VOL 19 ISS 2 WIN 1985 UMI

SOCIAL HISTORY AND HISTORY: A PROGRESS REPORT

Nine years ago in this journal, I attempted a brief assessment of social history in the United States, which focused on its meteoric rise and its uncomfortable position within the larger discipline; among other things, I suggested the need for a more formal division between social history and conventional history. Recently encouraged to offer another assessment, I find it appropriate to emphasize developments over the past several years which have complicated social history's definition, at least superficially, while reflecting also a growing maturity. Social history remains vigorous and innovative, but some issues of style and conceptualization have arisen that suggest a transition from brash newcomer to established scholarly resident. A few new dangers have arisen as well, notably in a fascination with social history as anthropology which threatens to go beyond welcome interest in values and mentalities to a reluctance to deal with social change. Yet amid new issues, a constant: the relationship between social and conventional history remains difficult, as attested by recent, if somewhat frivolous, potshots from a few conventionalists. But the response I thought appropriate a decade ago — which had scant impact in any event — now seems obviously misplaced. Divisions of approach between social and many conventional historians have scarcely diminished, but new possibilities of integration have at least been broached. And the need to discuss a new synthesis between social and conventional topics and approaches at the level of history teaching has become increasingly pressing. Implicitly, in texts and scholarly work, the discipline has been asking classroom teachers either to ignore a vital facet of their subject, thus teaching only social or only conventional subjects with the most cursory bows to the other camp; or to alternate between one and the other, which is a more palatable solution but one which leaves the ultimate burdens of sense-making to students themselves — or to no one.

What follows is a personal attempt to deal with current issues within social history and between social history and the rest of the discipline. It is not intended as an editorial statement. But it does suggest the need, for journals such as the JSH, to become increasingly active in encouraging deliberate illustrations of stylistic and conceptual alternatives in social history; broad topical and comparative syntheses; and efforts to reach out from social history not only to political themes, but also to developments in military and diplomatic history. And so the statement can be taken as an invitation, for essays directed to the JSH in future, to deal with some of the issues raised — even where the terms of treatment differ from the paths I currently suggest.

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What is still sometimes called the "new" social history — a term that evokes the confusions social historians have wrought — and regular history have now coexisted for roughly a quarter-century.[1] This is hardly a short time, for the initial publications of what was to become an onslaught of social history date from the early 1960s in the United States.[2] Yet some of the tensions first raised, between a deliberately aggressive group of social historians — at pains, for example, to found separate journals — and the larger discipline, remain as vivid as ever. At the same time, some new and interesting hesitations from social historians themselves have recently complicated an assessment of social history's trajectory. And the failure to date of social history

to become more than strong minority current in the larger discipline, if its most vigorous research component, has become quite visible with renewed attacks on the subfield from several political historians. Finally, a third vantage point, directed toward the impact of social history on history-in-general after over two decades of effervescence, judged however in terms friendly to social history's achievement rather than as laments over neglected verities, also merits exploration. Social history has affected mainstream history in ways that social historians are now in a position to attend to. All three assessment ingredients — the inside critique, the outside critique, and the impact on the larger discipline — are essential parts of a characterization of what social history and history have done to each other, and of a judgment on what they should do in the future.

The first part of what follows, then, is directed mainly toward social history itself, in taking up some recent confusions and even failures of nerve. The argument here is that social history shows signs of entering a new and more mature phase, which will see some changes in its level of analysis. The transition to this phase, involving some laments over the disappearance of earlier simplicities, is somewhat troubling but need not be permanently distracting.

Second, we will take up the renewed round of outside critiques of social history, which reminds us vividly of the continuing bifurcation of history in the United States between social historians and some at least of the unconverted within their own generational cohort as well as an older cohort. This outside critique deserves brief attention, not only because it suggests the hope in some quarters that an assessment of social history's larger impact can soon be turned into a funeral oration. Most of the critiques are not very serious, and have won notice mainly because of their coincidence with the growing pains of the field itself. But this point must be established, and a few telling comments assessed more fully. The simple fact of continued tension between social and "conventional" historians, which differentiates the United States from France where social history got an earlier start and won a near-monopoly on research by the 1960s, is an important change, in itself, in the larger discipline.

Third, a less familiar agenda must be assessed. If social history is reaching toward a new maturity, and if as I will argue its gains within the larger discipline will and should continue, then it is vital to turn to ways that social historians can help overcome certain problems that their very success has engendered within the larger discipline. This wider effort can mesh with the maturing of the field itself, but only through some additional shiftings of gears. Finally, the nature of this wider agenda depends crucially on social historians' answers to the recent attacks on their style and coherence.

Growing Pains

When social history began its rapid rise as a serious subfield, a quarter century ago, it was possible to believe that the endeavor might be rather simply defined through a characteristic political tone, a characteristic method, and/or a characteristic view of the mainsprings of historical change. To some early practitioners, social history was uniquely radical, a chance to glorify the power of ordinary people and to use history to further their cause in the present. To others, social history was uniquely quantitative; this group, interestingly, usually differed from the first segment who preferred to rely on strong impressionistic evidence. Many of the quantifiers, in turn, saw social history as focusing primarily on basic, measurable material forces in the past, such as proletarianization or demographic change.

