

Making History

The changing face of the profession in Britain

Social History

Eric Evans

Social history in the early 21st century seems to be experiencing something of an identity crisis. This may seem surprising. During the second half of the 20th century it established a dominant position in research and an increasingly influential one in undergraduate teaching. Social history flourished on its eclecticism. Much more than did 'conventional' history writing, it assimilated both ideas and methodologies from other disciplines.

The pioneering work of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in establishing the so-called *Annales school* brought methods of social scientific enquiry to historical scholarship before the Second World War. These, allied to an emphasis on cultures and *mentalities*, especially of pre-industrial societies, became increasingly influential throughout Europe and the United States thereafter. Similarly, revisionist work on slavery and slave cultures in the US from the 1950s onwards owed much to anthropological research and, especially, to debates about basic similarities which characterised different ethnic groups, however different their political, economic and cultural situations.⁽¹⁾ It was characteristic of both approaches that the primary fields of enquiry were social groups which lacked both wealth and power. Social history was widely considered to have a 'bottom-up' approach, offering a welcome and necessary corrective to a dominant 'top-down' historiography overwhelmingly concerned with the doings of emperors and elites.

Although much good social history had been produced in the United Kingdom somewhat earlier, it hurtled to prominence there in the 1960s. This was partly in reaction to the view that British students followed curricula which encouraged them to assume that only the activities of the great and the wealthy deserved detailed research, record and debate. The new emphasis on history from below partly reflected the oppositional *zeitgeist* of a turbulent decade which encouraged a much broader understanding of the past. The role of the individual played a part too. The 1960s witnessed the emergence of a number of supremely gifted historians whose writings, and in some cases whose personal charisma, inspired their pupils to strike out on new paths. To take just one example, our understanding of the impact and significance of Britain's industrial revolution was utterly transformed by the writings of Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Harold Perkin, all of whom wrote immensely influential monographs on the subject during the 1960s.

What made social history so compelling was not so much the pulling down of the historiographically mighty from their seats (although Thompson and Hobsbawm as leading contemporary, if idiosyncratic, Marxist thinkers certainly had much more time for 'people's champions' such as Tom Paine and William Cobbett than for bastions of 'old corruption' such as William Pitt or Viscount Castlereagh) as the emergence of a historical discipline grounded in tough-minded structural analysis. Not for the scholars of the 1960s and 1970s that *ersatz* social history which offered romanticised vignettes of individuals previously 'hidden from history' or the idea that effective social history could be written via descriptions of 'ordinary life' or costume displays in glass cases. Social history was for them a

vital, combative discipline much more interested in groups than in individuals per se and in the frequently antagonistic interactions which accelerated the pace of change in past societies.

Social historians made extensive, some might say promiscuous, use of social science methodologies. They posited hypotheses; they counted; they looked for trends. Above all, they investigated past societies in the mass. Beginning from the truism that mankind is a social animal, they focused on group behaviour and on the factors which conduced those groups to conflict and sometimes – their critics suggested all too rarely – to co-operate.

For a time, social history seemed to rule the historical roost. Specialist undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in social history were devised, with the so-called new ‘plateglass universities’ of the 1960s in the fore. What might be termed ‘orthodox history degrees’ underwent substantial curriculum change. Students were encouraged to understand the social context of political developments. The long, and still unhalted, retreat from the study of [diplomacy and foreign policy](#) (where such contexts usually had less purchase) began. As is normally the case in universities, these developments compelled hierarchical recognition. Harold Perkin at Lancaster became in 1969 the first of many UK academics to occupy a named chair as ‘Professor of Social History’. The [Social Science Research Council](#) (SSRC), established in 1965, funded research and allocated postgraduate awards specifically to students of social and economic history – a development which symbolised social history’s status as a true social science.

Why did the apparently unstoppable march of social history lose momentum? What explains why social history, as one historian recently put it, might be described as ‘a rather anxious pursuit’?(2) The optimistic interpretation is that its ‘anxiety’ derives from the lack of any obvious new historical territories to conquer. The social historians of the previous generation believed themselves to be fighting a definitional war – and they had won it. It is no longer plausible either to research or to teach history, even history concerned with [high politics](#), without consideration of the social dimension.

