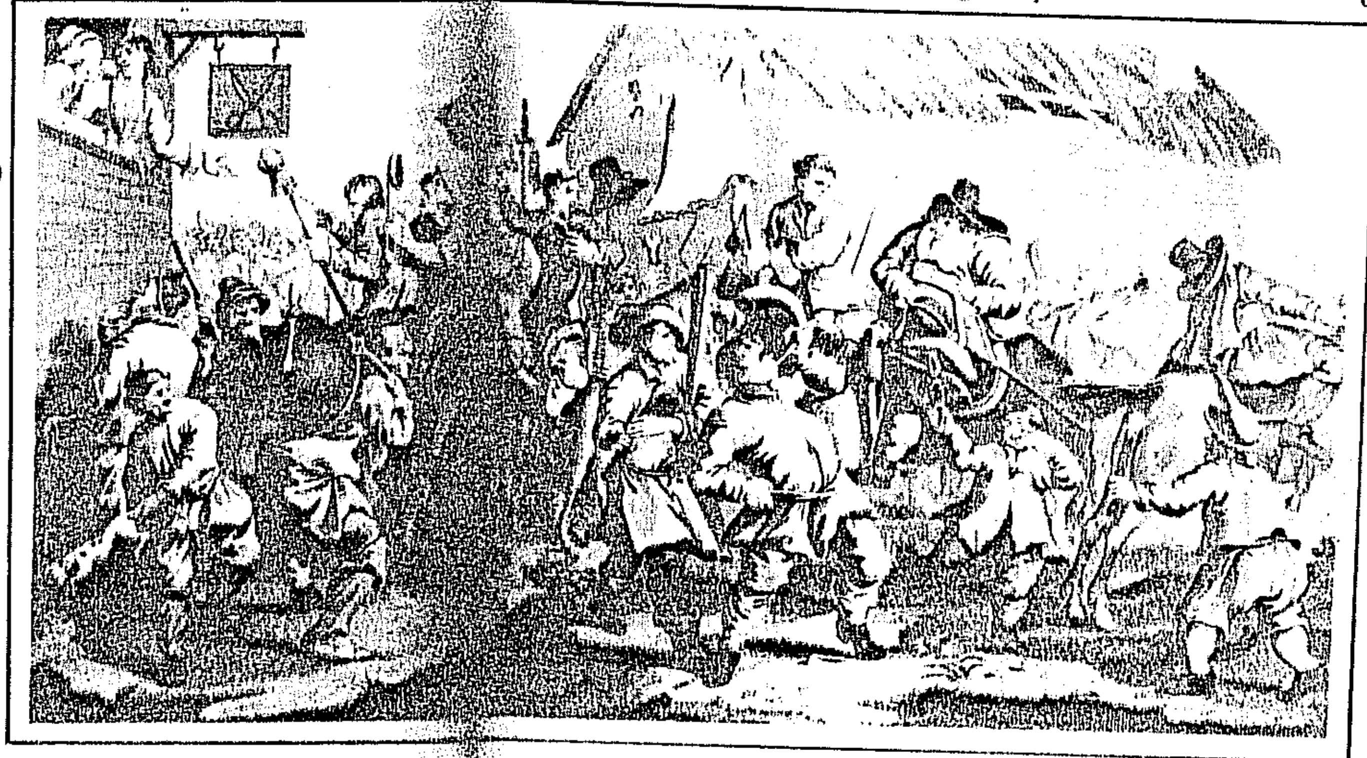
(ndura / o (3)) History Workshop 7 (1979)

ESSAYS

A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians

by Tony Judt



Hogarth *Hudibras/Skimmington Ride*

This is a bad time to be a social historian.[1]

On the face of it, this seems an unlikely suggestion. The last two decades have seen a proliferation of journals and books in the field, and more men and women than ever before are writing and studying social history. The old emphasis on institutions and events has been replaced by an interest in all manner of 'social' concerns, and the discipline has all the appearance of health and energy. What, then, is wrong?

The answer is that social history is suffering a severe case of pollution. The subject has become a gathering place for the unscholarly, for historians bereft of ideas and subtlety. The writings thus produced are without theoretical content, a failing disguised by an obsession with method and technique. They represent collectively a loss of faith in history. In their reaction against the chronological imperatives of political or economic history, social historians have all but lost touch with the historical events altogether. There is a constant striving for 'scientific' status, a requirement commonly met by the undignified and indiscriminate borrowing of terms and tools from other disciplines. One journal avowedly declares its commitment to 'interdisciplinary history', as if the support of other subjects were required for history to remain a plausible undertaking. In these circumstances the study of the past becomes a playpit for the unattended urchins of other disciplines: computer scientists, parsonian sociologists and structural anthropologists wallow around under a benevolent editorial eye. Small wonder that social history elicits scorn and distaste from the traditional empiricists, who at least retain their faith in history, for all that they do not know what that is.

My purpose in this article is to discuss the dominant characteristics of much modern social history, and then to offer some reflections on the origins of these. I should stress that, for two reasons, this is not a strictly theoretical account of the problem. In the first place, I do not believe that any properly theoretical thinking informs most of the writings under consideration. As a consequence, it might be misleading to attempt a single analytical explanation for them, the more so in that there is clearly more than one school of thought at work.[2] Second, the task of an initial critique of the subject is to focus clearly on *what* is at fault, and how this came to be. The reader is thus offered here a historical account of 'modern' social history; clearly, a more analytical investigation remains to be done.

Why, it may be asked, do we need a critique of modern social history? The response is that a whole discipline is being degraded and abused; a few more years of the work currently published in certain European and American journals,[3] and social history will have lost all touch with the study of the past. Certain areas of historical investigation, notably the history of women, of revolutions, of industrialisation and its impact, have proved especially vulnerable. In these fields received ideas and stereotyped models too often take the place of theoretical insight or careful research, while certain specialists resemble Bertrand Russell's savages in their aptitude for imagining a mystical connection between words and things. Thus a term such as 'modernisation' or some 'model' of progress is applied to a historical situation, which in its circular turn becomes source and justification for claims made on behalf of the word or concept in question. As such writings come progressively to

be revealed as sterile and vacuous, so will social history lose the ground gained in recent years. It is not hard to envisage a reaction, a few years hence, in favour of 'old fashioned' history, with the social kind dismissed as a soft option for the 'unserious'.

There is also a more important point at stake. History is about *politics*. By this I mean not the debates or electoral fortunes of parliamentarians, but the means and purposes by which civil society is organised and governed. The failure to consider this dimension has two consequences, to be discussed later. One is that whole areas of the human experience become incomprehensible; since they cannot altogether be ignored, we are offered a variety of alternative and mostly bizarre accounts of them. The recent historiography of revolutions is the most obvious instance. Politics are reduced to events of marginal significance, explicable in psychological terms, or mere footnotes to a serial description of 'long term social change'. The second consequence of the divorce of political from social history is the insulting denial to people in the past of their political and ideological identity. Consciousness of any kind, particularly that relating to class, is glossed over or paraphrased, so that human society in the past takes on an oddly impersonal, neo-hegelian quality. Strangely, then, modern social history fails at its first hurdle — the proper and sympathetic account of *people*.

Further, history is not just about politics, it *is* politics. There is a very clear and consistent message contained in the writings of many modern social historians, and it concerns the present. Concealed beneath layers of terminological neutrality and objective analysis, is a dominant tendency which is both philistine and conservative. It is against this aspect of modern social history that criticism must initially be directed, just as the time is long overdue for acknowledgement of the hollow and shallow character of much that passes for reflective thought in the field. Something rather odd has clearly happened to a discipline when one of its leading practitioners, the editor of the *Journal of Social History*, can pontificate thus:-

> The social historian must seek shared values and life styles on the basis of his definition of social structure, for this is what his enquiry is all about.[4]

I

The most striking characteristic of many social historians (other than their inability to write the English language) is their enthusiasm for 'modernisation theory'. Originally conceived and employed by economists and others as a means of accounting for and characterising the development of the 'third world', this all-purpose explicandum is now very frequently offered as a framework for describing the course of European history. A combination of neo-darwinism and functional sociology, it strings the past out along a linear continuum. Thus any given event, or attitude, can be labelled 'pre-modern' or 'backward-looking', with no concern as to the relative or historicist identity of the tag. David Apter, a leading exponent of this approach, clearly states that he sees 'developing communities' as strung out in this way, all of them pursuing a single, determined, upward path to the present. In place of a Whiggish England we are offered 'the modern world', and all incidents along the line are either causally linked to some stage in the process or, where this is wholly implausible, declared to be 'atavistic'.[5]

The nonsensical, teleological aspect of such a view was implicit in the optimistic application of it to Africa or Asia; it becomes even more obviously untenable when offered in the dimension of time rather than space. Here the usual approach is to present history as divided into two quite distinct categories, dichotomies, with all social and human attributes labelled 'traditional' or 'modern'.[6] The implication is risible, the result occasionally hilarious. One definition of a modern, developed society offers the following attributes:- high participation; structural differentiation;highly rationalised or secularised culture; nation state; capacity to meet most internal or external challenges. The author emphasises that the concept is 'linear', though he acknowledges that 'setback' may occur. It presumably follows that classical Athens could not properly be more 'modern' than present-day Italy, yet the definitions (with their Euro-centred pretensions to normative status) would suggest otherwise.[7]

A variation on this theme is Charles Tilly's use of 'urbanisation' as a description for a process he elsewhere labels modernisation; he defines the former as market expansion plus state centralisation. The theory he derives from this is that urbanisation breeds resistance where it has occurred in both vigorous and uneven form. That is to say, under certain conditions modernisation breeds revolt, a view Tilly has since put forth on many occasions. Here, as elsewhere in his work, one must choose between a megahistorical theory without explanatory value, and a re-description in pretentious terms of a particular process which could better be described in its empirical detail. The model offered is simultaneously overblown and redundant.[8]

The fact that the term 'modernisation' is consistently used, despite its epistemological vacuity is a reminder that it is serving a multitude of ideological purposes. To be modern is to be where the 'historical process' intended you to be. It follows that all evidence of a willingness to adapt to the demands of a modern society is, on the face of it, confirmation of the modernised nature of the person or group in question. Conversely, those who fail so to adapt, who 'protest' against the changes in question, are 'backward-looking' and the subject of much properly puzzled investigation. Thus Karen Offen admires the 'middle-class views' of nineteenth-century French artisans 'towards' women and wonders whether this laudable characteristic did not go in tandem with 'modernisation'.[9] Peter Stearns makes much of the growing 'adaptability' of European workers to the conditions of modern manufacture.[10] As for William Sewell, we learn from his pen that peasants who came to live in a city were more upwardly mobile than the old urban working-class, and this leads him to suggest that the former were 'more receptive to all kinds of modern ideas'. It is clear, in the context, that Sewell regards 'modern' ideas and behaviour as synonymous with competitive behaviour in the labour market.[11] Like Patricia Branca, he clearly believes not just in the rationality of the market, but in the purposeful inevitability of that rationality. Capitalist social relations (never described as such) are synonymous with modernism, so that it becomes proper to enquire, not why a given labour force came to accept its own subjugation, but why it might ever have been so retrograde as to fail to do so.[12] All that remains for the historian is to classify, along the continuum, what shall or shall not count as 'modern'. Whole disciplines can be subsumed this way — Offen, again, actually takes the view that what she calls 'women's issues' may serve as 'indicators of broad social change in societies undergoing modernisation'.[13] The *a priori* assumption thus breeds a definition which can be redeployed to prove the original belief.

