousands of Mexicans seek to enter Texas and the USA every day. This history of paradoxes allows Schama to demonstrate the complex and contested issue of being an American. In contrast, Michel-Gillaume Creveoeur was of French decent living in the Quebec area when the British defeated the French in 1755. He moved south into the New York area as a tenant farmer and then unintentionally became caught up in some of the violent episodes of the American War of Independence. Creveoeur attempted to explain what it was like to be in the new United States. These two examples are accompanied in quick succession by a section on how the railways provided a material basis for uniting travel and transportation across America. Then attention is focused upon the program instituted by Henry Ford to initiate immigrants into the American way of life.

*The Repertoire of the Four-Year Electoral Cycle: Iowa 2008*

Schama presents a crypto-ethnographic account of the Iowa voting primary he attended in January 2008. This expresses the exceptional culture. He observes that in contemporary Iowa everything seemed impregnated with history. Schama does presume that the non-American reader will grasp the full political rituals, especially the role of the caucus, in everyday American significance of the four year cycle as a major cognitive pillar whose ticking calendar shapes the political superstructure caging everyday lived durations. The four-year calendar is a key cultural repertoire concerning expectations about renewal. It is a ‘satnav’ of hopes and frustrations.

**Economic Problem Sets, Caging and Agency**

Schama focuses on how the future can transform the present. Yet the role of the economy plays an amazingly small role in the analysis compared to its strong position in Figure 1. So, in whose interests and with what consequences might Obama engage in renewal?

This question can be addressed in three steps. First, to note the significance of the historical evolution of the infrastructures of the American administrative state in formulating the problem sets for an array of American institutions and for their role in American hegemony. These contemporary features are the pre-existing context for Obama and include the position of the automobile in the lived durations of everyday life. Second, to inquire whether there are exceptional possibilities for the exercise of agency that arise from the power of multiple, albeit competing corporate interests, to claim time-space territories and be pragmatically creative. Third, whether the zones of maneuver which Obama inherits in the global political economy tend towards unfolding and refolding rather than renewal.

*Problem Sets and Infrastructures of Knowledge Transfer*

The contemporary revisionist historiography of the USA highlights the early date at which the USA surpassed leading European nations in productive growth and military potential—say after 1865. Current revisionist histories locate the rise of the West as occurring after 1790–1810. If so, the role of the USA is exceptional. The rise of the USA arises from innovations in science-related general-purpose technologies, such as coal harnessed to steam engines, whereby power could be applied in multiple activities within the economy. The 1851 London Exhibition witnessed the American steam-powered tractors, which were just one element in its agricultural capitalism.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently the application and evolution of key metaphors like the grid and the ledger were transformed within America into screens, networks and even fluxus.<sup>36</sup>

The evolutionary theory of infra-structural power highlights two major pillars of development: the intensification and extension of political power through logistical techniques, coordination and communication; and the diffusion and translation of these powers from the core areas to frontier activities through culturally replicable blueprints.<sup>37</sup> Intensive power is concentrated as in the strategic confrontations of the American Civil War. Extensive power is exemplified in the capacity of the state to shape beliefs and events across continents.

These potentials were developing in Europe well before 1800.<sup>38</sup> Transaction costs were influenced by the supra-local networks of trust which Christian ideology and religious practice inscribed and embodied. That inheritance, which was significant in Europe, became more so in the eventually United States. Moreover, the Gregorian institutionalization of the papacy as a universal and imperial authority was instrumental in underpinning the sources of social power. In the medieval period the law was dis-embedded and became the province of the emerging strata of professional lawyers and judges. Key time-spaces of autonomy emerged and became the template so that no single group could dominate. Autonomy was an unplanned and highly consequential fusion of the Roman and Germanic in the corporation.<sup>39</sup>

Autonomy and the corporation became defining features of the incorporated town in Europe and the future colonial states in early America.<sup>40</sup> The template and legal concept of corporate personality enabled many different forms of autonomous organizations to manage their boundaries and to negotiate longevity beyond specific membership into the future. The template protected proto-industrial formations and enabled the accumulation, examination and diffusion of new forms of knowledge. The legal and political development of the self-contained, self-organizing corporation provided an organizational formation which was a finite infrastructural capacity only found in certain North Atlantic contexts yet became an organizational innovation possessing enormous affordances.