Most of these early visions have proved too narrow, as social history has matured and diversified. But the disappointment of some initial hopes has, not surprisingly, produced considerable uneasiness among some of the pioneers and their immediate heirs. Thus various radical social historians have mounted an often eloquent attack

on a social history that has frequently displayed no particular political stripe, or has become enmeshed in "neutral" social science concepts, or has emphasized adaptation over discomfort plus protest or protest manqué. To some, the dissociation of social history from an exclusive focus on injustice and/or a Marxist framework represents not only a political betrayal but also a crucial incoherence, resulting in a series of random topics without overall direction.[3]

Another confusion has arisen with social history's increasing shift toward an interest in values and mentalities, as some practitioners find all divergence from quantifiable materialism a tragic sell out. This shift inevitably and properly produces important controversy.[4] It surfaces in disputes over the definition of social class, between objective and subjective characteristics, and over pheneomena such as a social protest, between those who argue that economic and political context alone explains protest patterns and those who look also for particular cultures and emotional ingredients. Still more strongly, the dispute centers on fundamental choices of topics — as between those who see family history a matter of measurable demography and occupational roles, and those who fasten on subjects such as childrearing and emotionality. The material forces-cultures debate also boils over into social historians' social science preferences. The early "scientific" hopes associated with the rise of social history rested primarily on linkages with sociology and to an extent economics and political science. The more recent shift to a cultural emphasis stresses contact with anthropology and social psychology. The debate, finally, involves quantifiers vs. non-quantifiers, though it is important to stress that some social historians have long had methodological feet in both camps. It is no secret that social history has become steadily less quantitative during the past decade. In some cases I think this results in part from poorer training and/or quests from easy ways out in a field increasingly popular with graduate students whose financial support and, probably, average quality have been declining. To that extent, the trend can be deplored. But the essential shift really does result from a change in what social historians focus upon, the sources they use, and the need to utilize more impressionistic data to answer the questions being asked.

Discussions of social history's focus and method, even more than the passionate but ultimately less interesting debates over political tone, reflect deep divisions, that are not going to be resolved easily, and in some senses are not likely to be resolved at all, as part of a maturing definition of what social history is all about. To be sure, on occasion I think positions are pushed needlessly far. A few partisans of values have neglected that basic criterion of social history that must insist that formal cultural evidence be tested for reception and representativeness before it is equated with the actual attitudes and behaviors of large gro[illegible]ome radical critics have failed to establish a particularly meaningful agenda [illegible]r analysis. Though their plea that power relationships be kept more firmly in mind is often warranted, there is danger of sterility in a history that begins and ends with reminders about basic social structure.[6] The qualification-quantification tension is by no means absolute, as witness the large number of social historians who have long worked constructively in both modes.[7] Some partisans of material forces seem to neglect a middle ground, in which such forces can be delineated as fundamental but with considerable attention to resultant cultures, which may be more challenging to explore and also more revealing about how groups or societies actually function at any point in time.

But the main points cannot and need not involve a probably doomed effort at full reconciliation. What is obvious, first, is that social history has moved away from some initial definitions, and that this movement has caused disappointment. Further, debates have entered social history that really have strong analogies with debates that have long enlivened the wider discipline of history. Debates over political tone and emphasis

are in this sense unsurprising. The division between those interested in impersonal forces and those concerned with mentalities is somewhat more novel, but it does to a degree replicate older divisions of interest between those who stressed individual actors and personalities as their focus and those who saw even great men the tools of larger forces. Social history does, to be sure, eschew a great man approach, but its new division between partisans of cultural change — shifts in ideas about children, or family, or leisure — and material forces has some similar ingredients. Consider, to take a contemporary-history example, the problem of explaining changes in American test scores. One school holds out for a fascinatingly simple set of basic forces: test scores go up or down depending on birth rates. But a more complex cultural interpretation, dealing with parental and educational styles and peer-group values, is also possible, and this approach leaves far more scope to decisions — beyond procreative decisions — by human actors.[8] A debate of this sort seems clearly a sociohistorical equivalent of more familiar controversies about the role of "great men" as historical movers. And this suggests, in turn, that the certain tensions have become endemic to social history as they have long been in history-in-general. This conclusion does not rob debate of force or passion, but it does suggest, as against some recent discussion, that debate should be seen as part of a maturing subfield rather than as proof that social history has somehow gone off the rails.

For while some recent discussion does reflect a certain disillusionment or confusion, debates over politics or quantification or anthropology in fact focus attention more firmly on what social history basically consists of, now as in the past. Social history is *not*, the current discussions show, a single political viewpoint; or a single methodology; or a single judgment of what forces cause and illustrate fundamental historical change. It is, of course, history, in being concerned with describing, categorizing and explaining the process of change over time. It also has three overlapping characteristics peculiar to the genre: first, a substantial focus on groups out of power, with the concomitant belief that these groups display some capacity to change and therefore some capacity to influence wider historical processes. Second, a fascination with aspects of life and society in addition to politics, which entails a belief that there is some interrelationship between social functions such as family, government, sports and ideologies such that non-political activities and beliefs warrant serious analysis in their own right as part of understanding the past. And third, an approach to history that emphasizes patterns or processes of culture, power relationships and behavior rather than a series of events. This definition, I believe, holds for all social historians, no matter what their view of social history and radical politics, or social history and quantification, or social history and mentalities. It is in this sense that I find it useful to identify important tensions in social history while dismissing them as challenges to fundamental identification.

A maturing social history must also deal with a final modification in approach, along with coming to terms with certain endemic internal debates. This final internal challenge is rarely articulated explicitly, but it may be more important than the arguments between "mentalitists" and quantifiers. Social history rests on some distinctive assumptions about what the past consists of and how change should be examined, most notably in its insistence on the importance of a history which embraces the officially powerless as well as the powerful and in stressing a presentation of the past and of change in terms of shifts in patterns of behavior and outlook, rather than a narrative of events. But while this basic vision of social history is fundamental, it is clear as a practical matter that social history's advance, in the field of history generally and in the minds of many social historians, has consisted less of insistence on basic definitions and more of practitioners' ability to add one new topic after another to the list of subjects open to serious, and not merely antiquarian, historical study. Thus for every ambitious attempt to discuss the role of the powerless in any overall view

of history, there are countless, and often very good, studies of particular "inarticulate" groups — defined as social classes, racial, age or gender groups, homosexuals or whatever. Topical expansion has been even more noteworthy, in the past decade, in the kinds of human activities subjected to historical scrutiny: mobility, sex, health, crime, family roles, material culture, and so on.