Two things are happening here, both of them inimical to the study of history. The first is a simple failure of intelligence. Take the following example: Edward Shorter has decided that a high rate of illegitimacy is a good working definition of modernity. He has gone on to discover that the 'single highest group most prone [sic] to illegitimacy was urban domestic servants'. Because of this he warns the student of industrial capitalism against 'attaching too much importance to factories and the modern economy'.[14] His artificially established criterion has become a norm, a truth-definition, from which all available empirical data may be re-arranged. Yet without any definition of 'modernity' (except by reference to illegitimacy) we have a mere tautology — and a rather dramatically silly one at that. Apter is little better. He offers two central hypotheses. 'One is that the greater the degree of modernisation in a system, the greater the tendency to embourgeoisement — while the greater the degree of industrialisation, the greater the tendency towards radicalisation.' Given Apter's point of view, the first is a tautology, the second a truism. Not surprisingly, we find that nineteenth-century Europe was both bourgeois and threatened by radicals. Q.E.D! We have actually learnt nothing.[15]

Secondly, and more profoundly inimical is the necessarily dualist structure of all modernisation theories. Tilly divides protest into pre-modern and modern, Sewell divides artisans from proletarians on pre-selected criteria of adaptability to bourgeois attitudes, and so forth. This is rubbish — the changing character of rural protest in late nineteenth-century France has nothing to do with definitions of modernity, any more than we have any reason to expect workers in Marseilles to desire upward mobility.[16] Nor can such views account for the existence of capitalism *before* industrialisation, or the time-lag between the birth of classical economics and its political application. How could such a globally dichotomous view of society make any sense of such inconveniently complex matters? The answer, of course, is that it ignores them. Hence both the inadequacy of the new positivism when it comes to doing more than naming things, and its careful refusal to do even that in the realm of ideas. Yet its aspirations remain unapologetically all-embracing, as they must.

One device for avoiding these problems has been the enthusiastic use of abstract nouns and the passive voice. It has been well said that the popularity of 'modernisation' comes from its 'ability to evoke vague and generalised images'. When more precision is required we hear much about the active intervention of 'forces' and 'pressures'. As a result of these agencies, society 'becomes' modern, people are 'influenced' and 'undergo' changes.[17] We are back here with what I referred to as the neo-hegelian character of this sort of writing. Shorter sees the 'reintegration of the lower classes into the structure of civil society' from 'about 1875'; here there is a nice mixture of the cavalier attitude to chronology, the hegelian conception of 'resolution', and anachronistic satisfaction at the ending of the nasty conflicts which characterised the earlier, 'transitional' period.[18]

A necessary consequence of this enthusiasm for terms such as 'modernisation' and its accompanying impersonal agencies is the return to a naive determinism. Events, conflicts and crises are smothered under 'long term' considerations, or else placed on a sub-section of the linear continuum, representing more or less positive stages in its path to self-fulfilment. Yet within all this there lurks a strange and paradoxical emphasis upon free will. This is particularly marked in writings upon the history of women. While the historical process unfolds unquestioned, women retain, apparently, a free choice as to their rôle within the process. Thus we learn from Patricia Branca that what caused domestic manufacture to persist was 'sheer traditionalism'. She writes of factory girls and domestic servants in the 19th century as if they chose their occupations (a choice influenced by their 'traditional' or 'family' nature), rather in the manner of a secretary reading the small-ads today. The point is repeatedly emphasised — 'traditional job opportunities were preferred when they remained valid'. Louise Tilly and Joan Scott make a similar point in their article on women's work.[19]

The theory lurking behind all this seems to run thus: 'society' modernises — a process over which no-one has any control. As it does so, it opens up little boxes for people to enter, options and roles between which they may choose. Women apparently display a propensity for choosing boxes which remind them of the (pre-modern) hole from which they have just emerged. Peasants and workers of both sexes occasionally kick the boxes over in atavistic frustration, but they too eventually come around and choose the suitable adaptive stance. To the extent that these choices are conditioned by anything other than personal taste, they are a result of economic 'pressures' placed upon the individual by the evolving modern society.[20]

It is this view, or some version of it, which informs the writings of most of the historians with whom this article is concerned. If they fail to recognise it, this will very possibly be because their satisfaction with the heuristic powers of the new positivism has obviated the need ever to advance a theoretical account of their undertakings. But theoretical inadequacy alone does not explain the patently incomplete character of such history. Not merely does the latter ignore both the constraints of the form of production and the beliefs of individuals — it also leaves out the very ways in which the changes described were actually effected. It ignores, and is ignorant of, politics.

II

The editor of the *Journal of Social History* recently claimed, with respect to the achievements of social history, that

> When the history of menarche is widely recognised as equal in importance to the history of monarchy, we will have arrived.[21]

Nothing could illustrate better the condition of the discipline. This sort of 'history with the politics left out' is inimical to the very enterprise of social history. To the extent that politics concerns the ordering and preservation of power, it affected the seventeenth-century peasant no less than the nineteenth-century burgher. Furthermore, in so far as the social historian is concerned to account for changes in the economic order, shifts in social attitudes, or even the age of menarche, these themes must lead rapidly to an awareness of events, of moments in time, which matter no less than the seamless continuity it is currently fashionable to emphasise. And this awareness in turn must invoke the attitudes and acts of those who intervened in these events. Otherwise we have not social history but retrospective cultural anthropology — of which more later.

The study of the decisive moment — a revolt, a piece of legislation, a vote, or simply an economic slump — requires an awareness of history as a dynamic process,

moving rather than static, but moved by people. The obsession with structures and demography, with what people ate and how many chairs they owned, is a feature of the pages of *Annales*, much altered since the halcyon days of Bloch and Febvre. Similar 'static' obsessions inform the pages of certain English-speaking journals as well. Such concerns are not laudable in themselves. They represent the mindless scraping of the historical dustbin, with no question or problematic behind them. They are, however, harmless — except when deployed in such a way that both the dimension of human experience and the political dimension are read out of history.

It is in such circumstances that the rejection of political concerns does most damage. More precisely, it is a refusal to consider *power* that lies at the root of much disgraceful writing on the subject of change in the past.[22] Power, after all, is the key concept in the study of society. Even Charles Tilly, little enough concerned with the subject, is constrained to admit that most explanations of the behaviour of men such as Colbert require an appreciation of the 'process of the aggregation of power that was going on'.[23] This is a rare admission from a modern social historian — but it remains abstract — it is reduced in value by a complete lack of concern with the central questions: *who* was exercising that power, on *whose* behalf, and to the detriment of *whom*? Any glossing over of such questions, as in the substitution of 'traditional' and 'modern' for 'pre-capitalist' and 'capitalist', shuts off all hope of understanding why society was governed as it was, why it changed when it did, and how the populace was affected thereby.

Two consequences flow from this refusal to speak of, or allow for, political and economic power. The first is a loss of political differentiation: thus Elizabeth Pleck can study work, women and family life by reference, in a single paragraph, to the poorest family, an embassy and the White House. It is as though the conditions, attitudes and relationships were all the same, normatively determined by such 'considerations' as 'women's rôle' or 'family structure'. All other matters aside, the result is that we learn nothing about any of her examples, since the most important and obvious differentiating factors have been forgotten.[24]

The second consequence is more serious. It may in principle be possible to discuss social classes without reference to power or political control. But when the historian comes to account for *differences* in attitude or beliefs, an odd thing happens. Denying the public sphere (that is, the political), the social historian is confined to the private sphere — and thus, often, to psychological explanations. Thus, because of the absence of any grasp of what the Genoveses have called 'the mediating character of white power on black consciousness', the history of slaves becomes the history of a servile and quiescent group. Similarly, women, or the industrial proletariat, appear to collude in their own oppression: when historians are not concerned with the economic or political nature of that oppression, they conclude that there was something innately (or at best historically) submissive or a-political about the class or group in question. This then becomes a generalised truth, and energy is devoted to explaining it in terms of the private or collective psychology (biologically or socially determined) of the colluding group.[25] It is the *refusal to consider class-based relations of power* which encourages such limited and pseudo-psychological accounts of the history of individuals. Seen collectively and in terms of class, located in a particular historical situation, understood as struggle, such behaviour looks very different.

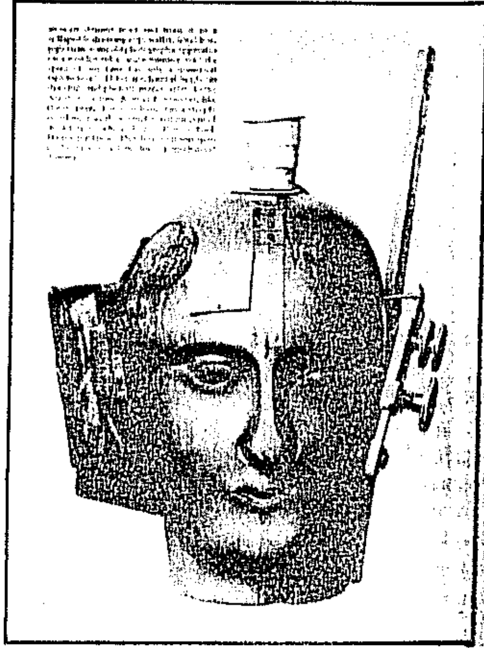
Here, it seems to me, is the reason for the failure of most 'new' social historians to make any sense of revolutions. A revolution is a struggle for power, for control of the state. It cannot be understood if its essential components — parties, ideologies, power, class — have been left out of the equation. No amount of number-crunching in the matter of 'collective violence' or 'internal wars' can resolve this problem. Indeed, the fashionable enthusiasm for the indiscriminate study of violence, with little regard for the nature of the act in question, nor its purpose and consequence, is actually inimical to the study of revolutions, violent or otherwise: it emphasises the form of the act at the expense of its content. Certain kinds of violent act have far more in common with a wide range of non-violent actions than they do with other kinds of violence. Many students of revolution seem oblivious to this obvious point; but its effect is all but to nullify their accounts of violent upheaval.[26]

With this playing down of the content of historical actions, particularly those of a political nature, there goes a heightened concern with form. This, together with the (here largely baneful) influence of Michel Foucault, has resulted in some very strange interpretations of strikes in particular. Michèle Perrot is often guilty of this in her otherwise thorough and scholarly *thèse* on French strikers, but hitherto unplumbed depths of subtlety were attained in a recent piece on strikes in northern France in the early 20th century. Virtually unreadable, the article argues that the 'formal words' employed in strikes and strike demands did not represent the workers' innermost feelings: these 'new words' (by which the authors mean the vocabulary of an organised strike) 'are themselves part of a 'political' language game far removed from working-class life'.[27]

Why 'far removed'? How do we know? — Only through a prior assumption concerning the innately un-political character of the working-class. The authors maintain that to argue that workers acted out of political motives is to tie working-class behaviour to a particular state of mind which may 'be of our own invention'. This sort of infinitely relativistic 'Foucaultism' actually says nothing about anything; but it does bear a close family resemblance to the more commonly held view that 'all' women, 'all' peasants were unpolitical. (Foucault is a prominent French scholar and scholastic.) This is extremely patronising, of course, and based on no shred of evidence. Indeed, in the case of French strikers it requires a poker-faced denial of that evidence. It also allows the authors of such views to dispense with the political dimension altogether, on the circular ground that they have shown politics to be of no concern to the people under investigation. The premise is the conclusion and vice-versa.