Since the Civil War, the American federal administrative state has penetrated society and is a coordinator of economic activity whilst being responsive to the consumer polity. America is distinguished by the attention to the coordination at various levels through which decision makers can arrange interdependent collective and distributive powers. This provides a multilevel growth of social power over time and space. The economics of coordination involve the movements of knowledge between segments of society.

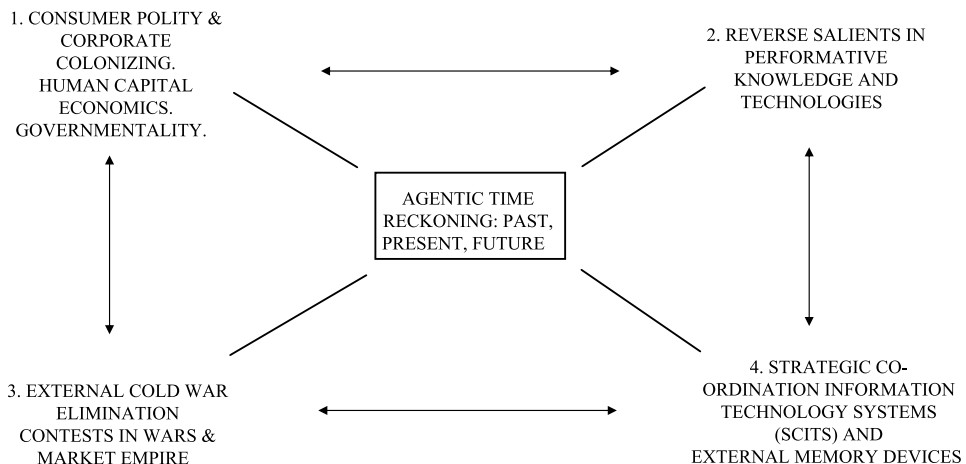
Geopolitical position (see Figure 1) is highly relevant. In the British case, there was the advantage of distance from costly battles in the frontier between Islam and

Eastern Europe. For the United States of America, the geopolitical distance from European conflicts and the advantage of inherited resources, such as navigable internal waterways, afforded the United States unrivalled opportunities to acquire desirable resources throughout the two continents of the America's. This is an infrastructural power, which encompasses both the Federal apparatus and the state administrative apparatus. For example, the state of Alabama competing with Michigan for auto firms to establish branch factories. Infrastructure also refers to the logistical techniques and organizational innovations which apply to particular territories. The American state apparatus can cage activities within its national boundaries. These finite capacities of caging delimit certain zones of maneuver and may, as in the Easter Island example, contain what Diamond has suggested are toxic assets.<sup>41</sup>

### *Agentic Time Reckoning*

Schama has scoped five insightful vignettes and traversed the interwoven problem sets, which arise in the successive configurations of Figure 1. His focus is upon the future oriented agency which elaborates and transforms these configurations through both violent events and through the remorseless processes of refolding America whilst enfolding segments of the globe. Schama highlights how the enduring mentalities from the past routinely privilege the future. He postulates that significant segments of American society are continually projecting their images of a new, often dangerous future, onto the present. He is therefore characterizing as a significant pole the typical variety of American strategic time reckoning. Figure 2 frames the process of agentic time reckoning as the cultural domain of representing problem sets at multiple levels within the nation.

In their seminal essay on agency and temporal orientation, Emirbayer and Mische observe that the transformative or formative aspects of agency are recognized in theory, but are not emphasized sufficiently in studies. Agency, they contend, is:



**Figure 2.** Problem set for the USA in the late Cold War configuration.

*the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.*<sup>42</sup>

They claim that (corporate) agents simultaneously juggle the past, present and future. According to their view, agents do relate to the past and engage in the selective reactivation of those previous patterns of thought and action that are routinely incorporated in practical activity and give stability and order. A focus on the past helps to sustain identities, interactions and institutions over time. Agents simultaneously look towards creating a future. This is the projective element: it encompasses the imaginative generation of possible future trajectories of action. The contention is that the projective element has been frequently neglected because the aspects of social structure that condition agency have been privileged. Consequently, most work on agency revolves around issues of the past rather than looking to the future. Agents also consider how agency relates to the present and they have the capacity to make practical and normative judgments between alternative possible trajectories of action.

