

\*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.

Position is geographical, but it is also structural. Where people are located in the productive system, in or out of families and households, and what access they had to legitimate political action (their location in political structures) are, by definition, first static questions. Once position is established, questions about variation and comparison are possible: when and where which people act politically and how? These variations in political action are as much of the story as *the* narrative of politics in the formal sense. We have looked the people of the past in the eye and we do not find political consciousness or identity. We find that some aspects of their behavior were patterned in a collective way and slow to change. Do we run away, as some of the critics propose? Or do we describe all of the past and see when, where, and among whom consciousness and political action cut across it? Social historians start with implicit political questions, but dissatisfaction with the narrow way these have been and are posed pushes them into new methods, new areas of life, new categories of collective life. If the political historian is dissatisfied that social historical studies frequently do not make the political connections or links (an exact parallel to the social historian's belief that political history leaves out too many people, too much of the past), she can and should take the findings of social historians and integrate them into her political history. This integration is essential. That some who cry for a return to politics overlook it makes one wonder about their politics — and their understanding of reality in the past.

I believe that examination of collective structures and behavior in the past can be carried on separately from the study of formal politics just as the study of formal politics can be carried on separately from economic and social activity. It is not everyone's task to intergrate the two, although to do so is obviously a historian's task. Political correctness is a separate issue from the tasks themselves, and political error is not more inherent in any one task, or topic, than in another. This is not to imply that social history is value free but that values and judgments are inherent in all historical research and writing.

Is quantitative method a waste of time, as Lawrence Stone insists? It is time-consuming; it certainly involves manipulating data from imperfect sources. What historical method doesn't? Quantification can be done properly: criticizing sources, asking questions appropriate to the sources, attempting to evaluate alternative answers or test quasi-experimental comparative hypotheses. Such historically grounded and theoretically informed quantified analysis can question, improve, or disprove social science theories about historical processes developed by contemporary observation. Such quantified historical analysis can indicate directions for a new, detailed historical case study, and it can provide new middle-level theory to social science. Asking it to provide a universal theory of change is simply too demanding. Such quantified historical analysis requires careful conceptualization, and it requires making common historical and social science categories themselves problematic. An example from women's history is the use of the word "work".

Most contemporary social sciences use the word to mean remunerated productive or service activity done for exchange outside the household. Historians, faced with the fact that such "work" emerged as the majority of pro-

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

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### "Clowns in Regal Purple" – A Response

Edward Shorter

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

Come on, Tony! Do we really have to go back to the Workers' Struggle? After a long blast at us as scholarly incompetents, disingenuous conservatives, and brainless quantifiers, we learn who Judt's real heroes are, "that minority of social historians who remain committed to the proper pursuit of history." They are people such as Eugene and Betsy Genovese, Albert Soboul, Rolande Treppe and E.P. Thompson, all worthy historians of course, but all old-line marxists. They made their reputations writing about Worker's Struggle. What Judt wants us to do now is abandon the new directions in which we've tried to move, directions concerning how patterns of intimate everyday life have shifted over the centuries, and go back to writing the history of the union movement! If he came out and said this directly, few people would listen. Everyone would yawn and go home. So this appeal to return to the history of the class struggle, as it was taught in Albert Soboul's classes...oh, circa 1957... must be concealed under three kinds of flummery. Each kind makes it appear that Judt is inviting us to return to some kind of dignified royal road of history, a road on which no historian could turn his or her back without guilt pangs, a royal road of broad political history in which "events" are somehow to be returned to their proper place and "vague trends" sent tumbling into the eternal outer darkness of sociology. Judt requires several sleights of hand to make us think the dull old marxist-leninist boilerplate is really some kind of noble historical tradition.