
Béla Tomka

**Perfecting Institutionalization: The Foundation of the International Social
History Association**

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REVIEW ESSAY

PERFECTING INSTITUTIONALIZATION: THE FOUNDATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

By Béla Tomka

University of Szeged

In any discipline the existence of learned societies, the publishing of specialized journals and the organization of thematic conferences are among the major indicators of institutionalization and emancipation with other academic fields. As for the social history these attributes have already existed on national levels for a longer period of time. Internationally speaking, however, the institutionalization of social history was not complete until recently. There has not been a lack of journals since many prestigious periodicals, although primarily embedded into the academic life of those countries where they were edited and published, provided for a wide range of opportunities for international scholarly discourse—in some cases this aim even surfaced in the title of the journal (*International Review of Social History*). International social history conferences have rather been the events of certain branches of the discipline for a long time, such as in urban history. However, in the past decade, advancement can be seen in that respect as well. Since 1998, the *European Social Science History Conference* held in every second year has begun to play the role of a truly comprehensive and representative international conference of social history, at least at the European level, in spite of some deficits not detailed here.

As far as learned societies are concerned associations covering special fields of social history have already existed and they exist; we can refer again to the example of urban history (*European Association for Urban History*). An international organization embracing the whole field of social history, however, has not existed until very recent times.

This gap is more astonishing since several other areas of history have this kind of organization. For example the society of economic historians has been successfully operating for several decades (*International Economic History Association*) and other sub-disciplines that are even smaller than social history have their own professional bodies, such as the *International Society for the Didactics of History* or the *Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East*. The existence of learned societies of a specific discipline is, of course, not mainly a matter of prestige, they rather have an important practical value for the researchers of the discipline, which we will come back to later.

The reasons for this long-lasting gap—even at the time of the biggest expansion of social history in the 1960s and 1970s—can be a subject of debate: the myriads of research themes in social history, as well as the methodological heterogeneity of the discipline are definitely points we have to take into account here. Subjective factors must have had an effect as well: for a long time, there has not been any social historian with the invention and the broad network of

international contacts also undertaking the strenuous and timeconsuming work of organization.

To create a fuller picture, we should add that between 1951–2002 the *Commission internationale d'histoire des mouvements sociaux et des structures sociales* tried to encourage and coordinate the researches in social history at an international level but this mission could not be completely accomplished. Above all, the commission, as its name suggests, was originally created with a much narrower scope focusing on specific areas of social history. Besides, this professional body was somewhat isolated and locked into the French academic life, and could not fully open up to broader themes, approaches and other academic cultures. Furthermore, the death of the French chair of the commission made the further operation impossible and lead to the complete ceasing of it.

The gap in the institutionalization of social history described above was considered unacceptable by several social historians. In 2002, after the initiative of Jürgen Kocka (Berlin), social historians representing renowned research centres—Francis Demier (*Institut d'histoire sociale*, Paris), Marcel van der Linden (*International Institute of Social History*, Amsterdam), Bo Strath (*European University Institute*, Florence), Klaus Tenfelde (*Institut für Soziale Bewegungen*, Bochum), Path Thane (*Institute of Historical Research*, London)—founded the *International Social History Committee* in Berlin with a seat in Amsterdam. The committee pursued the preparation of a more comprehensive association aiming at organizing and coordinating international research in social history.

After these antecedents, on 8 July 2005 the *International Social History Association* (ISHA) was established at the *20th International Congress of Historical Sciences* in Sydney by 10 historians from the following countries: Australia, Canada, France, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands and Sweden.

The main goals of the association written in its statutes are the followings:

- to maintain and improve the personal contacts between scholars of all countries interested in social history in a broad sense;
- to organize academic meetings on social history (including international conferences);
- to encourage all forms of research and publications relevant to the development and diffusion of social history.

Although these are fairly general and long-term objectives, social history might already benefit from the foundation of the *International Social History Association* in the near future. First of all, the ISHA can apply for admission into other international academic associations, for example into the *International Committee of Historical Sciences* (ICHS) that organizes the *International Congress of Historical Sciences* every five year. As a result it will be possible for ISHA to have an impact on the thematic structure of congresses in the future with greater opportunities for sessions focusing on social history. Some colleagues already have specific plans: e.g. Hartmut Kaelble and Bo Strath are preparing a session on social policy for the next ICHS Congress that will be held in Amsterdam in 2010 and smaller seminars covering similar areas are also envisioned in the coming years; Rae Frances will prepare a session titled “Beyond the Linguistic Turn” for

the *European Social Science History Conference* 2008. Secondly, the ISHA itself is scheduled to organize smaller thematic conferences or workshops—such as the one on the future of social history—to arrange reports about the state of social history research and to publish a newsletter in English. For the editorial work of the newsletter volunteers with English mother tongue were sought that obviously limited the number of possible nominees. However, at the time of the writing of this report (at the end of 2005) the staff of the newsletter was taking form: Australian social historians (Lucy Taksa and her colleagues) would undertake the editorial tasks. The newsletter will be distributed in electronic form to all of those colleagues who are interested and request it.

Amsterdam was selected as the seat of the association where one of the world's most eminent research institutes focusing on social history, the *International Institute of Social History* can be found. Its director, Marcel van der Linden, has already undertaken a great part of the organization of the ISHA. The excellent infrastructure of the Institute can facilitate the work of the ISHA in the future.

The founding members formed the first *General Assembly* in Sydney and voted for the officials of the ISHA. Marcel van der Linden was elected as the first President of the Association. The *Executive Committee*—that is the most important decision-making organ between the General Assembly held in every fifth year—consists of 12 members.

All learned societies or individuals dealing with social history can be the member of the ISHA. The General Assembly decides about the admission to membership on the recommendation of the Executive Committee. Applications have to be handed over to the latter body. Membership fees are 25 EUR for individuals, 15 EUR for students and 300 EUR for institutions. Besides several individuals and the above-mentioned five institutes, the *Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, the *Canadian Committee on Labour History*, and the *Journal of Social History* have already applied for admission.

In sum, compared to other sub-disciplines of history an international learned society with the intention of embracing the whole of social history was created relatively late, in July 2005. Considering the past experiences of other similar institutions we can assume that the activities of the newly created International Social History Association will give further impetus to research in social history. This can be achieved, first of all, by strengthening its internationalization through the organization of forums for social historians to exchange ideas and through waving a dense network of personal contacts that facilitates cooperation between social historians working in diverse academic cultures.