Agency is the array of strategic practices by which actors close the gap between their social constructions of the past and the future. It is presumed—though not detailed—that a repertoire of practices implement the possible choices. Also, there is a perpetual migration from history to the future. This migration resolves the choice between routine, purpose and judgment.<sup>43</sup> Therefore the zone of maneuver in the causal practice of choice draws on pre-existing conditions.

Emirbayer and Mische present the strong case for agency and Schama's history of the future gives their approach a rich canvas of examples. Even so, agency is situated within the pre-existing conditions, both normative and existential frameworks of thinking, feeling and acting as well as human and material resources. There is always some degree of caging. It has been argued that impossible trajectories—the superfactuals—dominate the openings for counterfactuals.

### **The Problem Set of the Cold War: Caging Obama?**

In the Cold War, immense attention was given by the American state and its key interest groupings to techno-organizational innovation. Figure 2 proposes the problem set in that era. The previous centrality of the anti-Soviet struggle was simply refolded in the Bush era, 2000–08. Therefore, Schama's analysis of America's ongoing strategic time reckoning has to explain how those relatively enduring structures and processes might be transformed. His politics of hope anticipates that these will and can be renewed. But what does that mean and how does it relate to the claim that agency operates in pre-existing structural conditions so that there may be limited zones of maneuver?

Figure 2 focuses on the most recent configuration in the meta-framework of Figure 1. It is very clear that, in the Cold War context, the post-1945 problem set transformed large segments of the pre-existing configuration which was in place during the inter-war years. There was exceptional agency. The problem set of the Cold War required decades of agency to unfold the pre-existing cultural repertoire from the 1930s and insert new forms of discourse and materiality. Yet, by the close of the Cold War, the USA had become a consumer polity as shown in the upper left hand quadrant (1) of Figure 2. The regulative nexus of the New Deal was

largely replaced by the economics of human capital led by the state and by corporations. The individual was given the role of consumer and of being a choosing agent surrounded by advertising and the politics of growing personal material wealth: the bio-politics of cognitive and affective capitalism. Corporations (e.g. Wal-Mart) did the state's re-colonizing of America (e.g. servant leadership) and articulating the American identity in the Cold War. In the post-war period, during America's role as the savior against Soviet power and communism,<sup>44</sup> a new understanding known as the Organizational Synthesis<sup>45</sup> was formulated in multiple arenas within academic capitalism.

The Organizational Synthesis was a complex interweaving with three major worldviews operating like Weber's switchmen.<sup>46</sup> First, Wiebe examined the interface between the increasing corporate discipline and its shaping by the search for order in the home and in a consumer society. He drew attention to the segmented nature of American society.<sup>47</sup> Zunz revealed how American segmentation provided open time-spaces for innovation and for the articulation of innovations between the major corporate agencies: the state, the military, corporations, professional managerial strata and academic capitalism.<sup>48</sup> These features are highly significant for the claims about American capacities for renewal. Schama has deepened their significance for understanding the role of hope in America. Second, the Organizational Synthesis nurtured a new political economy.<sup>49</sup> There was the uneven emergence and defense of corporate liberalism as the imagining of how an unfettered capitalist market would not only benefit the coalition of organized interests but would renew morality in the Cold War. By the 1980s, the Administrative State was the target of dismissive rhetoric, but early twenty-first century analysis shows the administrative state was a major player in spreading the market empire. Third, Chandler<sup>50</sup> exemplified the new business history as a problem solving theory by abstracting the most important organizational innovations from their complex origins and emergence. The case of the multi-divisional firm and the analysis of the role of technological and market innovation by professional management excited extensive attention within business schools and beyond. Chandler narrated how high levels of coordination were achieved across whole sectors in their interaction with transport systems. Logistical integralism and lengthening supply chains became the intended and realized strategy for corporate America. This required neither fascism nor communism. Chandler provided the legitimating and symbolically meaningful foundations for the new discourse about America's market empire. The Harvard Business School became a covert, perhaps unwitting, agent in the Cold War.