This topical expansion has been immensely important. It has greatly enhanced the utility of history. In teaching and in that public history which addresses adult, non-academic audiences, the expansion of group histories, which really add up to a statement that history can be not only about "them" but also about "us," has markedly increased the audience for professional historical work. This expansion is ongoing and should be fostered. The concomitant expansion of the kinds of activities covered by history has increased history's contacts with other specialists, by making available a genuine historical perspective to gerontologists or students of alcoholism. It also, more theoretically, has moved history into a key position in commenting on the boundaries between the immutably biological, and the socially-determined, in understanding how individuals and societies function — and this is an exciting advance that the more restricted topical range of conventional history had never allowed. In dealing with social history's problems, both old and new, these continuing gains must not be forgotten. They are only beginning to be exploited in expanding history's public audience and teaching utility and in augmenting history's inclusion in a variety of inquiries into the human condition.

But the vision of social history as a series of new topics has two obvious limitations. The first, long since noted by people like Charles Tilly, is that social history has often provided only loose linkage among topical specialities, each with a pronounced centrifugal tendency. This problem was a natural result of the efflorescence of new topics suggested by the social history approach, but it certainly reduced cohesion in the field, delayed efforts to produce coherent survey-level social history material, and to some extent distracted from the fact that many topics did indeed interrelate through their common subjection to certain key developments such as industrialization, the growth of literacy and so on. The second limitation, more visible recently, is that social history defined as a series of new topics is obviously finite. New groupings of the inarticulate are harder and harder to come by. New aspects of the social experience remain a bit richer — as witness recent efforts to deal with histories of emotion or histories of beliefs about sleep — but here too there are limits. Social history is beginning, I think, a process of conversion toward more mature consideration of already-established topics — which includes expansion into novel areas and periods. This process brings some confusion. Social historians are not always as careful about relating their topics to established work or about articulating clear periodizations and other analytical borders, as they will have to become. When a topic was brand new, a single point in time, or a single kind of source, would often seem quite sufficient. This is no longer true, but some practitioners have yet to awaken to the fact. A case in point, for both West-European and American family history, is a newly-developed passion for extensive diary evidence.[9] Here is indeed a rich source, that can be used to balance previous work on subjects such as childrearing or sexuality — often modifying, for example, an earlier trend among social historians to draw rigid lines between premodern and modern experience. But instead of using this source as part of a wider synthesis that would also take seriously previously established evidence, there has been a tendency to use the new data in isolation, and build as incomplete an interpretation on their base as that which is roundly attacked. When some of the same studies wander through the most random periodization, with no clear reasons for beginning or end, the failure not just of successful synthesis, but of any rigorous effort, can become glaring. Granting

that appeals for more synthesis or theory can become starry-eyed, since not all practitioners of any kind of academic inquiry can or should make the attempt, it is possible to do more and to do better, and to develop clearer standards for encouraging the enterprise.

The challenges inherent in moving from a social history defined almost entirely as new topics, to a social history concerned with a larger understanding of the past and an intermingling of topical themes, can be met, though because of the endemic debates already outlined they will be met in no single way. Meeting the challenges has been complicated, however, by one further product of the current period of transition. As social history moved away from some of its simpler earlier definitions, and as the problems of a largely topical approach became increasingly clear, some practitioners were moved to contend that social history's style of presentation needs fundamental review. Thus Lawrence Stone in essence argues that, if social history no longer identifies a small group of basic, measurable processes, it can meaningfully capture the past only through a traditional style. Stone urges a return to the narrative mode, then, on grounds that this style and organization alone make change intelligible.[10] His argument, paralleled by some other critiques, has won wide notice, though Hobsbawm and Tilly have properly pointed out that he misrepresented the extent of any shift back toward the narrative or even away from an interest in material processes.[11] It might also be added that in work subsequent to his heralded article, Stone himself shows no particular tendency to return to the narrative form.[12] But the question of style is a serious one. The needs of a maturing social history do include stylistic experiments suitable for the interweaving of themes and the analysis of change. While Stone has raised a valid question, however, he has not provided the correct answer, and it is important to say this firmly.

To be sure, the invocation of narrative can be very general; if it means clarity in periodization, such that histories have beginnings and ends, then the style surely fits good social history. Typically, however, more is implied: that narrative should use discrete events as their building-blocks, in the conventional historical manner. In fairness, of course, Stone and several of his partisans have attempted to deal with some of the sociohistorical objections to the revival of narrative, by talking of a "new" narrative style. The new narrative would seize on unfamiliar, ordinary events as well as large political or diplomatic events, and in so doing would avoid the trap of assuming that history is guided primarily by identifiable elite individuals. This is, to a point, an exciting prospect. Certainly some narratives of this sort can dramatically illustrate elements of the lives of ordinary people, and while on occasion they mainly demonstrate aspects already familiar through non-narrative sociohistorical analysis, they may even so improve the readability or teachability of social history findings.[13] (Though I see no reason, pending more evidence, to accept the claim that non-narrative social history has lost history readers or audience; this is often asserted, but I think the evidence runs in the other direction, granting a certain audience that cannot be reached by serious history of any sort and granting also the lack of wide appeal of many social history — like many conventional history — monographs).

But there is a serious weakness in this new narrative argument, linked to its common relationship to anthropological interpretations of events in the "thick description" school. The new narrative mainly promises to elucidate the pastness of the past, which is indeed a key function of historical analysis of any sort. It does not provide a means of coherently describing or explaining social change. Yet the description and explanation of change is the historian's most ennobling function, overshadowing even the importance of perspective as provided through rich portrayals of the past's pastness. Now that, through social history, we grasp change mainly through shifts in outlook and behavior

— as in crime, or leisure, or political protest — through changes in process, in short — the event-defined narrative, new or old, remains limited and incomplete. Social historians must of course debate the balance to be sought between rich still-lifes and dynamic accounts of change — again, a debate which has its analogue in conventional history — but they must not be trapped in stylistic choices that unduly weight the scales against the possibility of dealing with the transition between one period and the next and, ultimately, dynamically linking the present to the past. The basic mission of social history, in dealing with the relationship of groups whose members are as individuals usually far from identifiable roles in identifiable events and in treating the history of non-political as well as explicitly political behaviors and values, will continue usually to preclude anything like a standard narrative. Social historians must largely concentrate on patterns of behavior and changes in these patterns, which will allow them to deal coherently with change but without the luxury or simplicity of an event-based narrative. This distinctiveness must be reasserted in order to proceed with social history's relationship to the wider discipline.

