The ‘cultural turn’ refers to a diffuse intellectual movement within the humanities and social sciences challenging orthodoxies concerning the possibility of objective, universal knowledge, although it is scarcely the first movement to do so. Its current influence is evident in the extent to which many contemporary studies are described not merely in terms of conventional disciplines such as history, geography, sociology or politics, but cultural history, cultural geography, cultural sociology and cultural politics, along with ‘cultural’ studies and the closely related field of ‘cultural theory’. Thus, as Peter Burke has pointed out, scholars who once thought of themselves as literary critics, art historians or historians of science are much more likely to describe themselves as cultural historians working on ‘visual culture’, the ‘science of culture’ and so on, while out on the street, ‘culture’ has become an everyday term used by people to indicate their community or general way of life. In the world of business we find the idea of ‘corporate culture’ advertising agents use ‘culture’ to create an allure for products and tour operators to market exotic cultures. And there is scarcely any form of identity politics, from that of the Orange Order in Northern Ireland to the emergent ‘deaf culture’, that doesn’t invoke a cultural basis to advance its claims or to defend its practices. In short, ‘everyone is into culture now’.

This chapter considers the intellectual origins of the cultural turn, its manifestation in constructivist social theory and its significance for the study of world politics. It then examines competing discourses about world politics following the fall of the Berlin Wall, starting with the boost provided by the collapse of the Cold War to various neo-liberal/universalist ideas, which ranged from Francis Fukuyama’s vision of the ‘end of history’ to the renewal of universal human rights discourses and the democracy promotion project. A second set of discourses concerns
culturalist reactions to neo-liberal thinking. Of these, Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ scenario is certainly the best known, and one from which those sympathetic to the cultural turn may well want to disassociate themselves.

The cultural turn

It is difficult to settle on a definite starting point for the cultural turn, although it is often seen as emanating from an earlier ‘linguistic turn’ manifest in various philosophical developments in the early twentieth century, followed by the rise of poststructuralism and its spread to history and the social sciences. Hans-Georg Gadamer has been singled out as particularly influential in opening up ‘one of the most impressive vistas of the linguistic turn with his modern philosophy of hermeneutics’. Other commentators attribute it almost exclusively to French thinkers, especially as manifest in the work of Althusser, Derrida and Lacan, ‘who together made literary scholars and critics rethink the relationship of language to the subject and object worlds’. It has also been suggested that French poststructuralism tended to go its own way and, although building on the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger, stands accused of largely ignoring parallel developments in German thought.

Despite the apparent novelty of contemporary culturalist approaches, similar ideas were evident in the 1940s when a volume on The Cultural Approach to History was produced under the auspices of the American Historical Association. Voicing what culturalist approaches now take more or less for granted, it was noted that ‘each age writes and rewrites history in terms of the values, attitudes, and curiosities of that age, and ... brings to the task the intellectual tools which are part of its heritage and the product of its creation’. Not that this was an altogether new insight either. Cultural historicism in one form or another itself has a long history and, in the modern period, can be traced at least as far back as Vico’s recommendation that scholars take a ‘philological turn’ in order to discern how all civil institutions are constituted through mythologies.

One study that appeared in the early 1970s perceived not a turn towards culture at that time, but a turn away from it due to the rise of social history and its promise to supply firmer answers about past realities than the culturalists who, in the end, could not transcend the subjectivities within which their work was mired. In historiography, it was said, these divergent approaches seemed to represent the latest phase of the old controversy between historicism and scientific history.