Figure 2's right-hand upper quadrant (2) shows the blockages to the future which professional savants identified across many areas: the humanities, coping with the possible Soviet invasion of Europe, applying surveillance technologies to Soviet military movements and even to their capacity to use science to grow larger supplies of food. Blockages were conceptualized as reverse salients.<sup>51</sup> Knowledge creation sought to promote new and more effective forms of performativity in all areas. Imagining new possibilities and opportunities became the role ascribed to symbolic analysts. Reverse salients of all kinds were identified and targeted by the new professionals in the organizational, management and social sciences. This focus led to cybernetics, the information sciences and contributed to their role in strategic coordination, especially through the creation of external memory devices like computer software.

The lower left hand quadrant (3) refers to the market empire and America's hegemonic relationship to those other nations in the anti-Soviet bloc.<sup>52</sup> The Cold

War elimination with the Soviets involved the strategy of containment and its politics of hope fostered a remarkable modulation of previous formalities within corporations and homes. Externally, there was domination by design whilst seeking to expand America's global market place through global colonization by its major transnational corporations. The Olympic Games provided a regular theatre for competition through sports and recreation.

The lower right hand quadrant (4) represents America's distinctive expertise in the co-ordination and directing of flows of every kind. Computer screens and their programs provided the template for theorizing organizing via minimal explicit sets of information which could be stored and manipulated to model existing situations and future possibilities. These innovative systems blended hardware, software, brain ware and proxied for habits. SCITS are central to the American capability in warfare through surveillance, long-range delivery, defensive anticipation and destruction. Equally, SCITS transformed the service industries enabling retailers—from banking to realtors—to create new products which could be displayed on the web. This segment articulated with the human capital as the incentivizing focus of the raft of innovations in debt and risk which blossomed in 2008 onward. Toxic assets became an unintended outcome.

### Conclusion: Renewal?

Schama's notion of history is as understanding and hope. Schama has highlighted the unique, albeit mangled internal ordering to American culture. He attempted to formulate a dynamic conceptual map to detect those possibilities emerging from history, which foretell an era of typical American renewal. This is exciting yet dangerous analytic territory. The challenge of developing possible scenarios is formidable. So, there is a big problem. What does Schama expect to be renewed with Obama as President and Democratic majorities in both houses? How much change—and in what areas—and to whose benefit, does his history of the future expect?

Figure 2 situates the arena for federal state, corporate and entrepreneurial imagination and agency in the centre from where Obama and the Democrats are attempting to unfold key elements from (1) and (2) whilst attempting to refold the reverse salients (3). The role of SCITS (4) in securing America's security in warfare and in trade remains in play. With Obama and his *squadra*, there is an imaginative and pragmatic searching for a constitutional form that recognizes problems inherent in the nation state, whilst experimenting with hybrid elements from the market state. The program of 'Health care for all' is an espoused objective, but it is set in the arena of past failures and the current consequences embedded in the high costs of American auto production. The politics of hope are rampant. They are equally rampant in the pharmaceutical industry, but with a different calculus. Nonetheless, what is striking about Obama and his relationship to 'history and the future' is just how his public discourse is formulating a history of the future which prizes open the imperialism of western nation states. This is a form of renewal with immense demands and devastating potentials.

### Notes and References

1. Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2006; Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America and*