The result of all this is remarkably instructive. We begin with paranoia on the subject of political history — 'Only if one tacks on a conclusion that relates to politics is it fairly certain that the historians will take notice . . . '[28] And we are carried immediately and of necessity to the denial of any political ideas to the bulk of the human race, past and present. When a political event disturbs the landscape of the past it is confidently ascribed to an abstraction, such as 'social mobilisation'. From here we advance to the absurd: Matossian and Schafer assure us that ' . . . after the Battle of Waterloo [1815], there was a temporary shortage of young men and the Restoration was possible'.[29] Here at last is the nemesis of the new social history: it can deny politics, but it cannot deny certain kinds of uncomfortably obvious events. What it can do, and has done, is render itself quite unable to make any sense of these events, except by terminological obfuscation. Until monarchy and its implications are firmly placed back where they belong, in that position from which they have been dislodged by the non-history of, e.g., puberty, menarche (an instance of the seductive facility of certain kinds of social history, as Perrot has observed),[30]

social history will remain in its present condition, bereft of any social or theoretical value.


de Chirico *Mannequin*

III

The obsession with 'models', with the abstractions to which they lead, with the predictive value proclaimed on their behalf, has resulted in some distortions of history which go beyond a failure to pay any attention to the dimension of politics. Among these distortions is the strange but revealing obsession with numbers.

This is not the place to raise in full the discussion of statistical history, or 'cliometrics', a theme much debated elsewhere. What interests me here is not so much the fact that most historians cannot count,[31] but that they proclaim the need to do so. We have indeed succumbed to the 'delirium of statistical series',[32] when a recent review of the works of Maurice Agulhon can seriously take him to task for 'neglecting' to present 'systematic quantative evidence'.[33] The reader of journals in this field is beset with numbers on all sides: how many domestic servants were there in nineteenth-century Versailles, how many Frenchmen had blue eyes in 1815, how many eighteenth-century writers loved their mothers...?[34] It would be too easy to dismiss all this as the last resort of people whose only intellectual skill is the ability to manipulate a pocket calculator; limitations of such a definitive nature are not always the source of the problem.

The interest in numbers and their uses, is clearly linked to the absence of any properly conceived historical questions. It is of course true that a genuinely worthy undertaking might be assisted by a piece of quantative analysis, but it is interesting to note how very few of the *truly original* contributions to social history *have* been so assisted. All too frequent is the interest in numbers for their own sake. Thus Theresa McBride's work on nineteenth-century domestics contributes nothing to our understanding of the bourgeois household, and little enough to our knowledge of working women. So why do it? Because it is there. Servants can be counted, maps constructed, graphs drawn up and a piece of data thrown thereby into the historiographical pool. The same applies to the study of eye colour, family size, age of menarche, and anything else which has been counted for no other reason than it can be counted. A recent study of the 'transformation' of an Istrian village in modern times concludes thus:

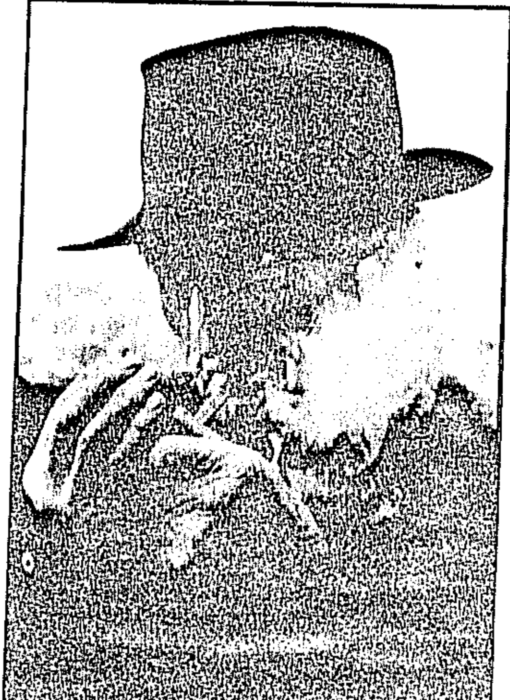
> The foregoing analysis has dealt with the nuclear family as a unit, employing multiple regression to determine how and why families responded to what they perceived as modernisation.[35]

This is a very typical instance of the resort to quantified and quantifiable data to compensate for the lack of an argument and the glaring absence of conceptual insight. As with words, so with numbers; reality disappears behind a blur of science.

What results is often absurd beyond belief. Nor can it be said that the new social historians hide their five-watt bulb under a bushel. David Apter, after all, asserts the need for the 'ruthless elimination of ambiguity in order to take advantage of the possible application of computer techniques'.[36] Hence we move to the attempt by Matossian and Schafer to 'relate the pattern of family emotional interaction to political violence...' by means of a computer; while Prof. Margadant's criticism of Agulhon in the above-mentioned review begins to make sense. After all, the subtle revelation and deployment of ambiguities in the latter's work is all to clear and frequent.[37]

The real problem, then, is not quantification as such, but rather that writing-by-numbers may lead to and flow from a complete epistemological bankruptcy. Thus the author cannot make very much of the calculations themselves, especially when these quite patently contradict existing knowledge or common sense. What matters is intention, the question or questions which prompt the use of a particular source. Where such questions are absent, or where they are themselves founded upon hypotheses based on a theory or model derived from the sociologists, then the numbers may be deployed as skilfully as you will — the result is still to hide from the reader and writer alike the historical process purportedly described. And when serial data are absent, it is as though a crutch had been removed; the social historian is left, all too frequently, with nowhere to go and no means of getting there.[38]

The most common use of quantified data comes in the application of models to history. It goes in tandem with the rigorous exclusion of the unquantifiable — hence, perhaps, the common lack of interest in anything before 1750. A model so applied is not a hypothesis to be tested, but a grid, rigorously and rigidly applied to the past, designed to exclude whatever does not fit. Two examples will serve to illustrate this. At the theoretical level we have David Apter (whom I quote again as a highly respected theorist of modernisation) affirming that:



> It may be necessary to treat explicitly as a testing ground for analytically derived propositions and, even in a rough-and-ready fashion, to plunder events in order to do hindsight analysis.[39]

So much for what they would li

to do. Lest it be thought that no-one would have the courage of such convictions, the reader is reminded of the thoughts of Prof. Tilly on the subject of the Paris Commune. In one of his many pieces on 'collective violence', Tilly notes the uncomfortable anomaly of the Paris Commune, which fits none of his models and bursts the bounds of his explanation at every point. He attributes this unfortunate situation to the temporary disappearance in 1870 of the 'French state'; his theories regarding the relationship of protesters to government thus remain valid, since in 1870-71 there *was* no government. This is a neat trick, so Tilly repeats it with rather more candour, on another occasion. In *The Rebellious Century* he acknowledges that his graphs make 1871 look rather insignificant in the history of protest in France. This, he concedes, may arise from 'our procedures'. He then goes on to claim that, since these 'procedures' were used consistently for the period 1830 through the mid-20th century, 'we have little choice but to treat 1870-71 as a doubtful case in the correlation between extent of violence and extent of political change'. When a historian's 'procedures' take over in this way, one cannot help wondering just what, or who, is the doubtful case.[40]

It may be true that models should be treated as 'ideal types', not intended to fit any given set of facts and not in any way a conceptual response to empirically established research. But in that case they should be kept out of the hands of historians, for two reasons. In the first place, there is a strong tendency for models of this sort to be essentially dualist. Thus we are offered protest in its old *or* new style, the alternatives of a traditional *or* modern society, and so forth. It has been suggested that this dual classification is a logical necessity in such matters, and that attempts to render ideal explanations of this sort more flexible, in order that they might better 'fit' the 'spread of empirical data are *in principle wrong*'[41] (my italics). All other objections aside, this is nonsense so far as the study of the past is concerned — such crude tools cannot even shape historical periodisation let alone interpret complex source materials.

The other case for keeping dangerous toys out of the hands of academic juveniles is the usual one — they may hurt themselves. A recent article actually tried to show a statistically verifiable connection between family relationships and political violence in the 'modern' period. The method employed was an investigation, through their biographies and their work, of 157 writers of the 18th and 19th centuries, with the aim of establishing a 'pattern' of parent-child relationships. The conclusion, produced by means of a machine and presented in graphic form, is a model, grandiosely entitled *Population, Family Interaction and Political Violence.* From it we learn that a propensity to attack one's parents correlates with revolution (thus reducing the latter to an unfortunate case of mass social pathology), while a tendency to fratricide correlates with 'foreign sectional war'. The period 1800 to 1850, we understand, was

> one in which the relations between mother and son remained positive and intense, while those between father and son grew more negative and intense.

Let there be no mistake. The above is a serious piece, published in the *Journal of Social History.* The astonishing use of sources alone should have consigned it to the editorial waste-bin, but it is the careful production of a *model* which is of particular interest to us. We are to understand that some causal proof has been established as to the provenance of revolutionary and other forms of violence in modern times,

which is definitive by virtue of its graphic and quantified form, rather than through any force inherent in the argument itself.

Obviously ludicrous instances of this sort are relatively few. More commonly one hears of such models as the 'J curve' of rising expectations as a cause of revolution, or the not-dissimilar suggestion that 'collective violence' is a response to rapid changes in the 'polity'. But the underlying assumptions are no less questionable. Why assume that 'traditional societies' (i.e. peasants) only rebel when their expectations have changed? There have been many instances of rebellion in defence of perceived interests (common land, legal rights), even in times of little or no 'change'. People in the past had ideals and beliefs, not just 'interests'. This sort of model, derived from economists' conceptions of rational actors, is extraordinarily insulting to the people it discusses.[43] As to the Tillys' view on 'collective violence', the sort of changes it describes respond far better to analysis in more concrete terms: the conjunction of improving prices for wine, the first Napoleonic repression, and then political organisation, makes perfectly good sense of the more peacable nature of rural politics in France after 1851. And how can a simple before/after model make sense of the reversion to 'collective violence' in 1906-7, during the wine crisis in the Languedoc? Another 'doubtful case', perhaps?[44]

Even the debate over women's work in the 19th century, apparently a more technical issue, in fact derives from a fascination with models. Joan Scott and Louise Tilly have responded to Shorter's assertion of a total 'modernisation' of the female experience by proposing a counter-claim. It is suggested that women remained traditional in many ways, placing old wine in new bottles (or the opposite, according to taste). Yet both parties are merely re-working a model of modernisation: Shorter in a typically over-stated way; Scott and Tilly with more subtlety and with the symptomatic addition of the view that women had free-ranging choice in the matter.[45] If we but ask whether there ever was such a thing as the 'traditional' woman, who was thus transformed, the whole debate can be made to disappear. The question, however, implies research, which is not done;[46] requires an interest in an earlier period, which is not forthcoming; and does not accept the conceptual premise out of which the dispute apparently arises. There *is* no evidence to suggest that women 'modernised' in the sense described, nor any to suggest they sat around and chose whether or not to modernise themselves in a 'traditional, familiar' way. But so to dispense with the starting assumption would throw out of gear the very principles upon which the new social history is grounded. No bishop, no king. And so the Emperor strides on, naked.

Enough has been said for it to be clear that I take the obsession with models and their ancillary 'methods' to be the fundamental defect in much recent social history. The subject has become the testing ground for sociologically derived propositions, as was the case with economic history in respect of neo-classical economics some years earlier.[47] Even when these propositions prove regrettably 'impossible to operationalise' (!!)[48] they cannot but impede the proper study of a past which just will not conform to static, dyad-like, either/or, before/after formulations. However, they are not the only impediment. All too frequently the problem is

compounded by the fundamentally unscholarly approach of the historians themselves.