One of the most accomplished, if under-used, pieces of 18th-century British social history was written by a historian trained in the old disciplines of political history. It studied the English aristocracy, explaining why an increasingly confident and wealthy bourgeoisie rarely challenged continued social domination by a landed elite. The explanation lies in understanding the wider social context, which is best done as the author modestly claimed, by practising ‘a little structural analysis’. He used the techniques of social history to explain that the British aristocracy was never a closed caste and why its relative openness had such profoundly dynamic consequences as Britain established itself as the most economically developed nation on earth.(3) For those who believed social history to be a coherent and integrative discipline, it was tempting to reflect ‘We are all social historians now’.

In one sense, such a statement was a truism but the complacency it implies was misplaced. Few historians are comfortable painting on the illimitable canvass of an ‘integrative discipline’. It is also the natural propensity of most research specialists to want to know more and more about less and less. The logical consequence is Balkanisation. In the United Kingdom, furthermore, this was enhanced from the late 1980s by a grotesquely wasteful and misbegotten [Research Assessment Exercise](#) (RAE). This encouraged too many scholars to play safe and too many of their ‘academic managers’ to play games aimed at massaging and manipulating redundant league tables to their own institution’s advantage. The end product too often was narrow, unimaginative and wearisomely repetitive ‘research outputs’.

For some scholars, the term ‘social history’ has long seemed unhelpfully broad. Britain has no shortage of specialist societies and groups dedicated to the study of specific aspects of social history. From a very long list, The [British Agricultural History Society](#) , founded in 1952, aims to promote

the study of agricultural history and the history of the rural economy and society. The [Society for the Study of Labour History](#) was founded in 1960 and has focused on working men and women, particularly through the institutions they created and used. Some groups advocated an interdisciplinary approach to social history. The [Society for the Social History of Medicine](#), for example, founded in 1970, encourages membership from those 'interested in a variety of disciplines, including history, public health, demography, anthropology, sociology, social administration and health economics'. Interdisciplinary perspectives have become increasingly prominent in historians' work during the last 30 years.

It is interesting to note that the [Social History Society](#) of the UK, founded 'to encourage the study of the history of society and cultures' did not appear until 1976, well after the foundation of many of the relevant specialist learned societies. Recognising the increasing influence of social history, its aim was to accommodate, if not to integrate, these more specialist branches. Its reference to 'history of ... cultures', anticipated the 'take-off' of [cultural history](#) from the 1980s onwards.

No one could possibly describe the expansion of [women's history](#) from the 1970s as 'narrowing' or deny the impact it had on the discipline of history as a whole. Recent historiography has sought to emphasise the diversity of women's experience and to relate it to variables such as religion, wealth and cultural context. Whether the recent development of studies of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' as 'totalising' social constructs will be fruitful it is still too early to say. The likelihood is that excessive concentration on 'gender' will encounter the same analytical problems as did concentration on 'class'.

Has the increasing influence of cultural history sidelined social history? There are two reasons for thinking so. First, the Marxist influence on social history was substantial and long-lasting, yet by the 1980s it seemed increasingly anachronistic. For some, it consigned social history to the study of inflexible structures and placed too heavy an emphasis on conflict models of society. Second, cultural interpretations of historical experience seemed liberating, offering more potential for exciting new avenues to be explored. Cultural history, it rapidly became clear, was much more than the history of culture, be it 'popular' or 'elite'. It was concerned with the search for meanings, and particularly with understanding how people in the past made sense of their world. The emphasis was less on 'society', and particularly not society as a set of structures; it was on individuals, attitudes and beliefs. Cultural historians were interested in group activity but of a less formal kind – not so much in trade unions or political societies but in carnivals, celebrations, rituals and festivals.

Central to this development was the [application of aspects of literary theory to historical study](#). Cultural historians increasingly saw their sources as 'texts' which, subjected to 'discourse analysis', provided cultural evidence of how people perceived themselves as operating within a public sphere. Literary theory aligned with insights derived from anthropology seemed to offer rich dividends not only in a deeper understanding of the lives of the non-literate (whose voices had all too often been dimly and distortedly heard through the official records of those who judged them or ordered them about) but also of issues relating to identities, both personal and local, and the importance of collective memory.