The Outside Critique

For a number of non-social historians, implicitly seizing on some of the transitional confusions which social history has itself engendered, but also building in some cases on a more conservative political mood and on related trends in education such as "back to basics" appeals, have reopened an attack on social history. Many of the resulting critiques are frankly silly, and worth noting only because their number and august origins might needlessly muddy the real issues of social history's relationship to history-in-general. Geoffrey Elton, for example, recently twitted social historians as voyeurs, uncovering facets of human behavior best left obscured.[14] It is true, of course, that social historians have been concerned with facets of the past such as sexuality, but the advance they have made in improving our understanding of the role of past trends in the evolution of this phenomenon, the advance they have made indeed over more conventional pop-cultural-history mockery of something like Victorian culture, makes this kind of attack simply ridiculous. One might as well quarrel with military historians for portraying excessive violence. Slightly less silly, but close, was a good part of Gertrude Himmelfarb's recent blast in *Harper's* Magazine.[15] Himmelfarb offered two basic arguments, which amounted, first, to an assertion that social history was displacing some attention to conventional history topics — on Advanced Placement exams for example — which is true enough though hardly a problem unless proved; and second, to a parallel claim, though not directly stated, that only the great leaders in history really shape the course of change or at least really shape it by rational acts, so that only conventional political and intellectual history should be studied by those who want to see history as an illustration of human responsibility and rationality. This seems to me a weak claim, though possibly worth discussing. But rather than dealing with it systematically, Himmelfarb attempts to back into a justification by some demonstrably feeble changes against social history. Thus she tries to argue that social history is strictly quantitative, which was never so and is the reverse of the current trend. And she implies that social historians in general see history as moving according to large, ineluctable forces, which she takes as a denial of human power and rationality. This interpretation might validly apply to some individual social historians, who may also be right, but surely not to the whole field. Indeed the care with which social historians have established the rationality of a host of lower class behaviors, from protest to birth control, transparently refutes the anti-rational charge.

Critiques of this sort are relevant to an assessment of social history, however, despite their errors. They demonstrate again that social historians have hardly won over the

whole discipline to their way of thinking. They reveal indeed an apparent reinvigoration of a perceived opportunity to counterattack on the part of people who, like Himmerfarb, and perhaps Elton, really believe that the publicly-revealed acts and publicly-proclaimed motives of the great are the only serious stuff of history.[16] The many teachers who have failed to integrate social history into survey courses or have even pulled back from it, for example in some high school gifted programs where students are offered demanding but old-fashioned narrative apparently on grounds that detail compensates for datedness, reveal, if only implicitly, a similar judgment.

And a portion of a critique such as Himmelfarb's does parallel charges levied by social historians such as Lawrence Stone. Himmelfarb obviously finds the materialist-quantitative strain of social history particularly distasteful. More generally, she charges that social historians have been unable to present a coherent picture of change, because of their confusion over what causes change and their stylistic aversion to narrative. Thus some sense that social historians have detracted from a coherent picture of the past emerges from several sources.

The critiques from without social history, those from within, and what I have suggested as the needed but incomplete transition from a field defined as new topics, to a field more maturely explored in new syntheses, add up to several key issues: first, there is need for attention to styles of presentation, so that a clear definition emerges of past periods and of changes from one period to the next. If as I believe social history must continue largely to avoid a narrative mode, in favor of concern with larger processes which sum up countless discrete events such as birth-spacing decisions or work-pace determinations, then it must do so explicitly. This involves conveying, as dramatically as possible, the human meaning of such processes and their evolution over time. Explicit style, in this sense, entails reasoned use of the factor of historical time: careful periodization must become a standard prerequisite in social history writing, as it already is in the more compelling syntheses in such areas as protest or leisure. Reliance on fresh and exciting topics and sources can no longer excuse unclear or random periodization. Second, there is every reason to turn increasingly to richer syntheses than have been characteristic of the field to date. Richness can come from the exploration of many processes in a single place and limited cluster of time periods – up to and including that elusive "total history." Or it can come from comparative ventures. Or it can come from attempts to carry a phenomenon or linked phenomena over a long time span. Richness in any of these senses must involve utilization of several types of sources, and a careful utilization of established work. Examples of the rich synthesis are already available in social history. Critics who claim that social historians have not developed a large vision ignore, for example, the great improvements in our understanding of the industrial revolution, as a whole phenomenon, or of slavery and its impact on a whole society, that have resulted from social-historical work. They ignore the strong theoretical content of work on the history of popular protest or of old age, which offer rich synthetic frameworks despite the relative novelty of the topics. And it is also valid to remind that historians of all kinds, conventional as well as social, are not in the main productive of large visions. But clearly, a more widespread orientation toward synthesis is called for in the field, and it is feasible. Finally, there is need for reconsideration of the relationship between social and political history. In various ways, radical and conventional-historian critiques (including, in fairness, some solid passages in the Himmelfarb article) have conjoined on this point. Again, it is important not to overstate. Much social history has long included a political element. But it is true that many social historians, in their topical enthusiasms, myopically defined themselves by their disinterest in the political process[17] – and some conventional historians, eager to dismiss their social brethren as a group of topical faddists, did the same.

These various challenges are serious. They require a growing number of social historians to widen their horizons. They require, in some cases, more stringent standards for conceiving and evaluating monographic productions. But serious challenge is not the same as hopelessness or surrender. Against those who, like Himmelfarb, essentially try to dismiss the findings of social history, social historians can rightly claim that they have sufficiently redefined the field as to make this kind of reaction inexcusable. Himmelfarb may lament that some students are learning about major changes in women's 19th-century roles along with data about the American constitution, but the obvious response is to rejoice that our vision of the past has been so fruitfully expanded. We quite simply know more about how society functions and how change occurs than we did twenty years ago, a knowledge relevant to students and to other disciplines as well as to historians, and social history can claim considerable responsibility for these gains. Against those who argue for a return to narrative, social historians must insist that the event is no longer the crucial focus of historical inquiry and that conventional narrative must be increasingly confined to occasional illustrations of key processes or the depiction of unusual events that themselves altered some basic features of society; the normal method of presentation must change and is changing. Social history's growing maturity involves a need to recognize and profit from some vigorous internal debates, while recognizing some common underlying beliefs about what the essential features of the past consist of. Endemic debate, plus rearguard action from historians who wish against the facts that social history had not happened, do not add up to a real crisis in social history, whose somewhat chaotic vitality continues to be high.