A large part of the ignorance on display apparently arises from an unawareness of the existence of civil society before the year 1500.[49] Research into the economic arrangements of the ancient world, and the recent animated debate over the medieval origins of capitalism, are matters of no apparent interest to most of the contributors to the leading American journals of social history. The results can be entertaining. Edward Shorter defines 'traditional society' as that obtaining in the period 1500-1700. Before the Renaissance there came, one supposes, 'pre-traditional' society. At least we cannot therefore accuse Shorter of believing for medieval times what he claims for the early modern period:

> It was a period of cultural homogeneity in which all popular strata behaved more or less the same, having similar social and sexual values, the same concepts of authority and hierarchy, and an identical appreciation of custom and tradition in their primary social goal, the maintenance of static community life.[50]

Here, as elsewhere, Shorter is unwise enough to assert that which others merely assume. When we move forward in time, however, there is no such modesty. A recent article by Louise Tilly hinges its argument upon the proclaimed disappearance of major subsistence crises at least 100 years before the last food riots (of the mid-19th century).[51] Prof. Tilly seems to be unaware not merely of the major subsistence crises of 1846, but also of the European-wide food shortage which followed the end of the Napoleonic era and which is the subject of a recent book.[52] In her work with Joan Scott, she claims that the rising wages of men made it less necessary 'for married women to work outside the home'.[53] The article concerns the 19th century, and it is simply inaccurate so far as much of France was concerned: by 1900 the wages of most married working-men would still not support a family, unaided.

In this instance the lack of scholarly care shows in the careful avoidance of dates and places, so that the assertions become slippery and hard to pin down. This is not always the case, however: Patricia Branca goes so far so as to assert that 'in general it is fair to say that factories and women rarely mixed'. This *can* be investigated.[54] It proves to be fundamentally inaccurate, although the use of such cheat-words as 'in general', 'it is fair' (as distinct from 'it is true'?), 'rarely', make it impossible to accuse the writer of malfeasance.[55]

The history of the family, like that of women, has also fallen victim to some odd and doubtful assertions. Smelser's misleading assertion concerning the 'familial' character of textile factory work is frequently repeated. *Does* the fact that the whole family worked in one factory or the same industry actually show anything very much about the survival of a unified 'family work force'? This is a matter for investigation. Recent work in France, at least, suggests that it has more to do with the availability, or otherwise, of employment, and with the conscious policy of the employer, who was rather more adept than the present-day historian at assessing the exploitative advantages of certain forms of labour organisation. These accounts are not of necessity mutually exclusive; but particular emphasis on the 'voluntarist' element, results in a wider failure to grasp the nature of social relations under capitalism. Another look at the evidence would not come amiss.

This failure to make much sense of the modern factory and its initial impact

upon the labour force is thus directly related to the refusal to write the word 'capitalism'. Here synonyms will not serve. Capitalist does *not* mean 'modern', or 'industrial', any more than 'pre-capitalist' can be replaced by 'agrarian'. The presumptuous use of such terms has misguided many social historians. Yet anyone who knew, for example, that there were thriving industries in Europe well before 1500, or that capitalism in Europe had a very marked commercial and agrarian character, would surely not claim, as does Marilyn Boxer, that women (and men) progressed from hearth to factory with the coming of capitalism (my term) in the 19th century.[56] For that matter, the history of 'internal violence' (revolutions) would be much complicated by an acquaintance with the writings of Rodney Hilton, or indeed of almost anyone else who has described the rural uprisings of late medieval Europe. Entrances to the polity, exits thence, social dislocation, rapid urbanisation and other synonyms for the emergence of industrial capitalism in western Europe are a little helpless in the face of the events of the 14th century, though like all such inventions they could doubtless be adjusted.

Ignorance of the past is clearly to be regretted in and for itself. However, this article is not intended as a requiem to scholarship. Not every prominent social historian stands accused of ignorance (although vast learning has not prevented Profs. Tilly and Stone from saying some very odd things). Nor is the interest in the modern period an unworthy one; there are some very respectable reasons for being interested in what has happened to Europe (and, with Europe, to the rest of the world) since the 18th century. My criticism is directed at the attitudes and assumptions behind the choice of period, and, within this period, at the choice of subject matter. For the decline in the quality of the work of many modern social historians is directly related to the loss of interest in the further past, to the dismissal of chronology and events (*'histoire évenementielle'*), to an overt distaste for political history and to a determined pursuit of certain kinds of patterns, a pursuit which is undertaken through very specific methods. Clearly, the field thus ploughed attracts a certain sort of worker. The shire-horses of the profession, tend to prefer steady and monotonous labour in the area of diplomatic or economic history, while the thoroughbreds still chase ideas. Simple assertions about the mediocrity of many social historians have their place, but they cannot provide an account of why we have reached this pass. Such an account requires consideration of other, broader matters.

IV

The proximate cause of much that is wrong with recent work in social history is the absence of any genuine problematic or question. It is many years now since Lucien Febvre exhorted us to 'begin with the problems', and it is clear that in the English-speaking world no less than in the pages of his own journal, *Annales*, this advice has been forgotten. Without a clearly defined problem, a reason for undertaking the research, historians cannot but

passes for an explanation or a context for the material unearthed. Why *is* Febvre's advice ignored?

Part of the answer lies in the structure of the profession, in the mode of production of history. Bad enough, as in France, to be 'assigned' a topic and told to contribute an answer to the patron's own questions. Elsewhere it is more frequently the case that the student is directed toward a source, most commonly an archival series or a statistical 'run'. This source will almost certainly have been recommended either because it is 'workable' (that is, can be manipulated quantatively, or converted into a diagram or map), or else because the professor happens to have access to a micro-edition of it (common in the USA, where access to European holdings is a problem). The salient virtue of the source will be that it is as yet 'unused'; the net effect of all this is a sort of academic variant of the Oklahoma land-grab. Young historians race out across the historical plain, their wagons full of fresh, crisp graph-paper, scrambling for the last remaining plots of 'virgin' territory. Thus are we offered original research.

Whatever answers the student derives from a reading of such material will necessarily depend upon the questions which he or she succeeds in imagining during the course of the research. Since the apprentice historian all too rarely begins with any problem to which an answer is sought, and since, Prof. Elton notwithstanding, it is all but impossible to construct a problem out of a set of documents without some sense of why they were assigned, the usual pattern is to turn for direction to the professor and the professor's own work. In many graduate schools this tendency is reinforced by the student's obligation to take courses from, and to remain in close and dependent contact with their research director.

This is the usual way in which ideas are transmitted in such institutions, but in modern social history an extra dimension has been added. The professor is all too often passing on a model, or a theorem to be tested. As a consequence, the student is being asked to contribute a building-block to some historiographical edifice, the shape of which remains unclear. Here the impact of the new positivism is at its sharpest: each researcher comes to believe in the existence of a 'proper' description of the past and is led to be content with seeing the doctoral thesis, or subsequent book, as a 'contribution' to that description. Proper obeisance is made in the direction of the governing model or method, but little further effort is spent on justifying or explaining the research being undertaken:[57] it is sufficient to have exhausted a source, correlated two or more statistical series, 'thrown light' on a hitherto darkened corner.

A contribution has been made. But to what?

The answer, clearly, is that a contribution is being made to the construction of a historical 'science'. The 'desire for scientific status in the social sciences[58] has captured the latest generation of historians, just as it obsessed their nineteenth-century forebears. The resolute rejection of the idealist and theoretical conceptions of the intervening period has left social historians in something of a quandary. They will not acknowledge anything which smacks of historicist or marxist thinking, yet they scorn the empiricists. They wish to be free to ascribe significance to anything they choose, while retaining a claim for the scientific status of their work. This precludes anything approaching a genuinely theoretical base. Theory has been replaced by discourses upon method.

It is this shift which accounts for the formidable impact upon social history of the post-war school of western sociologists. It is extraordinarily difficult to conceive of some historical method which would have served as a substitute for conceptual thought. The tools of the historian have traditionally been subservient to the intentions informing their use. But a certain sociology *can* place method at the forefront of its investigations, since it takes society as an undifferentiated unit, organised by function or structure. The role of the investigator is that of a taxonomer, and in this role, pre-eminence clearly attaches to the method of description or classification employed. For historians as for sociologists this must presume the non-involved status of the observer. Small surprise, then, that Charles Tilly envies economists because they can agree on their criteria, and bemoans the absence of such agreement among historians. Like other social historians, he appears to accept uncritically the claim that economists and sociologists have value-free criteria, and this credulous attitude is reflected in frequent borrowings.[59]

As a consequence of this enthusiasm for the categories and assumptions of the sociologists, we find the uprising of 1851 accounted for in terms of entrances into and exits from the polity, together with increasing 'social mobilisation'.[60] Social classes are determined by status or 'outlook', while 'normative' factors such as income, property, occupation and so forth become the determinants of social difference. Conflicts are 'resolved', political systems chosen. Change over time is evoked, but never as a factor in any explanation. The only temporal distinction made is that between 'traditional' and 'modern' society; both are equally presented as coherent and rational — the former inherently, (i.e. on its own terms), the latter immanently (i.e. really, and increasingly). New research serves to 'fill in the gaps'. The result will be a proper and complete account of society.

Just why this blind belief in the virtues of attaining a scientific status for history has re-emerged is a very interesting question. The belief clearly dates from the late 1950s, and can thus be linked to the simultaneous enthusiasm for 'scientific' status in the post-sputnik era and the loss of faith in philosophy and history alike. More significantly for our purposes, it was a response to the demands made upon the social sciences to account for the events of the 1960s. Necessarily marginal to this enterprise, historians' best hope was to offer guidelines as to the predictability of certain sorts of unsocial behaviour. The study of revolutions, violence and protest of all kinds came into vogue. Historians who could claim a 'predictive' value for their findings, and who could offer suggestions as to the circumstances in which revolution had been avoided or defeated, were at a premium. History acquired prophylactic qualities, and its practitioners came close to claiming experimental status for their findings.[61] Not surprisingly, such claims could only be made for certain sorts of things — indeed, the demand only existed for claims of a certain kind. For social history to be true social science, it had carefully to eschew the study of a number of phenomena (politics, ideology) — or else so to apply the methods borrowed from the sociologists as to render these phenomena something altogether different. Herein lay the origins of the approach which has now become standard for dealing with politics in general, and with ideology in particular.

There is no place for political ideology in most modern social history, any more than there was in the sociology from which the latter derived. It has proved necessary, however, to acknowledge its existence, both because ideology indisputably existed, and because a properly scientific history ought to be able to account for it. The usual approach has been to defuse its content by a reductionist account of its form. This is achieved by

accounts of the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 conceived in terms of a generation-gap), and then providing the standard account of why young people adopt such extremist stances. This will go a long way, since most revolutionary movements were of necessity composed largely of young persons.[62] The ideas of political women have been defused, too. 'Material' issues, we learn, were the motives behind female participation in strikes and revolts: where women had no material motivation, they were simply out supporting the men for 'familial' reasons. Thus all revolutions which see active female participation are, obviously, by definition, about 'bread and butter' matters.[63] For the rest, they represent either a bad case of collective pathology or else youthful exuberance.

