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COMING OF AGE

It is tempting, after ten years of editing a journal of this sort, to pontificate about the nature of social history and its current problems. Temptation of course should be resisted. But Clio, who is still our goddess whether metric or not, whispers yield. I yield, and will engage in some pontification.

Five years ago Eric Hobsbawn, in a *Daedalus* article, noted that these are good days for the social historian. They still are. Never have there been so many practitioners in the field. The proliferation of relevant journals (most recently, in Britain and Germany) and associations (most recently in Britain and tangentially in the United States) attest to the popularity of the field. Courses generically under the heading of social history multiply. Methodological innovations plus the development of new topics – women's history, the history of leisure, the history of sex, mobility studies – plus the promise of still more in the offing – the history of aging, the history of male self-identity – keep social history in the spotlight. Topics that could only be suggested five years ago are now elaborately developed, with all the controversy that any academician could hope for. The history of Blacks, for example, was until recently a catchall. Any biography of a Black, any history of a Black organization with, say forty members, any discussion of someone's opinion about Blacks – all this was fair game, and considered social history since the Blacks are by definition a deprived group and social history is supposed to encompass the deprived above all. But sophistication in research has improved immensely, and we are now learning about what Black life and outlook were, which is to say that most Black history is now social history. Women's history has yet fully to make this transition, but good social history is being produced under the rubric. For every regurgitation of Mill's views on women or a Pankhurst biography, we get something on housewives, servants, even basic theories of women's work.

There is growing recognition of what the field is, though some caveats here must be raised later. Social history is increasingly seen by its practitioners as a total historical approach. Even when a limited topic is dealt with, the image of what was happening in the broader society can be kept in mind. *Pace* my Britich colleagues, the best social history is now history with the Trevelyan left out. Collectively at least social historians not only can but must cover all aspects of the past, whether novel or familiar.

In order to fulfill this charge, however, we must sound a certain note of alarm, and the first question is why. With the outpouring of work on established topics plus the proliferation of new, why not simply keep it up? Why carp, or indeed fish at all in definitional waters?

There are three essential reasons: 1. While social historians can usually recognize social history when they see it, a host of people think they are social historians who are not; relatedly, training in social history is too often haphazard and incomplete. 2. A number of methodological problems peculiar to social history have failed to receive due attention because of the distracting necessity of simply justifying key topics that social history has introduced. 3. Social history cannot realize its full potential unless its practitioners become more self-conscious, more sensitive to the distinctions between them and both traditional historians and other social scientists alike. At present there is a Mulligan stew quality to the field. Courses that did not fit the menus of the conventional disciplinary state dinners, plus a few left-overs, can be freely tossed into an amorphous pot. We get sex (historically) if we stay out of politics; we can treat families but when we deal with great ideas we're intellectural historians, not social. This is why social historians typically stay away from efforts to integrate their various subtopics and concentrate on one of the scraps assigned to the field, women, Blacks, workers, but rarely in any ensemble.

More superfically, the fact that social history is constantly labeled "new," despite deep roots in historiography and at least two decades of vigorous development, suggests basic confusion about what the beast is. References to the novelty of the field as presently conceived have in fact increased during the past two years in the United States. Family history is still "new" according to one prominent review, despite the fact that serious study of the subject, particularly in Europe, goes back at least twenty years. A recent comment in the *American Historical Review* referred to "the new scientific social history," against which historians in more traditional fields could remain proudly non-conformist. How new are we? how scientific? what should our relationship with "older," certainly better-established disciplines be? And have we indeed gained so much that the traditionalists are now rebels? The surprise that social history seems continually to engender, causing claims of novelty at least every half decade, demands recurrent assessment by those who are not surprised, who implicitly think they know what the field is.