This point is crucial in preparing the final, less familiar aspect of assessing social history's relationship to the wider profession. For despite social history's tremendous surge during the past quarter century, most discussion of the field, from within or without, continues to embody a strange air of tentativeness. What is this "new" phenomenon? Isn't it about time we got back to basics and dropped all this ordinary people stuff? Isn't it time to revive the narrative as standard form? Questions of this sort, it seems to me, are really outdated now. Social history is no longer new, though it is true that it must still be defined to some groups. The field is not in fact about to fold up its tents in favor of a return to a largely unaltered conventional discipline. Indeed, I would argue that we may increasingly see the period in which social history was ill-developed, confined to pots-and-pans antiquarianism, as the genuine anomaly in the history of the discipline.[18] After all, the preconditions of social history were well established by the late 19th century. Figures as diverse as Marx, Weber and even Beard saw the importance of dealing with basic processes and with cultures in relation to material forces, while developing a method of exposition other than narrative. What happened was that, for over a half-century, most history writing and research got captured by the dynamic of the growing nation state. Since most history teachers were in fact employed to serve the purposes of this state, it was small wonder that even many critical researchers put on the political blinders, viewing political narrative as a fairly closed box. But this means that the rise of social history is in fact a revival, and a timely one from the standpoint of a more independent as a well as wider vision of the past. And it suggests at least that social history's surge will not be a finite one.

Impact and Responsibilities

But this kind of analysis, inevitably brief and open to debate as well as elaboration, means that some of the usual terms of discussion must now be rethought. The real issues posed by social history are not self-defense or rationalization by interlopers on hallowed turf, but rather an ongoing assessment of the impact of a changing historical

vision. At some levels, I think we are already moving toward this new ground. Conventional periodication, for example, is being rethought in light of social history criteria and findings. The Renaissance, in European history, looms less large than it once did as a result, while the Reformation takes on additional and far-reaching meaning. College-level texts in United States as well as European history are being redefined, if too gradually, to make social history content an integral part of basic organization.

A similar process must increasingly apply to the larger historical discipline. That is, social historians must take increasing responsibility for the impact of their work on historical understanding generally, rather than assuming that well-established or conventional branches can take care of themselves. If we remove the proof-of-durability burden from social historians, and recognize the field as established and indeed expanding fact, then we can increasingly ask not only what conventional historians are going to do about social history – which is what much of the previously-discussed critique has been about – but also what social historians are going to do about conventional history.

For the rise of social history has undeniably distorted the history discipline, in ways that now merit reconsideration freed from any assumption that the field will conveniently fade away or even docilely confine itself to a set topical bailiwick. There are also, of course, a number of tasks resulting from social history's durable ensconcement, ranging from further reevaluation of survey periodization to the challenging task of integrating social history more fully into teaching, particularly at the pre-college level. But these areas already show progress, and result more naturally from adjustments to social history's rise than do the distortions which have resulted from social history's impact to date.

The first distortion strikes me as exceptionally important but not difficult in principle to resolve. The rise of social history partially preempted a vigor and enthusiasm that might otherwise have gone into more comparative research and teaching in world history. This result, acceptable during social history's establishment, strikes me as undersirable for the long run. Social history has encouraged, albeit on new and exciting basis, a concentration on things American and Western that from most standpoints we should be trying to escape. For their part, the small band of world historians, though now again reviving, have often understandably attempted to simplify their task by avoiding much attention to the social history of non-Western regions (sometimes stating, with Lefton Stavrianos, that popular life does not vary much from place to place). Despite important ventures on the impact of disease, for example, William McNeill's work has largely adopted a rather old fashioned formal-cultural approach to world history, even omitting some areas in the world that cannot be seen as basic contributors to fundamental technologies or great ideas.[19] Area specialists in non-Western history, of course, have utilized social history emphases abundantly and with profit. There have even been exciting efforts to bridge between Western and non-Western social history, through use of concepts such as the moral economy.[20] And the world-systems approach of Immanuel Wallerstein obviously incorporates much from the material forces school of social historians. Thus there is no barrier in principle to a concomitant expansion of social history and a larger sense of the historical development and interaction of major world societies.

In fact, however, the most exciting and visible social history still probably distracts from any non-Western focus, at the level of teaching and survey-syntheses, though not in research. We have been able to discover details and patterns concerning family, and sex, and work history in the Western past that have yet to be rivaled in the study of most non-Western areas. Non-Western social history deals well with social structure

and power relationships, plus protest; it is only beginning to move into the examination of leisure patterns or family values. Yet if the social history thrust is not to impede a desirable expansion of Americans' historical horizons, we need to be able to disseminate a greater understanding of the sociohistorical contours of major world societies to match generalizations already possible for political trends or high culture. And this, it seems to me, poses an exciting agenda for the future, both for additional comparative research and for syntheses that go beyond making sense of the strands of Western history per se. Social historians, building on the important work already available in non-Western social history and encouraging additional research on topics established in the Western case, should be turning toward encouragement of comparative history and some forms of world history that exceed the Western framework while resolutely including sociohistorical approaches and categorizations in the resultant generalizations. The social history enthusiasm can become a base for promoting wider geographical horizons, instead of a de facto excuse for cultivating our own historical garden alone.