The next step is to place ideology, along with every other dimension of human thinking, in the category of epiphenomena. This daring move dispenses altogether with the need to discuss ideas. We should not be surprised to find Edward Shorter in the forefront of the move to this end. Logic and rationality, he claims,

> are just other words for ego control, the psycho-structural state of mind whence expressive sexuality flows.[64]

The appeal of such an approach is that it both dismisses human thought and employs a properly 'scientific' method as the means to this end — in this case, psychoanalysis. Sometimes in place of Freud we are offered rabbits. Thus Matossian and Schafer reduce the history of wars and revolutions (including the French Revolution) to problems of 'crowding stress'. 1789 was the direct product, we learn, of a demographic explosion, while the ensuing peaks of political violence only tailed off when the population ceased to grow, in 1871. The subtle admixture of socio-biology and bad history is seductive.[65]

Those who choose not to reduce ideas in this manner have instead devised means of defusing their content. Michèle Perrot is a particular offender here, 'reading' strikes with the gay abandon of Barthes deciphering an advertisement for automobiles. It is the 'signs' that count.[66] In skilful hands this is entertaining though not very informative in the end. But left to the drones, it is a device for denying to people in the past any mental independence whatsoever. Peter Stearns has laboured long and hard to show that the late nineteenth-century proletariat was not interested in revolutionary politics; small wonder that he is 'astonished' at the sudden opposition to long work-days which emerged in the 1890s, 'despite their longstanding in the trade'. Had he not been so resolute in denying the workers their ideas (and had he bothered to look), he would not have found the opposition to long hours 'sudden' in the least.[67]

Attitudes of this kind produce histories of 'protest', which are rooted neither in time nor in popular support for an idea or doctrine. The ideas which mobilise social conflict are carefully and altogether divorced from the participants in that same conflict. This offers a double bonus. The significance of ideology is dismissed, since 'modern' social history is not interested in the views of an élite of the oppressed. Furthermore, the common people become, under 'normal' circumstances, stable and passive. Where protest was 'pre-modern', it is classed as atavistic and irrational. When protest has 'modernised' itself, it is usually said to have been organised around an ideology conceived on high and purveyed to the masses by parties and

George Scholz *Industrialised peasants 1920*

leaders. At no point do the peasants and workers themselves, men or women, acquire *any* political identity of their own. They never *chose*, or were politically conscious. They rebelled blindly, or followed a lead.

This is the stuff of scientific history. It is not hard to see how it fitted in with the requirements imposed upon themselves by historians who came to maturity in the early 1960s. But why is so much energy devoted to demonstrating these points? Why

is it so important to deny that popular movements believed what they claimed to believe, wanted what they claimed to want, were made up of rational beings holding the views which they held? It is *not only* denied in order to trim the rough edges of a well-groomed positivist science. If this were so, better just ignore 'protest' altogether.

The answer lies in the unacknowledged challenge to which many social historians are responding. Once the eighteenth-century peasant or the nineteenth-century striker is admitted to be holding the ideas which he or she proclaimed, and given that these ideas are not reduced to psychological illusions, then a whole alternative historical explanation of the past is invoked. It is a defiance of these assumptions which seems to motivate much of the search for a scientific redout.Consciously or no, many social historians are doing battle with the demon marxists.

This is not always obvious. It is relatively rare to read someone within the new orthodoxy contrasting his or her point of view with 'the usual marxist interpretation'. I should add, though, that it is not at all rare for that interpretation to be totally misunderstood.[68] The usual approach is to reject from the outset any 'economic' interpretation of events, on the understanding that 'economic' and 'marxist' are the same thing. Instead we are offered a variety of alternatives, which seem to derive from the theories of Max Weber. The extent to which these function as attempts to circumnavigate all marxist reefs and sandbanks, may be deduced from their concern to avoid any reference to social *class*. When Charles Tilly writes of people entering or leaving the polity he is juggling with concepts of *status*; power confers prestige, social conflict is a result of attempts to smash 'open the door of the polity to some contender hitherto excluded'. The result of the conflict is seen as a re-arrangement of the social hierarchy. In a similar manner, Joan Scott invokes traditional 'culture' and social ties to account for the behaviour of Carmaux glass-workers. In her work with Louise Tilly considerable energy goes into the effort to avoid the use of class as a determinant in the economic position of women

Ben Shahn *The Terwilligers, Ozark family, Arkansas, 1935*

workers.[69] Where women come to occupy a very particular place in capitalist production, as in the lower-paid sections of the textile industry, we are assured by Patricia Branca that this was because men got out in search of better paid work, while women 'saw less reason to change'.[70] The passive voice and the abstract noun are here invoked most frequently in order to avoid the suggestion of exploitation, or of human intervention of a class-based nature. Thus we learn with Louise Tilly that authority 'is wielded', production 'grows', new opportunities 'open' for women. . . . [71] All under the aegis of a neutral 'society'. Cultural and ascriptive values form the basis of Sewell's over-rated work on Marseilles, where he appears bemused by the workers' sons' apparent lack of interest in 'upward mobility'. Had any of these authors, Sewell especially, chosen to ask themselves whether class consciousness and the capitalist system of production helped to account for the things they describe, their explanations would have been both more plausible and more properly historical. As it is they sit somewhere in the stratosphere, uprooted in reality.[72]

The fear of marxism engenders much confusion. When the term 'social class' is employed, it is divorced from any relationship to a mode of production, and becomes a mere ascriptive category, interchangeable with any other. Economic history is quite ignored, and, with it, the very word 'capitalist', so that it is not just Marx who is jettisoned, but whole schools of conservative economic historians with him. What remains is a painfully vapid account of the human condition, in which the central experience in people's lives is consigned to a secondary status.

Even social histories of work itself convey a a somewhat hydraulic sensation as if floating free of the thing described. This is because however accurate their description of the techniques of production and the proletarian experience of same, such histories avoid any account of the social formations contingent upon a particular mode of production. Thus such work might as well be about the natives of North Borneo for all that it relates to a genuine historical experience. Indeed, the suggestion is apt, since the emphasis is precisely upon a *static description*, which is inferred from the formal content of the work process and related events. This is more anthropology than history; with all the anthropologist's relative lack of concern for the dynamic of temporal change. The anthropologist, however, has at least been there and could question the protagonists. The resolutely anti-marxist historian merely second-guesses the participants, his subjects: they cannot answer back, when their intentions and experiences are being confidently re-interpreted or ignored. Such writing has a distinctly 'alienated' air to it. Things keep 'happening' to people in the past for no very good reason, while the victims of history so described become mere ciphers, their actions either 'irrational' because out of step with the times, or else 'rational' but devoid of thought-content. The target is marxism, but the real losers are men and women in the past, who are as determined by this view as ever they were by the schemas of dialectical materialists. At least the latter allowed the revolutionary class a passing claim to ideological intervention.

In France this denial of history has in some respects gone a step further. Fernand Braudel's own work has a certain panache to it, but the broader impact of his teachings has been negative. Scholars have adopted the long sweep(*longue durée*) on the one hand, and rejected 'events' (*histoire évenementielle*) on the other, and have steadily dismantled the historical event altogether. One result of this is a glut of articles about minute and marginal matters: the 'history of footwear' or the 'image of the cooked in pre-modern mentalities', . . . There has even been an attempt

to demolish the fact of the French Revolution, integrating it into the long sweep of the popular (and therefore unpolitical) experience.[73]

There is not space here to consider in depth the intellectual environment in which social historians have by-passed economic history and thereby dodged the contest with marxism. It should be noted, however, that all this reflects rather well the denial of class and ideology which characterised much of American social thought from the mid-1960s. It would be very misleading to suppose that these were the views of the political Right. On the contrary: not merely did the 'old' Left lose faith; the new Left of the 1960s openly denied objective social and economic categories, and claimed the right to identify itself just as it chose and with whomsoever it wished. The individual rather than the class became the revolutionary 'unit', and occupational or subjective 'strata', such as students or intellectuals, became the collective nouns for such units. The old marxist conception of revolution was retained, but a very different and quite unrelated set of subjects was attached to it. Small wonder, then, that the next generation of social historians lost their way. Some retained their interest in the sexual revolution — Shorter unabashedly replaced the capitalist economy with sexual liberation as the generator of proletarian revolt —[74] but most proceeded to a new academic detachment, retaining the distaste for the classical accounts of social relations, but unable to find any satisfactory replacements for them.

Out of all this has come a marked failure to separate the past from the present. A disturbing number of modern social historians patently construct their historical explanations from the material provided for them by their own lives and those of their neighbours. To the extent that they avoid the private sphere, they nevertheless depend very heavily upon the political world they have themselves experienced.[75] Here, as so often, it is the newer fields of interest that suffer most. Scott and Tilly assure us that 'traditional families employed a variety of strategies to promote the well-being of the family unit'.[76] All that this can possibly mean is that for most of human history men and women did everything they could to keep from starving and to prevent the break-up of their families. But the phrasing chosen speaks reams about the authors' conception of choice and economic action. Prof. Branca, arguing that the late 19th century saw the 'modernisation' of the age-old 'mobility through marriage theme' (!), suggests that one reason why women entered secretarial work was the hope of marrying an 'up-and-coming young executive'.[77] No doubt they would happily have returned to the textile factories to which they felt such traditional affinity, had there but been some executives prowling the shop floor in search of proletarian wives! It is hard to tell whether it is the pulp novel, or biography which accounts for this sort of twaddle. Both make bad history.

The emphasis, it will be observed, is again and again on the individual, 'an isolated actor in the economy hell-bent on maximising his own profit'.[78] This may be a fair and proper description of the professor in search of promotion and obliged to publish just about anything in order to obtain it, but it has little to say to the experience of most Europeans in the 19th century. It is absurd to write of people exercising 'strategies of family fertility' in search of a place in the sun. Like theories of rising expectation, relative deprivation and so forth, such accounts assume intention, frustrated or otherwise, on the part of individuals. Never is there any sense of people acting together, or for motives which transcend the maximisation of private or family wealth. This would be poor stuff if it had been written

about the history of the industrial bourgeoisie. As an interpretation of popular behaviour it is risible. The sad conclusion is that the modern social historian is obsessed with material motives and impersonal causality. How ironic that it should be the marxists alone among social historians who remain openly interested in ideals and non-material concerns!

V

The present-minded character of the interpretations, the search for 'scientific' status, the refusal to recognise the significance of ideas or politics, the ignorance of the economic (except in so far as it can be tabulated) — all this represents a complete loss of faith in history. Traditional modes of historical understanding are scorned, alternative approaches praised unstintingly. Thus Theodore Zeldin's two-volume *Oxford History of Modern France* is everywhere offered as the acme of modern social history; yet it is a fundamentally wrong-headed work, albeit entertainingly written.[79] Social history, as I suggested earlier, has been transformed into a sort of retrospective cultural anthropology.

It is a very significant development. Traditional political history continues on its untroubled way, describing in detail the behaviour of ruling classes and the transformations which took place within them. Divorced from social history, this remains, as ever, a form of historical writing adapted to the preservation of the status quo; it concerns itself with activities peculiar to the ruling group, activities of an apparently rational and self-justifying nature. In earlier days first labour history, then social history appeared a threat to all this, if only by providing alternative and less complacent accounts of political events themselves. The impact of the work of Georges Lefebvre or Albert Soboul upon our understanding of the *political* revolution in France provides an excellent instance of this.

But social history is now being disarmed. Deprived of its claims upon the major events and changes in history, it is increasingly confined by its leading practitioners to descriptions of the non-political, the avowedly insignificant. This is thoroughly disturbing. There is no analogy here with the process whereby labour history ceased to be obsessed with unions and began looking at workers themselves. The interest remained political, and the political history of a labouring class was enriched thereby. Modern social historians, in contrast, are encouraged to scrabble around among the oddments. From these they fashion accounts of subjects, such as women at work or the changing nature of the family economy, which deserved better. Meanwhile the political history of the ruling class has survived unscathed the threat to its hegemony of interpretation in those things that matter, rather in the way that an international corporation will grant a degree of workers' control on the shop-floor, smiling the while, in the knowledge that this is not where the true power lies. In both instances attention is deflected away from those areas, concern with which had posed the initial threat.