One might comment that the work of the cultural historian could be easily assimilated within the 'totalising vision' of social history. The Social History Society established a new journal, [Cultural and Social History](#), in 2004. This attempted just such an assimilation while also seeking 'to move the discipline beyond the limits of both social and cultural history as traditionally approached by emphasizing the ways in which the "social" and the "cultural" are mutually informing ... approaching society and culture as inextricably linked enables a fuller understanding of both'.

Inextricably linked the two approaches may be, but it is difficult to deny that the main impetus in the last two decades has been provided by cultural history. Social history, is still widely taught and has undoubtedly transformed the agenda of political historians over the past half century. However, it is also widely considered – not least by the new generation of postgraduate students applying for funding from the [Arts and Humanities Research Council](#) and the [Economic and Social Research Council](#) – both less fashionable and less ‘cutting edge’ than is cultural history.

Should we then conclude, incidentally misappropriating Dean Acheson, that social history has lost an academic empire and has not yet found a role? The picture is surely less bleak than this. Social history is necessarily concerned with an understanding and elucidation of structures: how folk engaged with one another, collaboratively, collectively, often in conflict – and at all levels from the family unit to national and even international identities. It is now abundantly clear that economic factors are only one aspect of this engagement, and often far from the most important ones. From an early 21st-century perspective, and making every allowance for its influence on the new literary theory, Marxism appears as busted an academic flush as it has long been a political one. Although Marxist historiography accommodated social, economic and political dimensions and recognised the need to explain how social relations develop, excessive emphasis both on economic factors and on class struggle precludes a rounded understanding of the totality of social relationships. Many historians consider much Marxist writing unhelpfully determinist.

Economic conflict will remain part of the social historian’s armoury in explaining the development and, not infrequently, the clash of institutions and structures but it offers only a fallible mechanism for explaining how people, in all their diversity of experiences, live and organise themselves. How quaint now seem those reductively hoary debates of the 1960s and 1970s about the impact of the industrial revolution on living standards or when ‘the working class’ was ‘made’. Work in the last 30 years on the history of women, on family life, on the uses of memory and on multiple identities has immeasurably enriched our experience of what is often, if inelegantly, referred to as ‘the social’. We now ask, almost as a reflex, how helpful a catch-all phrase such as ‘living standards’ is. Few historians retain much use for ‘the working class’ as an organising concept, although they will disagree as fiercely as ever on why it is deficient.

In the last 40 years or so, myriad new perspectives on, and approaches to, studying the past have been jostling for space, creating as their ideas collide huge but fissile sources of historical energy. It is time to stand back and re-appraise the impact of these changes. The task for the next generation is to harness that energy to create a new, clearer and broader historical narrative which incorporates the best of the new. If it ditches in the process the exclusivist jargon, ugly terminology and generally lazy writing which has characterised the work of too many historians influenced by post-structuralism and the so-called ‘[linguistic turn](#)’, so much the better. A re-energised social history, drawing on its integrative legacy while remaining open to new perspectives, is particularly well situated to take advantage of the opportunity.

1. For a short and valuable, if engaged, perspective, see R. W. Fogel, *The Slavery Debates, 1952–90: a Retrospective* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2003). [↑](#)
2. James Cronin ‘M memoir, social history and commitment: Eric Hobsbawm’s interesting times’, *Journal of Social History*, 37, 1, (2003), 219–31. [↑](#)
3. John Cannon, *Aristocratic Century* (Cambridge, 1984). [↑](#)

Suggested further reading:

Literature in this area is vast. The brief suggestions here are intended to lead readers to more extensive bibliographies. The sharpest insights into the historical profession, its pitfalls and opportunities, is probably now Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000). On social history specifically, the best detailed starting point is now probably Miles Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies and Methods* (London, 1999). *What is History Today?*, ed. David Cannadine (London, 2003) offers a lively and various collection of essays. A robust defence of the profession against the wilder attacks of postmodernism is presented by Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (2nd edn., London, 2001). His critics doubtless wish that he had entitled it 'Telling lies about postmodernism'! On oral history, an important technique which has influenced much writing on social history but which is not discussed here, see Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (3rd edn., Oxford, 2001).

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