If social history has unwittingly, partly because of student-audience interests, limited a once-promising enthusiasm for non-Western history, it has also discouraged certain topics of historical inquiry whose decline now demands reevaluation. Diplomatic history, and to an extent military history, are the prime cases in point. While some of the waning interest in diplomatic history results from a national mood of self-absorbtion and perhaps a skepticism about the diplomat : process, a part of the decline is surely attributable to the incompatibility between social and conventional diplomatic history – such that when ones sector rises, the other fairly naturally falls. Diplomatic history, and certain types of military history, are by definition normally the provinces of elite actors. They do not clearly relate – though in fact they may so relate on further study – to social history's widened topical range. And of course the characteristic mode of diplomatic history, in proceeding through a narrative of events, differs markedly from social history's concern with treatment of change through process and pattern. Thus social historians, particularly in the United States, have not contributed much to diplomatic history or even to a large understanding of military history (as opposed to specific and promising excursions into the social history of common soldiers). And so the rise of social history has not only paralleled, but in part caused, the decline of diplomatic inquiry, or its migration to political science or strategic studies.

A social historian can make a strong case, of course, for the need for a partial rebalancing of historical topics, such that diplomatic history would automatically loom less large than was once the case. And some kinds of diplomatic history may simply not merit much further inquiry, in that the relevant features are already known. There are, after all, subjects in many disciplines which must be taught but which do not permit of new discoveries; diplomatic history may thus in part (aside from the need to establish the empirical record of recent decades) resemble the field of general anatomy in medicine, in which no new discoveries have been made for over a half century. But surely a whole discipline in which diplomatic history, defined as relations betwen states including wars,[21] seems a rather dreary appendage is a distortion, quite apart from the need for vigorous work on recent developments and for periodic reinterpretation even of familiar data to fit current interests. Diplomatic shifts and military conflicts do count, and if we do not continue to use history to improve our understanding of this aspect of human society we risk a harmful division of interest between a fascination with domestic matters and an apathy or resignation toward crucial questions of war and peace. Indeed, I suspect that many social historians opted for their topics and approach because of an ideological aversion to diplomatic strategems and military establishments which, while understandable, cannot be allowed to set the agenda for the whole historical discipline.

But if new imbalances are to be corrected — and I do think the separation of a flourishing domestic history from a languishing study of international relations is the most crucial instance — the question is how. The first step, a plea for social historians to take more responsibility for this aspect of the whole discipline, is vague but not without some utility. Certainly in planning curricula, courses and texts, social historians can strive to join hands with diplomatic and military historians who are from their side of the divide groping for realistic ways to link their interests with the new level of understanding of internal social change. But beyond this step, a crucial question remains to be answered as to whose terms are to govern any reintegration of history.

It is possible to envisage a properly-balanced curriculum and research agenda in history that simply builds on the current bifurcation of the field between those who think of the past mainly in terms of changing patterns of outlook and behavior, and those who structure the past in terms of an event-filled narrative focussed around the activities of the state. Indeed, in talking with high school teachers about how to build survey courses that seriously deal with social history but continue to attend to the more familiar political-diplomatic framework, an alternation between approaches seems almost imperative at least for the present time. After all, if research historians have yet to produce syntheses that embrace the political, the diplomatic and the social in a single scheme, apart from a few magisterial exceptions such as Braudel's work, we can hardly expect survey teachers to do better.

And some bifurcation of approach does seem inevitable if not theoretically desirable, not only because of the powerful divergent traditions that have now grown up in different branches of the discipline. An event-based narrative approach that is both impossible and undesirable in dealing with demographic change or shifts in leisure functions can certainly be defended for aspects of elite decision-making, where personal vagaries are more easily ascertained and frankly count for more because of the power position of their authors.

Yet a durable split between narrative and social history camps is undesirable and unnecessary, even though the timing and precise form of the healing cannot as yet be predicted. On the level of style, social historians are in fact learning to use narrative not as their basic structure but for illustrative purposes. At the same time, "new" political and diplomatic histories strive for greater attention to patterns and processes. More generally, the gap between the past as an evolution of processes and the past as parade of events *can* in principle be bridged, as we learn to deal with events as part of more sweeping social trends — as illustrations of some patterns, causes of change in others. This is not an approach foreign to political and diplomatic history in any case, for all the fascination with narrative storylines. We have long been familiar with concepts such as balance of power strategies, critical elections, or crucial changes in the functions of governments that really parallel the social historian's concern for processes and patterns in worlds of work, play and family. We are not even completely unfamiliar — though here I think continued reemphasis is needed — with the tracing of key developments, such as the invention of printing or the industrial revolution, in their diplomatic, political and "social" ramifications. It seems then theoretically possible, and certainly desirable, to work toward a greater unification of history-as-a-set-of-topics on the basis of a common concern for viewing the past in terms of changes in patterns of behavior and outlook, and a common concern also for seeking linkages among such changes as between elites and commoners; and among a variety of social functions from diplomacy and warmaking to childrearing and play. That final syntheses will never be achieved is undeniable; indeed it would in a way be disappointing if they were, for the quest is the pleasure. But a new determination to see history as a whole once again seems a suitable and feasible goal for the discipline, so long as the "whole" is not crammed into outdated confines.

Elements of this new integration may not be quite as difficult to come by as is often assumed. There are, as indicated earlier, important parallels between key and endemic tensions in social history, over political orientation, method and causation, and familiar issues in the mother discipline. Now that we know that neither social history nor history-in-general, for example, is strictly quantitative or strictly qualitative, arguments over the appropriate balance become causes for mutual concern, not gaps between branches of history. The plea for greater integration does ask for two shifts on the part of social historians — shifts frequently urged in the past, increasingly necessary as social history reaches a new maturity. The first shift, already sketched, is the curb on the tendency to see social history as an endless proliferation of exciting new topics, in favor of greater attention to larger syntheses, with particular credit, at least during a transition phase, for cogent periodization, linkage between process and event, and, of course, connections between "social" and political or diplomatic themes. For, in the second shift, social historians as a group must no longer indulge a sense that they can isolate their topics from appropriate concern for political or even diplomatic change. This does not mean that every social historical inquiry must leap to political ramifications in the conventional sense. Examination of groups without much explicit political consciousness, inquiry into areas of behavior not much touched by government functions, remain valid. There is no need to assume, a priori, that politics always provides the coherent touchstone to which all other processes must be related — unless, as in some accounts, politics itself is meaninglessly redefined to include all human relationships. But the social historian's identity can no longer be honed on a neglect of politics; indeed, it is possible to doubt that it recently has been so defined, in a field that has produced new findings about the bases for political action among the lower classes or the importance of state functions in modern family history.