It cannot be said that the social historians of the last two decades have fought very hard to avoid this situation. On the contrary, Stearns and others have been in the vanguard of the battle to deny to men and women in the past any political existence whatsoever. The result has been to take away from people in the past the central distinguishing characteristic of a properly human and civil society. Small wonder, then, that biological analogies are so frequently to be glimpsed in the pages

of journals of social history. The urge to anthropologise history is part of this same denial, and I cannot make the point better than by quoting from a recent review of some books on the Paris Commune:

> From an anthropological perspective, the Commune was a 'revitalisation movement' with a strong messianic component. It sought to maintain the integrity of the local community by expelling those forces, symbolised by the priests, who opposed its fraternal and egalitarian ideals.[80]

What is to be done? The solution, if there is one, lies with that minority of social historians who remain committed to the proper pursuit of history. We cannot hope to 'convince' the rest of the profession of what we believe; to begin with, it would be rather odd to proclaim a 'truth' status for our own ideas, to step in to do battle against the 'scientific' claims of the opposition. The study of the past is an entirely cerebral activity — it has been well said that it takes place 'in the present and in the head'.[81] But this need not lead to a position of infinite relativism. The distinction between good and bad history can be established. Radical social historians should have the courage to proclaim abroad, in articles and reviews, that a particular book, or the premise on which it is founded, is unscholarly, stupid, or historically illiterate. There are so many naked academic princelings[82] striding the groves these days that some public comment as to their appearance is long overdue.

The next task is undoubtedly that of re-emphasising, on every occasion, the primacy of politics. It will no longer do to accept a study of workers or revolutionaries which denies them their ideas and their ideals, on the grounds that the author 'does a careful and competent job within the limits he has set himself', etc., etc. This acknowledges the plausibility of the enterprise and adds a few pounds more to the burden supported by those who reject such history.

Many otherwise well-intentioned writers shy clear of proclaiming the need for a return to political hsitory on the principle of solidarity. Social history, they suggest, is still such an infant discipline that we shall all suffer if we are seen to be divided. This sort of view has a long pedigree; it is of a kind with the response of Jean-Paul Sartre to the news of Stalin's crimes. Keep it under wraps, he counselled — *'Il ne faut pas désésperer Billancourt'*.[83] The same line has been offered to silence criticism of some of the shoddy work produced in the name of women's history — yet the implication is surely that second-best fields get second-best work, and we should be grateful and shut up. In every case it is a bad mistake: the result is Gresham's Law, applied to the writing of history — the bad writing survives and edges out the good.

A return to the centrality of politics, properly understood, will bring in its train a recognition of the full identity of people in the past. Real people, with opinions of their own, will re-emerge from the heaps of taxonomological wool under which they have been buried. One side-benefit of this might be a reduction in the level of loose thinking and bad writing associated with that sort of impersonal history. One hopes that the time will come when no-one will publish sentences like the following, which contains most of the follies I have attacked:

> A case can be made that exposure to the modern sector at least sensitizes the population to the values of individual self-development and precipitates a readiness to experiment with new life styles and personality configurations, which then leads to action, should all other things be equal.[84]

No history can live through immersion in prose like that, matted with abstractions and heavy with the perfume of benevolent anachronism. Historians who write like this cannot discuss real people, yet they have neither the clarity, nor the conceptual range, to theorise.

One should not be over-sanguine. A return to the study of politics and ideology, a willingness to criticise and condemn where appropriate, an improvement in the level of scholarship and literacy are none of them very likely in the near future. Newcomers (the history of women, the history of the family) might yet force some rethinking on the profession, in order to avoid being stillborn. But that, too, is unlikely. The pessimistic prognosis is much the more realistic. We are witnessing the slow strangulation of social history, watching while a high fever is diagnosed as blooming good health. If the deity who watches over the profession did indeed desire the death of the past, what better way than to drive its high priests mad? It is quite disconcerting to be associated with this scene of progressive dementia. Now is truly a bad time to be a social historian.

This article has benefited greatly from the help and advice of other historians. Geoff Eley originally suggested the theme to me, and I have discussed it in the interval with David Crew, Bill Hagen, Patrice Higonnet, Ray Jonas and Gareth Stedman Jones in particular. They and others have made acute and occasionally critical suggestions and provided valuable references. I also learned a lot about social history from the graduate and undergraduate participants in a seminar on the subject, held in Cambridge in 1978. I owe a particular debt of acknowledgement to Patricia Hilden, who first opened my eyes to the need for women's history and the defects in much of current writing on this and other topics. The article owes a lot to her critical advice, although neither she nor anyone else should be held responsible for the views expressed in it.

1 As will no doubt become clear, this article reflects a number of strongly held and somewhat personal views, and it thus lacks much of the 'detachment' commonly associated with academic history writing. Not everyone would agree that these are bad times for social historians, and it would be ungracious of me to fail to mention the extent to which some very good social history is currently being produced. In England the pages of *Social History* and *History Workshop Journal* have contained some seminal contributions on the family economy, German women and so forth. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* and *Mouvement Social* (in particular) have published representative examples of the very best of continental social history. The text of this piece makes clear just how highly I rate the work of Maurice Agulhon, for instance, and one could add the names of Rolande Trempé, E.P. Thompson, Yves Lequin, Temma Kaplan and Nathalie Zemon Davis to a random (and long) list of historians who elicit respect. There is, too, a whole new generation of historians of Britain, men and women with whose work I am insufficiently acquainted to offer either deserved praise or well-merited condemnation. My theme, then, is not that things are all bad, but rather that the dross has risen rather disturbingly to the surface (to mix a metaphor). It is time to condemn the shoddy work of the people discussed in this article, and this must result in a piece of polemic, rather than a carefully weighed discussion of the state of the art. In adopting this approach I run the risk of appearing to condemn wholesale where in fact I wish to offer encouragement to others who share my views. There is also the danger that I may appear arrogant and aggressive in tone. For this I apologise in advance to the reader. If a muted tone had the effect of reducing the force of the critique, and I fear this might be the case, then it is better to run the risk of being thought somewhat overwrought. Amid the chatter and hum of academic discourse, it sometimes helps to shout if you really wish to be heard.

2 It may even be doubted whether any theory can be directly associated with the works of Charles Tilly and his disciples, although theirs is the dominant influence in many areas. With Tilly we are in the presence of an intellectual maverick (perhaps magpie would be a sharper characterisation), extraordinarily adept at gathering and applying data and methods from a wide range of ideological positions. A careful reading of the collected works fails to reveal anything approaching a coherent 'Tillyism', unless it be the repeated and indiscriminate use of [illegible] categories and their application to the past.

3 I have in mind in particular the following: *Annales Economies-Sociétés-Civilisations* (cited here as *Annales ESC*); *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (cited as *CSSH*); *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (*JIH*); *Journal of Social History* (*JSH*); and, occasionally, *Past and Present*.

4 Peter Stearns, *The Impact of the Industrial Revolution*, New Jersey 1972, p.6.

5 David Apter, *Some Conceptual Approaches to the Study of Modernisation*, New Jersey 1968, p.243. See also the article by D.C. Tipps, 'Modernisation theory and the study of national societies: a critical perspective', *CSSH*, vol. 15 no. 0, 1973, pp.199-226.

6 The usual assumption seems to be that 'traditional' covers the years 1500-1750, 'modern' everything since!

7 See L.E. Shiner, 'Tradition/Modernity: an ideal type gone astray', *CSSH*, vol. 17 no. 2, 1975, p.249. Note the implication that a modern society is one where revolutions ('internal challenges') do not succeed.

8 Charles Tilly, *The Vendée*, Harvard 1964, pp.13, 17, 37. Note too the comments on pp.24-5.

9 Karen Offen, 'Commentary on papers by Boxer et al.', *Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the Western Society for French History 1974*, Austin, Texas 1975, pp.204-7.

10 Peter Stearns, *Lives of Labor*, New York 1975, p.335.

11 William H. Sewell, 'Social Mobility in a nineteenth-century city. Some findings and implications', *JIH*, vol. VII no. 2, 1976, pp.217-33 (see p.228).

12 This view informs all Professor Branca's work. See *Silent Sisterhood*, London 1975, especially ch. 8; also 'A new perspective on women's work: a comparative typology', *JSH*, vol. IX 1975, pp.129-53; and *Women in Europe since 1750*, London 1978, the subject of a very critical review in *Social History*.

13 Offen, 'Commentary on papers by Boxer', p.204.

14 Edward Shorter, 'Illegitimacy, Sexual Revolution and Social Change in Modern Europe', *JIH*, vol. II no. 2, 1971, pp.237-73 (especially p.250). In the same article (p.246) we learn that 'Hit and run illegitimacy typified a period when young people swooned romantically through a social landscape of disorder and flux'. Why — you would think he meant the 1960s!

15 David E. Apter, 'Radicalisation and Embourgeoisement: some hypotheses for a comparative study of history', *JIH*, vol. I, no. 2, 1971, pp.265-305 (see p.269).

16 See the comments by R. Laurent in 'Droite et Gauche de 1789 à nos jours', *Actes du Colloque du Montpellier juin 1973*, Montpellier 1975, p.19.

17 On the application of 'forces' and 'pressures', see Ted Margadant, 'Peasant protest in the Second Republic', *JIH*, vol. V, no. 1, 1974, pp.119-131 (review article). Note Tilly's use of the abstract-for-concrete in 'The Changing Place of Collective Violence', in M. Richter (ed.), *Essays in Theory and History*, Harvard 1970, pp.139-65, where he speaks of France 'transforming' herself etc. (p.139). The comment on modernisation comes from Tipps, 'Modernisation theory', p.199.

18 Shorter, 'Illegitimacy', p.247.

19 See Branca, 'A new perspective', pp.135, 138-40. Also Joan Scott and Louise Tilly, 'Women's work and the family in nineteenth-century Europe', *CSSH*, vol. 17 no. 1, 1975, pp.36-64 (see p.54 especially).

20 I use the term 'boxes' advisedly! One of the most overblown but influential contributions to social history in recent years was the book by Neil Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution*, London 1969. In this work, Smelser speaks often of his analytical categories, or 'boxes', into which the data is to be inserted. In the introduction we are warned that some of these boxes may, and should, remain empty! But how can we take seriously a 'historian' who can write, with reference to nineteenth-century England, of 'symptoms of disturbance in the form of "unjustified" negative emotional reactions and "unrealistic" aspirations on the part of various elements in the social system'? (p.15).

21 Peter Stearns, 'Coming of Age', *JSH*, vol. X no. 2, 1976, pp.246-55 (see p.250). Stearns really is something of a phenomenon. His work is shoddy (see the many errors in *Lives of Labor*, not all of them attributable to a careless publisher), his approach falling somewhat short of the standards of subtlety his renown might lead one to expect. In this same article he attacks Edward Thompson, though not by name, for ending his *Making of the English Working Class* in the year 1832. Stearns attributes this to an unreasoning concern for traditional chronology. Had he but understood the work in question, he would see clearly the relationship between the social history of the English working class and their developing consciousness, and the effect of the achievements and failings of the Reform Act. In *Lives of Labor*, Stearns is so concerned to show how good things were getting for the proletariat that he actually suggests (pp.338-9) that the piece-rate was favoured by workers, as a means of raising their pay. He includes sources such as the *Statistique des Grèves* in his bibliography; had he actually *used* them he would know, as does anyone acquainted with the subject or period, that piece-rates were abhorred and were a very common target of strikes. Notwithstanding all this, Peter Stearns has pretensions: in *The Impact of the Industrial Revolution* he recommends to the reader two 'general studies of industrialisation' — *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, by Barrington Moore, and *European Society in Upheaval*, by... Peter N. Stearns!

22 See the pertinent comments on this theme by E.F. and E.D. Genovese, 'The political crisis of social history', *JSH* vol. X no. 2, 1976, pp.205-21; also Sanford Elwitt, 'Politics and Ideology in the French Labour Movement', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 49 no. 3, 1977, pp.468-80 (review article).

23 Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, Princeton 1975, p.635.

24 Elizabeth Pleck 'Two Worlds in One', *JSH*, vol. X no. 2, 1976, pp.178-96 (see p.187).

25 See E.F. and E.D. Genovese, 'The political crisis of social history', p.212. Also Gareth Stedman Jones, 'From historical sociology to theoretical history', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. XXVII no. 3, 1976, pp.295-306. This brief piece is one of the sharpest contributions to the debate surrounding the character of the new social history, and my own thinking owes to it a considerable debt.