Us and Them

To claim that many who profess to be social historians are not is at once haughty and exclusivist, but it is an essential starting point. There are not many social historians in the United States; they are overwhelmingly outnumbered by other types. As noted in an earlier article, there are not many in Britain, and some of them, historically trained, hide in fledgling sociology departments, which makes British sociology intelligible and interesting but confuses any attempt to demarcate social history itself. Social history is undeniably gaining momentum, which is why so many people jump on the bandwagon without knowing where the wagon is going or even where they should sit. Only in France and in a few of the institutes for social and economic history in Germany and central Europe has social history won the day *within* the historical discipline. Elsewhere social historians are viewed with misgiving or are simply mislabled, so that a history

department can merrily do what it has traditionally done while adding the word "social" to a few course descriptions and research projects. The problem is compounded in the United States by the long association of social and intellectual history, at least at the teaching level; neither the social or the intellectual orientation was conventionally political or diplomatic, and as both were therefore odd it seemed logical to lump them together. The result was that many historians dealing with ideas about society thought and still think themselves "social," while many social historians downgrade ideological causation. The European association of social and economic history was less damaging, but again only recently have groups like Sixième Section seriously considered the links between ideas and the broader society from a sociohistorical standpoint.

The historical discipline is not alone in confusion. Most sociologists who purport to dabble in social history are equally myopic. For every Neil Smelser capable of pulling secondary materials into an important new synthesis, for every Charles Tilly willing to sully his hands with actual source material, there are scores of sociologists who gleefully rehash facts that historians already knew, adding little or nothing by way of analysis. Hence a recent essay, touted as "historical," states: "Population has been increasing over the past several thousand years," a statement unexceptionable but meaningless without analysis of periodization or causation. Without question, many sociologists are interested in social history; others will at least consent to dine with social historians or nod in a friendly manner. But overall the interaction has been slight.

The pressures of conforming to the expectations of established disciplines, as well as the internal dynamics of a presumably discrete topic, show in the evolution of two fields and part of a third, all of which seemed five years ago among the most dynamic in social history and whose practitioners would for the most part (though now largely erroneously) consider themselves social historians. Demographic history, unquestionably vital to social history, stagnates because it works within a limited body of source material, largely numerical, without great concern for relationships with other social forces. Kinship studies risk degeneration into counting household size, without consideration of other linkages, indeed at an extreme without even considering what relatives lived down the street as opposed to dwelling under a single roof. At its recent worst demographic history recites facts – number of women in France over time, birth rate changes in Germany – as if empiricism were sufficient unto itself. The data gathered are extremely useful to social history but the product itself is not social history. Rare attempts at explanation, taking a number of variables into account, including human motivation, too often fall short of the mark. Even the predictive power of demographic history is thereby reduced, leaving demographers in other disciplines free to speculate without clear reference to trends or models from the past.

Urban studies have proved even more disappointing than demographic history, from the sociohistorical standpoint. Here again, a self-conscious subdiscipline has evolved. It tends to concentrate on urban technology (the rise and fall of the street car) or limited political institutions or urban planning, all taken as essentially self-sufficient entities, at best interacting among themselves. While not completely ignored, elements of human causation and impact take only a secondary place. The field has drifted almost entirely from the orbit of social history, which is presumably why a recent essay collection on the social history of urban people had to be entitled the "new" urban history.

One could add labor history to the list of walking wounded, as social historians of workers have failed to mesh with the more traditional students of labor movements and ideologies, unless they give up and point their data toward conventional goals.

Confusion over what is and what is not social history, while obviously only an indirect, backhanded approach to defining the field, is no mere exercise to scholastic logic. As suggested earlier, it has hampered rigorous training. Whether sociologist or historian, the sociohistorical neophyte must master what "they," the disciplinary establishment, think is important and thus is unable to spend sufficient time on the methods and models of social history itself. How many students are daunted by the shock of incomprehension among mentors; how many find that they must point their research toward conclusions about Bismarckian politics, say, to camouflage their essential interest in some aspect of German social history in the 1870s? How many, as students or as young scholars eager to publish, either yield to the lure of what "they" want or simply lack the training to deal with a social context? The student of prostitution, unquestionably a sociohistorical topic, finds it both easier and more acceptable to examine the writings of Lord Acton and/or a law or two instead of coming to grips, if again only historically, with actual prostitutes. The topic may still seem a bit eccentric but at least the data derived from familiar sources and nobody's mental set will be shattered. And it is easy to slide from a Lord Acton to imply if not state outright that this was "society's" view, particularly if one has been encouraged to think oneself a social historian. Confusion can thus perpetuate itself, when, at an extreme, a student versed in social ideas or expert on the organizational structure of ward bosses in Detroit emerges confident that he is a social historian, blithely ignorant of basic social dynamics even in his own period and of the wide range of sources that must be consulted to get at them.