The idea of a reintegration of the discipline on the basis of social history's durability calls, I admit, for more radical shifts on the part of many non-social historians than among social historians. While there is no reason to expect collapse of old-guard resentments, it is realistic to hope for a gradual decline of attacks on social history per se; indeed, just as individual intellectual historians and historians of medicine have moved to an embrace of a social history approach while preserving their topical interests, so a wide range of conventional historians can actively participate in the new syntheses.[22] This kind of integration requires an admission of the expansion in history's topical range. This admission need not equate the inarticulate and the elites as actors in all major historical processes, or merge histories of crime with histories of alliances as equal windows on the past. But it does require acknowledgement that history has changed and that social history cannot be relegated to a discrete and hopefully inferior set of topical interests. This means that areas like diplomatic history must be opened to consideration of new factors, and not treated as self-contained boxes — an openness already common when treating phenomena such as imperialism, which obviously juxtapose social and economic as well as diplomatic systems, but less common in treating more conventional diplomatic exchanges. The second shift involves the issue that has most clearly run through a discussion of current critiques of social history and the less-familiar plea for renewed efforts at integration. With due recognition of the need for conventional narrative for some teaching purposes and to reach certain kinds of audiences, and for its role in dealing with events as causation, I am obviously suggesting that a reintegrated history proceed mainly from the analytical historian's interest in pattern and process, his concern for society-wide reactions to basic transformations such as new technologies or new personal values, now expanded to history's full topical range. This approach, alone, penetrates how the past actually happened, as opposed to how what happened unfolded in the more limited and

sometimes more superficial sphere of events. This approach alone, it seems to me, conveys to the users of history what really should be learned about the past.

Social historians are not alone in urging further movement away from the event-based narrative; indeed the "new" political and other historians preceded them in the quest at least in the United States. But the challenge that social history continues to pose for the larger discipline consists above all of the need to work out a new topical equilibrium through attention to the changing patterns of social and institutional life. Social history does not elevate a single process — such as voting habits, or economic forms — to unquestioned preeminence; it is not deterministic in this sense, and so contrasts with earlier subfields whose interest in process was overshadowed by claims that a particular kind of process constituted the core historical inquiry. But social history does encourage an approach that contrasts with much conventional historical wisdom, even with the proliferation of "new" histories in various fields — a contrast which explains why social historians still often feel isolated, even beleaguered in the larger discipline and conventional historians often hostile to what remains to them an upstart method of envisaging the past.

For the concern with basic processes in society — including cultural processes or mentalities — is turning out to be social history's main contribution to broadening and refocusing history-in-general. In modern social history this refocusing adds up to an effort to determine, in Charles Tilly's words, how people have lived through the "big changes,"[23] (but also, I would add, how they have helped shape these changes) which may of course be somewhat variously defined but on which there can now be considerable agreement. Social history has long suffered, and still draws skepticism, because of its lack of a coherent, continuous phenomenon as an object of study comparable to the state for political history. For a time social historians seemed to be offering the inarticulate as their alternative, but this is not provably a consistent rival to the state, in terms of coherence, and in any event now captures social history too narrowly, given advances in understanding elites as well as commoners. But if there is nothing exactly comparable to the state as social history's ultimate focus, the alternative, basic processes such as technological and demographic change or shifts in popular outlook or elite-mass cultural relationships, is genuine and workable. If such a focus lacks the simplicity of the state, which in fact is embraced in basic processes both as actor and as creature, it gains in comprehensiveness, in its enhanced ability to capture the complexity of social change. This challenging new focus, the essential product of social history's own maturation over earlier and narrower definitions, is the key device for re-linking social history with history-in-general.

An agenda of reintegration of history substantially on social history's base is not without brashness. It has at least the merit of counterbalancing the recent unrealistic attempts to simplify the discipline by pretending that, in crucial respects, social history has not happened or is about to stop. The bifurcation of history that has followed from social history's rise is not the result, simply, of social historians' inattention to style or failures of synthesis; it also results from stubbornness on the part of some of the historians who charge themselves with particular responsibility for treating politics and diplomacy in the past. The bifurcation is not fundamentally fruitful; it differs from other kinds of tensions which lead to productive debate.[24] It unduly complicates efforts, in teaching as well as research synthesis, to convey something of the wholeness of past periods — efforts which are doomed to imperfection even in the best of circumstances. Social history has, over the past quarter-century, provided not only considerable new knowledge about historical change. It has also provided an excitement that can usefully inform the whole historical discipline, and it is beginning to generate

historically-based contacts among the various specialties that examine the human condition[25] that should involve the whole discipline as well. It is time to build on the growing sense that a period of confusion in the discipline needs to find resolution, and to do so on a basis that takes full advantage of the advances that social history has brought, though unevenly and incompletely, to the historical endeavor.

Peter N. Stearns

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FOOTNOTES

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the American Historical Association meetings in December, 1984. I am grateful to James Martin for suggesting the presentation, to Charles Tilly, Michael Adas, Akira Iriye, and Allan Bogue for various suggestions, and to John Modell and other colleagues at Carnegie-Mellon University for commenting creatively on previous drafts.

1. The claim of a new and explicit surge in social history starting about 25 years ago, while valid, should not obscure the important sociohistorical work done earlier in the United States, as in immigrant studies, urban studies and on scattered other topics.

2. For example, Stephan Thernstrom's first work on mobility; Genovese's first work; the early articles from the "1960s" generation of colonial social historians; Tilly's study of the Vendée.

3. Tony Judt, "'A Clown in Regal Purple:' Social History and the Historians," *History Workshop* (1979): 66-94; Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective," *Journal of Social History* 10 (1977): 205-20.

4. Charles Tilly, "The Old New Social History and the New Old Social History," *Review* 7 (1984): 363-406; James Henretta, "Social History as Lived and Written," *American Historical Review* 84 (1979): 1293-1323.

5. This is a danger not fully avoided in some recent work on family emotionality, though appropriate strategies are now available. Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York, 1977); Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in 18th Century England* (New York, 1978); Peter N. Stearns with Carol Z. Stearns, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards," *American Historical Review* (1985).

