

PROBLEMS IN SOCIAL HISTORY: A SYMPOSIUM

Introduction

Louise and Charles Tilly

During the last few years, criticism of existing practice in social history has quickened. Some examples of forceful and influential statements on the subject are: Gareth Stedman Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," *British Journal of Sociology* (September 1976), 295-305; Tony Judt, "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians," *History Workshop Journal* (Spring 1979), 66-94; Elizabeth Fox Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History," *Journal of Social History* (1976), 205-221; and Lawrence Stone, "History and the Social Sciences in the Twentieth Century," in Charles F. Delzell, ed., *The Future of History* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1977).^{*} Complaints about the crassness, arrogance, and naïveté of those social historians who draw heavily on the social sciences have erupted in history since the econometricians burst upon the historical scene. But recent criticism contains some new elements: a desire to substitute cultural analyses and anthropological perspectives for the harder-edged sociological work which became popular in the 1960s; increased questioning of the epistemological bases and implicit political orientations of social history, especially as it is practiced in North America and particularly as it is influenced by the social sciences; and a tendency of historians who had previously pushed for a rigorous, autonomous brand of social history to develop doubts about the feasibility or desirability of that program. The statements by Stedman Jones, Judt, Fox Genovese and Genovese, and Stone differ dramatically. Taken together, however, they cover the full range of recent complaints.

These are serious questions, both because they touch the premises of social history, and because whatever consensus forms about them will shape the next round of work in the field. Concerned about the questions, and well aware of weaknesses in the current practice of social history, a group of historians and people from allied fields met in October, 1979 at the Center for Research on Social Organization, University of Michigan. They held a daylong discussion of the issues raised by the papers mentioned earlier. The debate was vigorous; the views expressed were contradictory; the discussion served to clarify differences rather than to resolve them.

Considering the significance of the issues, that is probably as it should be. Some of the participants in the discussion prepared brief, informal statements for circulation in advance. They were meant to provoke debate, not to settle it. Here we present some of those informal statements, in essentially the same form as when they passed from hand to hand in Ann Arbor. If they serve again to start an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of recent work in social history, that will be enough to ask of them.

*Your attention is also directed to two recent statements: Tony Judt, "The Rules of the Game," in *Historical Journal* (March, 1980), 181-191; and Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," in *Past and Present* (November, 1979), 3-24. (Editor's Note.)

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Social History and its Critics

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Whence the critique of social history? It comes at once from self-defined "political" and "conservative" critics. "Political" critics — usually marxist or *marxisant* — decry the lack of politics and political analysis in the practice of social history; they deduce serious consequences from this lack. Some go further: they insist that social science is tainted in its roots, its methods and its theories, and should therefore be shunned by ideologically enlightened historians. The "conservatives" wish to conserve what they believe to be the proper mission of history. They aim their attack chiefly at the methods and findings of social history: the methods as trivializing, the findings as trivial. Some of the "political" critics share the disapproval of social-scientific method and theory. They insist, also irritably, that social history has produced thin results and bastardized theory. The two tendencies thus converge on the mission of history and on its proper methods. What is history? Is history simply *narrative of past politics*? Such a narrow, exclusive definition gives no guarantee that human beings, with their consciousness and political identity, will return as the proper subjects of history, despite the faith of Judt and the Genoveses in that return. It simply means that those whose individual consciousness and political identity can be known easily and directly will again become the heroes of history. They are the literate, the elites, and the leaders of popular movements, parties, or organizations.

What is social history? To some degree, social history is the practice of those who call themselves social historians, which covers a lot of ground. The large middle ground, however, comprises the study of economic, political, and social structures, the analysis of collectivities — groups defined by class, occupation, sex, family position, geographic location, ethnicity, religion, etc. — in the past. Further, social history adopts appropriate theoretical perspectives to inform conceptualization and methodology. By definition, time is more important in political history's narrative of events. Nevertheless, social history ought to take time and place equally seriously. One of the key impulses of social history's development is (was) a populist vision that aims (aimed) to seek out how ordinary people lived and acted in the past. That these people seldom appear by name in the political narrative of events is another way of saying it is hard to discern their individual or collective consciousness in the narrow political sense, or that discernable collective consciousness is expressed episodically. In order to carry out this populist focus, much of social historians' practice has gone to establish baselines of economic and social interactions by asking questions about position: where people were.