The rigidity of traditional historians and to a lesser extent sociologists results also in a certain in-grown quality to real social history, at least in the United States. While by no means a characteristic unique to this field, the temptation is strong to write mainly to an audience of other social historians, who can at least appreciate the importance of the topic involved even if they disagree with the findings. Only if one tacks on a conclusion that relates to politics is it fairly certain that other historians will take notice, save in a few cases, such as colonial American history, where research has become so voluminous and sophisticated that it cannot be ignored. In most instances, an appeal to the conventional remains vital for a wide hearing. Sometimes a political conclusion flows logically from sociohistorical research, but this is not invariably the case. So the social historian either distorts his goal to please or writes to his confreres alone. Hence key groups of academicians are unaware of what social historians are doing; even well-established conclusions in historical demography are ignored, because of the generational lead-time necessary to pound new approaches into scholarly heads.

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And aside from the "fad" histories that have strong political overtones (Black history, women's history), few social historians even dream of popularization. The educated public remains untouched even though social historians deal with the basic stuff of life, the things people eat and breath and believe. Interested in subjects such as the family in contemporary society, most people have no sense that history can be brought to bear on them. So journalists and ahistorical sociologists dominate public consciousness; hence the family has been dead or dying, according to media presentations, at least four times in the present century alone. No utopia is in sight, but social historians can become aware of various modes of presentation if they grow more confident in their own field. When the history of menarche is widely recognized as equal in importance to the history of monarchy, we will have arrived.

Methodological Problems

Social history obviously shares difficulties in method and conceptualization with a variety of other disciplines, but there are some problems peculiar to the field. Few have been faced squarely, in part because of lack of sufficient data at present but in part because of the failure explicitly to grasp what social history is.

Shared problems most obviously include geographical scope and, to a lesser extent, the uses of quantification. To date the tendency has been to focus on small localities, particularly by French social historians who claim to be the most ardent advocates of total history. The approach is intelligent in many respects. Can one deal with new topics, particularly in periods prior to the dissemination of general statistics, beyond a narrow geographical source base? Can one capture the totality of experience in any other framework given baffling local variations? French historians seem bent on countering national centralism with their barrage of village and regional studies. Americans, true to their competitive nature, vie to chart one city's mobility patterns after another. The obvious question is when to stop, or better yet, when to combine. How many English villages need family reconstitution before sound generalization is possible? Once we know Birmingham, Atlanta, Omaha, Warren, Poughkeepsie, Boston (twice), Newburyport and Philadelphia, how much more mobility must we digest before producing a paradigm for the mid- to later nineteenth century? Localism is essential for pilot efforts on a new aspect of social history; we still badly need local studies of mobility in Europe, for example. But ultimately social history should emerge with broader conceptualization, even to interpret another local study properly. This suggests the need for team research and comparative studies toward determining the representativeness of a sample locality.