6. See for example Lawrence T. McDonnell, "'You Are Too Sentimental:' Problems and Suggestions for a New Labor History," *Journal of Social History* 17 (1984): 629-54.

7. See for example the various work of John Modell, Maris Vinovskis, Edward Shorter, Tamara Hareven.

8. R.B. Zajnoc, "Family Configuration and Intelligence," *Science* 192 (1976): 227-35.

9. Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1800* (Cambridge, Eng., 1984); Ellen Rothman, *Hands and Hearts; A History of Courtship in America* (New York, 1984).

10. Lawrence Stone, *Past and Present* (Boston, 1981).

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11. Tilly, "The Old New Social History;" E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments," *Past and Present* (1980), #86; 3-8.

12. Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Bawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540-1880* (Oxford, 1984).

13. C. Vann Woodward, "A Short History of American History," New York Times *Book Review*, Aug. 8, 1982, pp. 3, 14.

14. Geoffrey Elton, "Review of Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*," *New York Review of Books* (May 8, 1984).

15. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Denigrating the Rule of Reason: The 'new history' goes bottoms up," *Harper's Magazine* (April, 1984).

16. It also reflects, at least in arguments such as Himmelfarb's, the new conservative mood in the United States, such that social history's gains in discovering serious historical stuff beneath the elite levels can be so facilely argued away with even remote hope of credence.

17. Darrett Rutman, "Comment" (on Henretta, "Social History"), *American Historical Review* 84 (1979): 1323.

18. J.C. Wilsher, " 'Power Follows Property' – Social and Economic Interpretations in British Historical Writing in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries," *Journal of Social History* 16 (1983): 7-26.

19. William H. McNeill, *A World History* (3rd ed., New York, 1979).

20. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1976); Thomas Holloway, *Immigrants on the Land: Coffee and Society in Sao Paulo, 1886-1934* (Chapel Hill, 1980). Additional use of moral economy concepts for Latin America is currently in progress.

21. In a diplomatic history thus broadly, and untraditionally, defined, a number of social-political historians have already contributed, including Charles Maier, J.M. Winter, and Myron Gutmann.

22. See, in intellectual history, the work and evolution of Robert Darnton; and in the impressive transformation of the history of medicine, not only the efforts of social historians ab initio, but also the creative shift of practitioners such as Charles Rosenberg.

23. Charles Tilly, "Retrieving European Lives," in Olivier Zunz, ed., *Reliving the Past* (University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

24. Thus a reification of two kinds of history, through creation of separate institutional bases as in Britain, is ultimately unproductive for both branches, in contrast, say, to the German pattern which has more freely allowed interchange between "social" and conventional historians over both familiar and novel themes in German history, or the French pattern which, admittedly, leans more heavily toward a social historian's definition of the past but which has, not perhaps accidentally, produced some of the most creative historical syntheses of recent decades.

25. I refer here particularly to a growing sense that social historians can generate relevant, period-specific theories of human behavior, in areas such as social psychology, rather than depend, as historians of all sorts have too often done when interested at all in a social science approach, on other disciplines for theoretical equipment which they then dutifully use or humbly test. See Theodore Zeldin, "Personal History and the History of the Emotions," *Journal of Social History* 15 (1982): 339-48.

SOCIAL HISTORY AND THE REVOLUTION IN AFRICAN AND ASIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

The rise of social history to a prominent position in research and scholarship on virtually all areas of Africa and Asia has come about with a good deal less tension between the "new history" and conventional work than Peter Stearns' essay, as well as earlier articles by Lawrence Stone, and others,[1] indicate has been the case in European or American history. There have, of course, been notable clashes between the defenders of straight narrative – which in Afro-Asian history usually meant little more than dry chronology – and proponents of innovative approaches stressing non-elite social groups or processes rather than events. Victor Purcell's infamous review of G. William Skinner's fine work on *Chinese Society in Thailand* comes immediately to mind.[2] Most African and Asian historians who came of age in the 1960s and early 1970s can also recall moments of confrontation that made them all too aware that their avid interest in peasants, untouchables, or other varieties of non-elite groups was not history for those in positions of academic power. After I had delivered a talk some years ago at the University of London comparing millenarian movements in Burma and Java, the venerable D.G.E. Hall, whose *History of Southeast Asia* was the very epitome of conventional history, asked (gently and with good humor) if I had lost my way. The sociology department, he observed, was in another part of the building. Despite these inevitable points of friction, social historians have had a relatively easy time in establishing an important, if not predominant, place for their concerns in the scholarship on most African and Asian areas. The reasons for the rapid ascent of social history on Third World areas are complex, but most of them can be traced to a convergence, since World War II, of trends in the training of area specialists, challenges posed by upheavals in Third World areas, and the growing strength of social history in the discipline of history as a whole in this period.

African or Asian social history was, of course, not without pre-World War precedents. These can be found as early as the fourteenth century when the Arab historian, Ibn Khaldun, set standards for the historical analysis of societal change that contemporary scholars could do well to emulate. In more recent times, scholars of the caliber of Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, Wolfram Eberhard, and B. Schrieke had amply demonstrated in the decades before the Second World War the great analytical and comparative potential of social history focusing on African and Asian areas. It was, however, the proliferation of area studies programs, beginning in the 1950s, that provided the initial impetus towards the establishment of social history as a central concern of Third World scholars. From the outset, area study programs, whether in Chinese, Islamic, or African studies, were interdisciplinary. They were devised to educate scholarly researchers, government experts, and diplomats in a number of disciplines relating to particular non-Western areas and to convey a sense, if not a mastery of, total civilizations or cultures. As G. William Skinner has observed,[3] area studies programs emerged from a fusion of two scholarly traditions that were complimentary, but had long taken little notice of each other: anthropology and "Orientalism." In the area programs that developed in the United States and Western Europe, the Orientalists' study of philosophical and artistic "Great Traditions" was fused with the exploration of peasant or "tribal" cultures that until then had been mainly the concern of anthropologists. The very ambitious curriculums of the best of these programs were rooted in language