26 See E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Labor History and Ideology', *JSH*, vol. VII no. 4, 1973, pp.371-82. The historiography of revolutions is immense. The reader wishing to find a way through the maze could usefully begin with John Dunn's *Modern Revolutions*, Cambridge 1972. There seems to me to be nothing worth learning in the works of Gurr, Tilly, Chalmers Johnson, or any other practitioners of the study of 'violence', 'internal war' etc. This can be confirmed, for example, by a comparison between the works of the French historian Maurice Agulhon on the one hand, and Tilly and the rest on the other, on the French revolution of 1848 and the ensuing republic.

27 See R.P. and P.K. Baker, 'Actions Speak Louder than Words but What do they Say? An essay on working class language and politics in early twentieth-century France', *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, no. 3, 1975, pp.402-11. On p.406 we learn this: 'The tracts from the Halluin strike thus allow us to read within their words two different message levels at once; on the one hand, a narrative relational level with close ties to the gestures of the workers themselves, a combined analog-digital level of desire, refusal and ideological goal; on the other hand a purely digital propositional message level designed to assist in the outside world, a level of demand, negation, and limited goal.'

28 Peter N. Stearns, 'Coming of Age', p.249.

29 M. Matossian and W.D. Schafer, 'Family, fertility and political violence', *JSH*, vol. XI no. 2, 1977, pp.137-78 (see p.170).

30 Michèle Perrot, 'The strengths and weaknesses of French social history', *JSH*, vol. X no. 2, 1976, pp.166-77 (see p.166).

31 Professional statisticians have known this all along — a mathematical economist at Stanford recently explained to me that the 'calculations' in a book by one of the better-known 'new' social historians demonstrated precisely nothing. The problem is partly that historians are not mathematicians, partly that their data is very often insufficient and ill-adapted to genuine statistical manipulation. Where these caveats do not apply, it is frequently because the subject and approach were chosen in order for this to be so — hardly a plausible basis for good history.

32 Perrot, 'The strengths and weaknesses of French social history', p.172.

33 Margadant, 'Peasant protest', p.123.

34 For an example of the mindless accumulation of data on domestic servants, see Theresa McBride, 'Social Mobility for the Lower Class: Domestic Servants in France', *JSH*, vol. VIII 1974, pp.63-78; on the enumeration of eye colour in early nineteenth-century France, see P.A. Clour and J. Hondaille, 'La couleur des yeux à l'époque du Ie Empire', *Annales ESC*, vol. XXXI no. 4, 1976. I am indebted to Ray Jonas for calling my attention to this path-breaking piece.

35 R.M. Bell, 'The transformation of a rural village: Istria 1870-1972', *JSH*, vol. VII no. 3, 1973, pp.243-71 (see pp.262-3). Bell seems very confused; on p.251 'work' appears to be the modernising factor and determinant, yet four pages later we learn that a yardstick for

measuring the 'presence of the framework of modern life' is the absence of seasonal cycles of birth, marriage and death.

36 Apter, *Some Conceptual Approaches*, p.6.

37 Matossian and Schafer, 'Family, fertility and political violence', p.138.

38 See for example Charles Tilly and Edward Shorter, *Strikes in France*, Cambridge 1974.

39 Apter, 'Radicalisation and Embourgeoisement', p.265.

40 Charles Tilly, 'The Changing Place of Collective Violence', pp.157-8; Charles, Louise and Richard Tilly, *The Rebellious Century*, Harvard 1975, pp.68ff.

41 Shiner, 'Tradition/Modernity', p.245.

42 Matossian and Schafer, 'Family, fertility and political violence', pp.154-60. The chart is on p.167. It is astouding to think that any historians, however aesthetically impoverished their souls, would ransack works of literature for evidence as to quantifiable familial attitudes.

43 Some good points are made in a review article by J.C. Scott, 'Peasant Revolution, a Dismal Science', *Comparative Politics*, vol. IX no. 2, 1977, pp.231-48.

44 See various articles by Harvey Smith on the subject of rural protest in Languedoc, in *JIH*, vol. V no. 3, 1975, and *Past and Present*, no. 79, 1978. See also J. Sagnes, 'Le mouvement de 1907 en Languedoc-Roussillon', *Mouvement Social*, no. 104, 1978.

45 Scott and Tilly, 'Women's work and the family'.

46 The work currently being undertaken by Patricia Hilden on the relationship between working conditions, political organisation and the growth of class consciousness among women textile workers in the Nord should make a substantial dent in our ignorance.

47 See Stedman Jones, 'From historical sociology to theoretical history', p.299.

48 Apter, *Some Conceptual Approaches*, p.2.

49 One could hardly make this particular criticism of Lawrence Stone, who nevertheless manages to say some very bizarre things in his recent book, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, London 1977. Here the problem is one of sources — Stone infers from material relating to one social class whole attitudes and beliefs with respect to other, lower classes. Like Branca with her manipulation of 'advice manuals', the critical approach to the material is all too often suspended in favour of its use as 'neutral' information.

50 Shorter, 'Illegitimacy', p.240.

51 Louise Tilly, 'The Food Riot as a form of Political Conflict in France', *JIH*, vol. II no. 1, 1971, pp.23-59 (see p.25).

52 See J.D. Post, *The Last Great Subsistence Crisis*, Baltimore 1977.

53 Scott and Tilly, 'Women's work and the family', p.63.

54 Branca, 'A new perspective', p.131. Naturally, the figures vary according to time and place. In those parts of France and Belgium where factories existed by, say, 1870, women represented a large minority (often over 40%) of the work-force; in certain industries — tobacco, textiles — they were in the majority. Elsewhere, the *apparently* agricultural occupations of women is misleading; seasonal work in cottage or factory was very frequent. Only by the absurdly misleading device of investigating Versailles, or parts of London, would anyone think that women were predominantly domestics or not gainfully employed. I am indebted to Patricia Hilden for confirming these points from her own research.

55 The use of slippery terms is very frequent. Branca is particularly guilty of this, but there are many others. A recent article by George D. Sussman on 'The Glut of Doctors in Mid-Nineteenth-century France', *CSSH*, vol. XIX no. 3, 1977, pp.287-305, proclaims its intention of avoiding a discussion of whether there were too many doctors — 'in some senses there was and in some senses there were not'; instead we are to be offered a 'statistical' (ah!) account of why the proposition was felt to be true. After twenty pages of figures the author concludes with the startling observation that, faced with the choice between 'socialised medicine' and professional protectionism, the doctors 'on the whole' chose the latter. Who, as they say, would have thought it?

56 See Marilyn Boxer, 'Socialism faces Feminism: the failure of Synthesis in France, 1879-1914', in M. Boxer & J. Quataert (eds.), *Socialist Women* New York 1978, pp.75-112. This collection is a monument to the impossibility of writing women's social history by reference to 'famous women'. It is also informed by a hopeless misunderstanding of the history of socialism itself, as in Professor Boxer's reproduction of the cliché which says that marxism 'failed' in France because it was a foreign and alien ideology, ill-adapted to the essentially 'reformist' French socialism, etc, etc. (see p.106).

57 Not infrequently, a problematic *does* exist at the outset, but is ignored and eventually displaced by the application of a quite inappropriate method of answering it. Thus Marilyn

Boxer makes a nonsense of her study of French socialism's failure to deal with the woman question, since she offers an essentially *intellectual* response to a social question. See M. Boxer, 'Socialism faces Feminism in France 1879-1913', PhD thesis, University of California, Riverside 1975.

58 R.T. Vann, 'The Rhetoric of Social History', *JSH*, vol. X no. 2, 1976, pp.221-37 (see p.224).

59 Tilly, 'The Formation of National States', p.604.

60 Tilly, 'The Changing Place of Collective Violence', p.143; Margadant, 'Peasant Protest', p.126 (where 'social mobilisation' is in its turn accounted for by expanding communications networks).

61 For examples of the obsession with predictability, see Tilly, 'The Formation of National States', p.40, and Matossian and Schafer, 'Family fertility and political violence', pp.138, 183. It was in these circumstances that certain sociologists turned historians acquired vast sums of public and private money for the purchase of research materials, and it was out of such an atmosphere that was born the programme at Carnegie-Mellon University, run by Peter Stearns and concerned with 'Applied History and Social Sciences'. Its credo runs thus: 'Historical training in combination with statistics, economics, psychology, sociology and political science offers a unique vantage point for identifying social problems and formulating relevant policies ... Our graduates, with their interdisciplinary knowledge, offer the essential tools for dealing with multi-dimensional social problems.'

62 See Apter, *Some Conceptual Approaches*, p.243.

63 William Reddy argues that linen-weaving women supported strikes involving their husbands on familial grounds. This is simply untrue, as any survey of the details of strikes in the textile industry will confirm. See W. Reddy, 'Family and Factory: French linen weavers in the Belle Epoque', *JSH*, vol. VIII no. 4, 1974, pp.102-12. I am grateful to Patricia Hilden for confirmation of this point with respect to strikes in Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing in the years 1890-1910.

64 Shorter, 'Illegitimacy', p.252. It is hard to imagine anyone taking the author of such twaddle seriously, but they do. An article by J. Michael Phayer, 'Lower Class Morality, the case of Bavaria', *JSH*, vol. VIII, 1974, pp.79-95, depends heavily on Shorter's work, as does Branca. From Phayer we learn that 'The new moral attitudes and behavior constitute the earliest historical signs of class diversification and class consciousness'! (p.86).

65 Matossian and Schafer, 'Family, fertility and political violence', p.169.

66 See Michèle Perrot, *Les Ouvriers en Grève 1871-90*, Paris 1974, 2 vols.

67 Stearns, *Lives of Labor*, p.3.

68 Offen, 'Commentary on papers by Boxer', p.205.

69 See Joan Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux*, Harvard 1974, and Scott and Tilly, 'Women's work and the family', p.64.

70 Branca, 'A new perspective', p.142.

71 Louise Tilly, 'The Social Sciences and the Study of Women', *CSSH*, vol. XX no. 1, 1978, pp.163-73 (review article).

72 Sewell, 'Social Mobility', p.230. See also W.H. Sewell, 'Social change and the rise of working-class politics in nineteenth-century Marseille', *Past and Present*, no. 65, 1974, pp.75-110.

73 See F. Furet and D. Richet, *La Révolution Francaise*, Paris 1965-6, 2 vols. As the Genoveses well note, the modern Annalists have quite forgotten Bloch's emphasis on narrative as well as analysis, and they have allowed their theories and methods to upstage the historical process itself; see 'The political crisis of social history', p.207.

74 Shorter, 'Illegitimacy', p.248.

75 See for example Margadant on 1851, which he sees as the 'culmination of a anticipatory crisis in the polity ('Peasant protest', p.128). This is a particularly transparent transposition of the experiences and explanations derived from our own lifetime into the behaviour of people in other lands at other times.

76 Scott and Tilly, 'Women's work and the family', p.50.

77 Branca, 'A new perspective', p.145.

78 Shorter (who else!), 'Illegitimacy', p.249.

79 Theodore Zeldin, *France 1848-1945*, Oxford 1973 and 1978, 2 vols. At the risk of being accused of reactionary and myopic responses, I affirm the view occasionally hinted at in reviews of Dr Zeldin's book that it is, put simply, bad history. Well-informed, ... conceived, but bad. We lear[illegible]

odd consequence is that all Dr Zeldin's efforts come to nil. In a rather different constellation we are being offered the most traditional of all history writing — a lengthy compendium of 'one damn thing after another.'