The quantitative trap is increasing recognized. The trap is subtle. Social history has benefited immensely from quantitative materials and their manipulation. Some social historians, at all levels, still need to learn more about the methodology and its utility, but there is no question that quantification has been a key to advance and recognition in the field. Indeed, somewhat misleadingly, quantification is often equated with social history, and this just as social historians are learning a dual lesson: count when there's something to count but

do not let the absence of countables deter study of a vital subject, and rarely rely on numbers alone or choose a topic simply because it allows a quantitative approach. There remains danger, particularly in training researchers, to let method dominate conceptualization — for example, at the dissertation level, the proliferation of more mobility studies but based often on only two censuses, without considering expressions of values associated with various jobs or various forms of wealth and without determining causation. Mono-source-mania is not confined to social history, but it is a dire disease. But here we slip from a general problem — applicable, say, to political history as well — to the special justificatory problems of social history. Many talented quantifiers are trapped in essentially descriptive or at best correlative analysis not simple because of fascination with method but because they are trying to prove themselves before an unseen audience of social scientists in other disciplines, particularly those who believe that if one cannot reduce findings to mathematical equations they have no validity.

No one but social historians themselves can take primary blame for the chronological skew of the field. The most intensive and imaginative social history to date ends before 1870, at best before 1914, with a mere handful of exceptions, most notably the recent, careful social analysis of nazism which has added greatly to understanding of the movement and has become central to any discussion of it; here the potential of sociohistorical work in the twentieth century is clear, but there has been scant initiative in other areas. Problems of source availability contribute, but political and diplomatic historians, similarly hampered, plunge eagerly into recent decades. We know too little about the social history of the last hundred years, yet key breaks occurred in precisely this timespan. Earlier periods invite social history because political developments have already been elaborately charted and are somewhat remote in any event; correspondingly, modernists seize on the relevance of politics without probing more deeply. Even here, conventional historical thinking plays a role: politics first, and then maybe the menu can be varied (plus, in Europe, a wider tendency to see recent history as current events, beneath the dignity of historians of any stripe). Vital information about recent history is thus lacking and the field is left open to generalizations by other social scientists whose historical sense is minimal.

It is the question of periodization, however, that reveals most clearly the artifically dependent position of social history. With a few exceptions sociohistorical periodization follows one of three patterns, all understandable but inexcusable: Pattern 1: periodization by the current arrangement of source material. Here are two censuses; they must prove something, and who really cares if the chronology corresponds to definable breaks in the evolution of the topic under examination. This approach undeniably produces facts, but often little else. Pattern 2: Accept the conventional periodization of political events. Here one stops with the American revolution or 1848 or 1914, typically without consideration as to whether these dates represent a break for the subject at hand 3. Follow the periodization of economic history (the first industrial revolution, various price revolutions). This approach works best, because of the close

association of economic causation with broader social developments, but it is inappropriate for many subjects. Overall, of the various subtopics in social history, family-cum-demographic history has done the best job in devloping a coherent periodization, because of clear descriptive breaks, such as a decade in which a rapid increase in reported bastards occurred. A few recent studies of workers, mainly in a single locality, are sensible enough to end, say, in 1896, when clearly decisive events occurred for the workers involved, instead of dragging wearily up to 1914. Far more, however, accept a political framework. We thus have the English working class "made" in the year of the Reform Bill, without knowing why this date was chosen or what happened to the class later. We rely on convention and convenience, not the social process itself, to excuse us from one of the key tasks of any historian.

Total History

Social history *is* history, an approach to the entirety of the past. It is not a topic, like intellectual history, or even a set of topics (the Mulligan stew syndrome). It is panoramic, asking questions broader than those most historians have previously raised and dealing with an unprecedented combination of familiar sources and materials essentially untapped before. The established topical fields of history – political, intellectual, even military (sadly neglected by social historians who tend not to like war) – are all part of social history. But the sociohistorical approach to these topics involves radical reorientation. There is little significance in knowing what a given intellectual thought unless one examines not only the social context of thought, which can be imprecise given individual psychological variables, but the social resonance, the manner, extent, and reasons that ideas became influential. The detail of the influence of ideas on ideas is less essential and can be left to philosophers, if these ever become interested in philosophy again.