- the World 1600–1898*, Atlantic Books, London, 2006; Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth Century Europe*, Belknap, New York, 2005.
2. Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 2004; Peter Clark, 'America's market polity of knowledge and Ferguson's stumbling colossus', *Prometheus*, 23, 1, 2005, pp. 83–99.
  3. Simon Schama, *The American Future: A History*, Bodley Head, London, 2008.
  4. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, Collins, London, 2002; Andre Burguiere, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2009.
  5. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, 'What is agency?', *American Journal of Sociology*, 103, 4, 1998, pp. 962–1024.
  6. Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.
  7. Jack Goodey, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.
  8. Michael Rowlinson, R. Stager Jacques and Charles Booth, 'Critical management and organizational history', in M. Alvesson, H. Willmott and T. Bridgman (eds), *Handbook of Critical Management Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009.
  9. Schama, *op. cit.*
  10. Ann Swidler, 'Culture in action: symbols and strategies', *American Sociological Review*, 51, 1986, pp. 273–86; Ilana Silber, 'Pragmatic sociology as cultural sociology', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6, 4, 2002, pp. 427–49; Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes & Huge Comparisons*, Russell Sage Foundation, 1989.
  11. Braudel, *op. cit.*
  12. Fred Gearing, 'The structural poses of the eighteenth century Cherokee villages', *American Anthropologist*, 60, 1958, pp. 1148–57.
  13. Peter Clark, *Organizations in Action: Competition between Contexts*, Routledge, London, 2000.
  14. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Blackwell, Oxford; Peter Clark, *Anglo-American Innovation*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 1987; Peter Clark, *Organizational Innovations*, Sage, London, 2002.
  15. Peter Clark, 'Corporate chronologies and organizational analysis', in John Hassard and Dennis Pym (eds), *The Theory and Philosophy of Organizations*, Honor Croome, London, 1990; Emirbayer and Mische, *op. cit.*
  16. Jeffrey Haydu, 'Making use of the past: time periods as cases to compare and as sequences of problem solving', *American Journal of Sociology*, 104, 2, 1999, pp. 339–71; Richard Whipp and Peter Clark, *Innovation in the Auto Industry: Product, Process & Work Organization*, Pinter, London, 1986; Clark, 2000, *op. cit.*
  17. Silber, *op. cit.*
  18. Tilly, *op. cit.*
  19. Peter Clark, 'America's consumer polity, market empire & colonizing corporations', in S. Clegg (ed), *Advances in Organization Studies*, Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press, Frederiksberg, forthcoming.
  20. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Psychology Press, New York, 1986.
  21. Melvin Donald, *The Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993.
  22. Wiebe Bijker, Thomas Hughes and Trevor Pinch (eds), *The Social Construction of Technology*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987.
  23. Goodey, *op. cit.*
  24. Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, Galaxy, New York, 1946, p. 280.
  25. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose or Fail to Survive*, Penguin, London, 2006.
  26. Keith W. Hoskin and Robert Macve, 'The genesis of accountability: the West Point connections', *Accounting, Organizations & Society*, 13, 1988, pp. 37–73.
  27. Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*, Belknap, Cambridge, MA, 2000.
  28. Clark, 2000, *op. cit.*



29. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000; Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*, Penguin, London, 2003.
30. Ferguson, *op. cit.*
31. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History*, Granta Books, London, 1999.
32. Bijker *et al.*, *op. cit.*
33. Donald, *op. cit.*
34. Jacques Barzun, *God's Country and Mine*, Vintage, London, 1959.
35. Gavin Wright, 'Historical foundations of American technology', EPWP 2008–10, Conference Board Report R1441-09, New York, 2008.
36. Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand*, Belknap, Cambridge, MA, 1977.
37. Hazel Higham, *The Grid Book*, MIT Press, Boston, MA, 2009.
38. Mann, *op. cit.*
39. Stephen R. Epstein, 'The rise of the West', in J. R. Hall and R. Schroeder (eds), *The Anatomy of Power: The Social Theory of Michael Mann*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.
40. Jack A. Goldstone, 'A historical not comparative method: breakthroughs and limitations in the theory and methodology of Michael Mann's analysis of power', in Hall and Schroeder (eds), *op. cit.*
41. Diamond, *op. cit.*
42. Emirbayer and Mische, *op. cit.*, p. 970 (italics in original).
43. *Ibid.*, p. 971.
44. Peter Clark and Emanuela Todeva, 'Unmasking Americanization: de Grazia's irresistible market empire advancing through twentieth century Europe', *Prometheus*, 24, 1, 2006, pp. 101–15.
45. Louis Galombos, 'Recasting the organization synthesis: structure and process in the 20th and 21st centuries', *Business History Review*, 79, 2005, pp. 1–38.
46. Weber, *op. cit.*
47. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877–1920*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1968.
48. Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate: 1870–1920*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990; Olivier Zunz, *Why the American Century?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998; Clark and Todeva, *op. cit.*
49. Galombos, *op. cit.*
50. Alfred Chandler, *Strategy and Structure*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1962; Chandler, 1977, *op. cit.*
51. Bijker *et al.*, *op. cit.*
52. Bobbitt, *op. cit.*