80 Ted Margadant, 'The Paris Commune, a revolution that failed', *JIH*, vol. VII no. 1, 1976, pp.91-7 (review article). It is perfectly proper to employ anthropological approaches in their place — Annie Kriegel does a brilliant job with them in her study of *Les Communistes Français*, Paris 1968. But here the method has been deliberately selected in view of the author's theoretical grasp of the subject matter. Professor Kriegel believes that the PCF operates both structure and in certain static and functionalist ways — hence her choice of a certain model of analysis. But I have yet to read a plausible suggestion as to why we should 'read' the Paris Commune in this manner.

81 Stedman Jones, 'From historical sociology to theoretical history', p.296.

82 I would not wish to be thought sexist in my use of metaphors — there are some pub women, too. But what is the feminine form of the diminutive 'princeling'?

83 'We must not disillusion Billancourt'. Boulogne-Billancourt is the suburb of Paris which houses the massive Renault car works, a stronghold of the French communist party and its trade union affiliate, the Confédération général du travail.

84 Shorter, 'Illegitimacy', p.249.

REVIEW

a journal of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations

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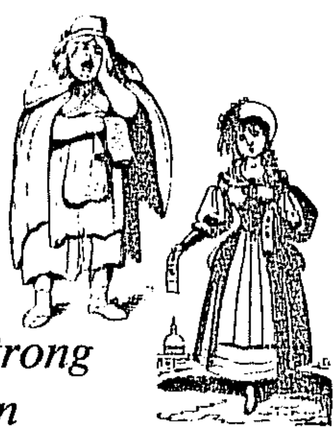
Some Reflections on the English Folk Revival



by Frankie Armstrong and Brian Pearson

The dream of a truly popular culture, a culture of and for the people, has been a deep-rooted one for socialist artists. And of all the attempts to create the framework for such a culture, the folk revival seems by far the most successful. Its repertoire has been created by the 'common people' themselves. Organised by enthusiasts in their spare time, it has few impressarios and receives no subsidies from the authorities. It appears to be the model that we have all been waiting for and yet in many ways it is seriously flawed. This article is less an attempt to document the history of this simultaneous success and failure than a consideration of some of the contradictions that characterise the revival today. However, in order to do this it is necessary at least to sketch in the background.

The roots of the revival are too complex to untangle here. In some ways, it was a child of the trad jazz revival and the associated skiffle craze. During the 1950s, a disenchantment with the banalities of pre-rock commercial music impelled many to look for more satisfying alternatives. The influence of British pioneers, notably Ewan MacColl and A.L. Lloyd, mingled with that of American groups, such as the Weavers. From its very beginnings, the revival was far from a unified movement.

After slowly gathering momentum during the '50s, the new movement surged ahead rapidly in the early 1960s. For its physical base it developed the folk club, an institution unique to these islands, housed almost without exception in the back rooms of a pub. Run by enthusiasts with no thought of commercial profit, the folk club concept has proved very durable, filling an empty niche in what is traditionally the social meeting place for the community. The pub room has given the revival a secure base from which to operate, available at minimal cost and located just where people customarily go to relax. It is impossible to over-emphasise the importance of the pub, for good or ill, in shaping the British revival. The absence of a comparable institution in the USA, for example, accounts for many of the differences in the history of the folksong movement in the two countries.

It is probably fair to say that almost all the early revivalists were intent on creating what might be called a popular 'peoples' music. Unfortunately, there was less than perfect agreement as to exactly what this entailed. To some the important thing was simply to get people singing and creating their own entertainment. Little concerned with matters of repertoire or style, they sang anything that could vaguely be considered a folk song from any part of the world, using whatever musical approach seemed most natural or easiest. They cared little for standards and were cheerfully contemptuous of theory. Participation was the thing to aim for. Others

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ductive activity only relatively recently, use the word in the social science sense for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; for the more distant past, "work" is more often used to describe productive activity requiring physical effort. The increasing separation and differentiation of exchange and use production in the nineteenth century gradually moved much of women's work, in the looser historical sense, out of the category of work in the social science sense. In order to talk about changes in women's work over time, more rigorous definitions, words, categories are needed. Similarly with the concept or category of politics. If politics is conceived at the formal level and at the center of the nation state, women enter the political arena only when they are demanding rights in that arena, and then act in it. This largely leaves women out of politics. Politics must be reconceptualized so we can talk about the politics of those without formal rights. Using new categories or definitions is not willful obfuscation or blithe innovation: it comes out of a serious effort at conceptualization. Similarly, quantified analysis of sources not rich or full enough to inform on the individual level gives us a handle for studying many people who otherwise would be absent from history. It is part of the historian's mission.

University of Michigan

"Clowns in Regal Purple" – A Response

Edward Shorter

I feel like some poor devil who's just broken out of prison. Now that I'm out at last I've gotten to experiment with researching the age at menarche, women's attitudes towards their bodies, why they have sex, and all that interesting stuff. All of a sudden I feel this hand on my shoulder. "OK pal. Got you at last. Back inside." It's Tony Judt.

Come on, Tony! Do we really have to go back to the Workers' Struggle? After a long blast at us as scholarly incompetents, disingenuous conservatives, and brainless quantifiers, we learn who Judt's real heroes are, "that minority of social historians who remain committed to the proper pursuit of history." They are people such as Eugene and Betsy Genovese, Albert Soboul, Rolande Trempé and E.P. Thompson, all worthy historians of course, but all old-line marxists. They made their reputations writing about Worker's Struggle. What Judt wants us to do now is abandon the new directions in which we've tried to move, directions concerning how patterns of intimate everyday life have shifted over the centuries, and go back to writing the history of the union

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Sleight-of-hand number 1: The "incompetence" of the New Social Historians. The *apparent* argument is that the field has attracted many mediocre minds who make lots of mistakes, flaunt a bottomless ignorance about real life, and generally threaten to drag down the tone of the profession. I am, for example, charged with knowing nothing of Europe before 1500, which is true. Louise Tilly and Joan Scott are charged with not knowing how little distance a male worker's wage carried his family in the nineteenth century, which is probably false. The real argument Judt wishes to make, however, is that we social historians are incompetent because we've misrecognized the real motives behind (a) the participation of powerless groups, such as women and blacks, in collective action at those times when they do participate, and (b) misrecognized what's going on in their minds at those times when they don't. If we argue, for example, that women took part in strikes basically because they wanted more money for their families, or that peasants didn't take part in revolts because they were uninterested in that particular political ebb-and-flow, we're charged with denying "to people in the past their political and ideological identity" (68). Politics, it turns out, "affected the seventeenth-century peasant no less than the nineteenth-century burgher" (71), and anyone who disagrees with this cosmic generality will be charged with "refusing to consider class-based relations of power" (72).

Judt, in other words, is filled with the view that at all times and places individuals have perceived rather sharply their position in some hierarchy of exploitation, that this perception ascends to the level of an "ideology" when it is encadred within a specific culture, such as a "working-class culture," and that if people have not always rebelled against their "exploitation," it is only because the apparatus of repression facing them was so grimly intimidating. Some of us, of course, believe none of the above with respect to, let us say, German smalltowners in the eighteenth century or brow-beaten Beaujolais cottagers' wives in the nineteenth. We argue instead that these unfortunates accepted with resignation life's unfairness, and indeed did, in Judt's unbelieving phrase, "collude in their own oppression". Even Marx, one will recall, spoke of "the idiocy of rural life". This view, it turns out, is "a device for denying to people in the past any mental independence whatever." He simply cannot accept that "common people might under some circumstances become 'stable and passive' " (82). The result of the New Social Historians' efforts to rob people in past eras of their "political existence" had been to strip them of the "central distinguishing characteristic of a properly human and civil society". And what is that fabulous characteristic? Precisely which aspect of

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for hundreds and hundreds of years most women from the popular classes accepted with tired resignation the brutal, overbearing authority of their husbands and consoled themselves that the many gynecological torments inflicted upon them as a result of sexual intercourse were a judgment of God upon womankind as a whole. In doing research on such women, are we "denying them their individuality"? In researching the history of their menstruation or their vaginal discharges are we abandoning ourselves to trivia? That brings us to the next point.

Sleight-of-hand number 2: The unimportance of the New Social Historians' research. Poor Peter Stearns is pilloried for having burbled once about age at menarche. The *Annales* are savaged for having run Jacques Houdaille's article about changes in the distribution of eye color. All these hapless American Ph.D. candidates get it in the neck for having staked out some obscure quantitative source and built their forts atop it. Judt's *apparent* agenda here is "back to the royal road of *histoire événémentielle*, boys"! "Until monarchy and its implications are firmly placed back where they belong," he writes, "social history will remain in its present condition, bereft of any social or theoretical value" (73-74).

The real grievance, however, is that the New Social History's subjects tell us nothing about the Class Struggle. None of us could quarrel with his noble declarations that we must occupy ourselves with events, not just trends, and perforce, with those who intervened in the events. But once we leave behind that particular class of events which interests Judt, like the founding of the Working Men's College in Brighton, the rest turns out to be minutia. Research on the structures of daily life, like household composition or diet, is revealed to be a "static obsession with trivia" (72). There is no obvious link between menarche and revolt, so forget menarche. The effrontery of this trick leaves us almost breathless. The magician distracts our eye by evoking a nostalgic sense of collapse in the historical profession: "For the decline in the quality of the work of many modern social historians is directly related to the loss of interest in the further past, to the dismissal of chronology and events" (79). Then he produces from his hat the flopping bunny "Give-the-workers-their-ideals."

Sleight-of-hand number 3: The New Social Historians are obsessed with "models". "The real problem with quantification," he says, is that "the authors cannot make very much of the calculations themselves . . . What matters

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because they are (a) sensitive to jargon, (b) against the war in Viet Nam, and (c) uneasy about the possibility that individual *mentalités* could, at any point in the last four hundred years, have been profoundly different from our own. Thus Judt has gauged his audience well.

Judt's *real* agenda, however, is to destroy the principal competitor to his own marxist-leninist model, which is also a model of modernization. Marxist economic thought asserts that at some point traditional modes of production existed. And even if there was capitalism in sixteenth century Bruges (which Judt accuses us of having somehow "forgotten"), he himself has obviously forgotten that a subsistence economy dawdled on far longer in Oberpfaffenhofen. This is the neatest trick of all. If you can knock out the principal rival model of social change, the Great Transformation school, your own model, *faute de mieux*, will carry the field. But you have to do it in a way that makes all "models of social change" seem repressive and oversimplified. That way people will naturally agree the only sensible point of doing historical research is to discover how all this ghastly political repessiveness came about, whether it was repressiveness in the fourteenth century or now.

Thus when he goes after Chuck Tilly tooth and nail, it is not merely because Judt dislikes the idea of disk-packs of data on "violence" sitting in the Computing Center in Ann Arbor. It is not merely because he finds oppressive the piston-like vocabulary of social science analysis or Tilly's refusal to genuflect at the Wall of Martyrs at Père Lachaise. It is because he is alarmed at the possibility that Tilly might actually get the goods on such strategic questions as, "Why do groups decide to mobilize for political action in the first place"? And that Tilly might prove wrong, in a way that would be expensive and hair-tearing to contradict without a lot of arduous research, some of the easy assumptions of the *History Workshop Journal* gang. So why do research on the history of menarche? This is the question left dangling at the end, because if it turns out that information on such eminently "non-political" questions is trivial, many social historians will be wasting their time. I recently spent six months painstakingly putting together dates of the advent of the first menses among rural women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. I have spent the last half year compiling statistics on the history of uterine prolapse. I am currently drafting an article on "The History of Vaginal Discharge." Maybe I should just forget about all this stuff.

Listen, Tony. In those Oxford senior common rooms none of the fellows are

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