Ideally social history should provide a framework for evaluating the significance of any historical fact, in terms of what it reveals about what people create and what is imposed on them. Institutions, economic structures as well as systems of thought are studied not for their own sake – for the internal dynamics may often be sketched rather than elaborately analyzed – but for what they reveal about society's causal role in extruding them and their impact on society in turn. There is thus, potentially, a social history of everything. A case in point is the social history of science, which is gaining ground through analysis of social cause and effect, in contrast to the earlier approach to science purely through the history of ideas and discoveries, typically through intellectual biographies.

For the social historian the ultimate task is to create an overall picture of a society in all its facets, with appropriate weight given to each. This assumes, of course, appropriate chronological and spatial definition of the society involved. As in other fields, the grand syntheses can be undertaken by only a few; most social historians will content themselves with subtopics, though an active sense of the larger society should be involved. The work should be generalizable, of substantive and methodological interest to scholars who have no concern for the

particular period or area. Too often a subject highly relevant to social history – the constituency of an American Masonic temple, for example – is presented as a self-contained entity, with no heed for broader significance or historical reference. But even for good monographic research in the field, the key problem remains the subordinate position of social history in other disciplines, most commonly conventional history itself.

Not only have social historians accepted the periodization imposed by one or another of the limited topical histories. They also have, with rare exceptions, accepted conventions such as the unbridgable Atlantic approach, by which American historians deal with America alone and historians of Europe, whether native or American, stick to their side of the water, which severely and artifically limits sensible comparative work. Europeans are largely ignorant of the American industrial experience, for example, while Americanists judge their topic too precious and unique to be sullied by careful comparisons. Finally, social historians have kept their collective noses out of most conventional historical topics, intruding rarely on diplomatic turf, very tentatively and incompletely into the history of ideas, somewhat more boldly only in the case of political history. Early on, this self-limitation was probably desirable and well as inevitable, given the mental set of the established topical historians. New topics commanded prime attention and some might have little to do with, say, the political process either as cause or effect. This will continue to be the case in many monographs, for nothing is more damaging than the fabricated imposition of, say, political implications on a group or activity essentially foreign to politics. But social historians must study politics, with constant attention to social impact and social causation. That many efforts, though by no means all, have floundered so far – most commonly when essentially political historians blunder into imprecise statements of relevant social structure – is again due to the jealousy with which conventional historians guard their domains. One result is the common assumption that social history is another topic rather than a total approach, and the failure seriously to touch base with traditional historians. At best social history is granted the right to cover the inarticulate generally, which has led to the production of more analysis of the working class, in recent history, than of the rising middle class. The political predelictions of most social historians play a role in this imbalance, but so does the resolute desire on the part of traditional historians to put social history into another neat cubby hole.

The conclusion seems inescapable. Social history has been fettered by its service as handmaiden to established disciplines. Lack of generalized, and rigorous training, distraction from internal methodological and conceptual problems, plus the limitations on approaches to a broad social synthesis as opposed to spinning off one subfield after another – urban history again being a case in point – all suggest the need to recognize social history as an independent discipline. Undeniably, progress has been made within the present framework, and more can come. Social history is alive and well and some of its practitioners are already addressing themselves to many of the problems suggested in this essay. But advances are needlessly slow and some able minds are prevented from making their full contribution to the field by the necessity of pleasing traditional historians.

sociologists, economists, even statisticians, who have no feel for the new approach. A few departments, particularly in history, might be won over by boring from within, as has substantially occurred in France. Pending some unforeseen Great Revolution, however, most will continue to be boring in their accustomed fashion.

Conventional history will survive the split. It will remain useful for recording purposes and for serving those students and afficionados who like their history neatly tied to events or to an institution they belong to. It will largely dominate biography, although social historians need not exclude this format; people who like an abundance of names and individual personalities in their history will long resist the sociohistorical approach, which by dealing with groups and societies is of necessity more anonymous. But conventional historians work to their own purposes, not to ours. Their falling course enrollments and lack of research vitality – there are only so many times a given man can be interestingly studied or an event chronicled and rechonicled – have in fact forced many departments to lean increasingly heavily on the vitality of social history. And, admittedly, content with their relative prosperity, their new topical and methodological toys, social historians have typically been satisfied to plug gaps, to put fingers in historical dykes while maintaining contact with social science concepts and methods unfamiliar to most historians. It's now time to get out.

But to go where? Sociology provides inadequate refuge because of the predominant lack of historical consciousness in the field. Sociologists turn to the past more for analytical models, sometimes almost religiously invoked, than for an ongoing sense of trends in society directly. Social historians need more than awed references to Weber or Tocqueville or even Marx to set up a theoretical structure for the past. Why not the often-heralded interdisciplinary approach, which only minimally rocks the academic boat? Interdisciplinary teams have occasionally been successful in sociohistorical research, but they are not the rule; and they are normally unsuccessful in teaching, because of a lack of shared goals. Interdisciplinary pieties and patchwork will not suffice.

Only through recognition as a separate discipline with its own identity can social history fulfill its role as a vital part of the range of the social sciences, an essential approach to the understanding of the human animal. Only then can social historians, themselves still often partially self-taught, develop appropriate and thorough systems of training, drawing on history, the social sciences, and indeed biology and the applied physical sciences as well. The dynamics of society can be tackled directly, without the necessity of knowing much about Millard Fillmore or even Jules Guesde, save as relevant to a particular project or for use in crossword puzzles. Social history requires a vast store of knowledge, even in terms of work already generated. Here is the central task of the field, and it should be pushed not only as preparation for research but in curricula at all levels of education. When, as it is now the case, tests for secondary school students who have had advanced work in history cannot include questions on women's past because the schools have not yet introduced the subject, something is obviously askew.

At the research level, the social sciences need new vigor in a variety of respects. Model-building has become a Cartesian art that risks loss of contact

with human reality. The gyrations of economists, whose inability to encompass human variables distorts both pure knowledge and public policy formulation, provide but a prime example. The historical consciousness is essential to understand where the roots even of contemporary behavior lie, how deep they go, and to establish the basis for understanding when and why behavior changes. Conventional history has not proved up to the task because it simply does not encompass a sufficiently wide range of the human experience. Historians have typically followed social scientists, usually with a considerable lag, into exploration of a topic of new public interest; a recent example is gerontology, which has had no historical input until the last two years, leaving sociologists and economists to monopolize the field. With the framework of social history, unencumbered with distractions, this lag should not be necessary. Facile, unexamined generalizations about the past produced by scholars who know they need it to establish a sense of trend but who do not study it, can thus be reduced before they are implanted in academic and even public consciousness.

Social historians will of course disagree with each other, perhaps more vigorously than they have had a chance to do while hidden in other disciplines. Generalizations about human behavior and outlook will inevitably be far complex than some model-builders like; but reality is complex, and neither logic nor a presentist focus can make it otherwise. This is why social history must be directly entered into the spectrum of the social sciences.

Social history is already a discipline *de facto*, mediating among several other disciplines. What is needed is a conversion to *de jure* status. In the United States and Britain, distinct departments are essential. The continental pattern of separate institutes would help at the research level but would not fit common teaching patterns. Direct linkages among social as opposed to the groping for some kind of special relationship to the social sciences simply as historians, regardless of basic approach, which is where the new American grouping of "social science historians" seems to be heading. A host of conventions can be reconsidered, such as the common instence on book publication rather than a significant range of articles to achieve the summits of recognition in conventional history. It seems brash to suggest yet another department, but it is organizationally as well as intellectually essential.

With greater freedom to pursue their distinctive goals, the past can be more broadly explored as a laboratory of human experience: this is the main point. It remains a good time to be a social historian. We have only to exploit the consequences of what, collectively, we have become. By making not only the past but also the present more comprehensible, social history may serve as a lever to invigorate the social sciences generally, again at both teaching and research levels. Is one whistling in the wind in calling for social history as a recognized discipline? Perhaps, but better to keep whistling than to take shelter in a familiar cave.

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