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SOCIAL HISTORY AS A DISCIPLINE: DEVELOPMENT, THEMES AND METHODS

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Contents

[1. Eras of Social History: Formation, Expansion and Fragmentation](#)

[1.1 The Beginnings and Institutionalization of Social History](#)

[1.2. The Age of Expansion](#)

[1.3. The Era of Fragmentation](#)

[2. Themes and Methods: Openness and Its Consequences](#)

[2.1. The Facets of Thematization](#)

[2.2. Methodological Features](#)

[Related Chapters](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Biographical Sketch](#)

Summary

The academic field of what we regard as *social history* today has emerged in the second half of the 19th century and underwent a remarkable expansion in the 20th century. Although the gradual accumulation of knowledge in the field is not to be underrated, the foundation of the journal *Annales* in France in 1929 clearly initiated far-reaching changes with respect to the long-run development of social history. The diffusion of social history accelerated in the 1960s. In the United States and Western Europe social history became a major and completely institutionalized branch of historical sciences by the 1980s. As a by-product of the expansion, the discipline increasingly embraced divisions that had only loose relations with each other and which often applied diverging, and hardly reconcilable theoretical perspectives. Therefore, social history was characterized by a higher level of differentiation and even fragmentation than several other disciplines of history at the end of 20th century. Social history enlarged the spectrum of phenomena covered by historical research to a great extent; however, it is more than a simple thematic extension of historical studies, since it adheres to specific methods, or at the very least to a particular analytical style as well. Typologies, generalization and comparison occupy prominent places in the scholarly toolbar of social history, which in turn imply a more systematic treatment of methodological issues than what are required in the case of traditional historical works focusing on political events. All of these particularities bear consequences on the style and manner of presentation as well. While traditional historical works primarily rely on narration, social histories rather utilize analytical discourse, and quantification is often performed by social historians as well. The openness

towards the results and methods of other branches of social sciences and humanities is also a major characteristic, which has recently been the strongest towards cultural history. However, at the same time the relations with sociology have faded somewhat. Social history has indeed furthered the renewal of historical research to the greatest extent by its doubtless inclination for interdisciplinarity.

Social history is a branch of the historical sciences which assigns a major role to social phenomena when studying the past, since it either examines a specific aspect of social life, or focuses on society at large claiming that social change instead of politics, economy or other spheres should be at the centre of historical interpretation and synthesis. The discipline of social history is quite recent; it emerged in the second half of the 19th century, and underwent a remarkable expansion in the second half of the 20th century. In the following, the article provides a short overview of the formation and advance of the field, then it investigates its most significant thematic and methodological characteristics, and finally it dwells on the relationship between social history and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

1. Eras of Social History: Formation, Expansion and Fragmentation



1.1. The Beginnings and Institutionalization of Social History



The research field of the originally mostly interconnected economic and social history began its differentiation within history in the second half of the 19th century. Social history tended to distinguish itself, on the one hand, from traditional modes of historiography which were primarily interested in emperors, diplomacy, wars and political ideas, and, on the other hand, from economics as well that increasingly abandoned historical analysis at that time.

The emergence of social history had numerous preconditions. First, as a result of the diffusion of enlightenment philosophy, the notion of society as a distinct sphere appeared in Europe in the 18th century. Prior to that, political and social phenomena were generally not clearly distinguished. On the contrary, all members of the community were assumed to fuse into a "political body" that was stratified and hierarchical, still unified nonetheless. Secondly, again due to the influence of enlightenment political thinking, society itself was more and more conceived as an organic unity which takes form as a consequence of the actions of human beings and at the same time follows principles which can be subjected to empirical scrutiny. This does not mean, however, that passages could not be cited from earlier historical works which would be labeled today as social history. Herodotus and other later authors had already described customs and morals of the peoples, but rather as interesting detours without the already mentioned concept of society prevailing. Thus the idea that society is a domain consisting of groups with different interests and being distinct from politics and other spheres of life is clearly a modern development.

Such well-known 18th century thinkers, such as the French Charles de Montesquieu, the Scottish Adam Ferguson, John Millar, or Adam Smith, are usually regarded as the forerunners of modern social scientific thinking. All of them were interested in the general principles of social change, in the "philosophy of society". Faith in rationality and the possibility of a cognition based on empiricism were characteristics of the age. The works of the thinkers referred to above had a profound impact on the emergence of several modern disciplines – history, sociology, economics. As for social history, Smith studied the socio-economic

conditions of earlier historical periods in detail, while Montesquieu wrote a book on the prosperity and fall of the Roman Empire, and Malthus theorized on population growth. Nevertheless, these 18th century thinkers could be rather considered as "philosopher-historians" than representatives of some social scientific discipline in the sense we think of it today.

Another, hereby relevant and significant stage in the history of sciences was the professionalization of academic life in the latter half of the 19th century which included the separation of history from economics, sociology and political science. This created favorable conditions, in the long run at the very least, for the formation of different sub-disciplines, such as social history. But this process was less conspicuous in the short run, and indeed, at the end of the 19th century historiography diverged again from the analysis of social phenomena in a strict sense.

At that time history was primarily conceived within the paradigm of the nation state, and dealt with the formation and functioning of states, with armies and wars, with diplomacy and the lives of eminent statesmen, with laws and other themes related to state activity. Therefore, social history had been marginalized in all respect for quite some time for which numerous factors accounted. On the one hand, in its initial phase the above mentioned professionalization of history meant the exploitation of archival sources that subsequently went under an extensive and meticulous source criticism. This method however, which was most influentially represented by Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) with its expressed scientific standards, at the same time narrowed the scope of history, since archival sources contained information almost exclusively pertaining to governmental activity. The returning preoccupation with nation and state had a further important origin: in the second half of the 19th century governments increasingly realized the potential of historiography, namely its capability of being instrumental in forging national identity. For this reason the state endeavored to influence the thematization of historiography so that it would study the nation and investigate the activities of governments and great rulers.

The national peculiarities of history writing had already been conspicuous in this early formative period nonetheless. So in Germany, for instance, the creation of the unified nation state inspired historians particularly in the last decades of the 19th century to deal with the state. However, at the very same time the so-called historical school of economics studied the factors of economic and social development as well. Thus the research of these latter themes belonged then rather to economics, and indeed to sociology, than to history. Therefore the highly influential works of Karl Marx (1818-1883), Gustav Schmoller (1838-1917), one of the eminent members of the historical school of political economics, or Max Weber (1864-1920), a most prominent sociologist of his age, were written outside the palisades of professional historianship, but applied historical approaches nonetheless. Towards the end of the century, however, there appeared several historians who clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with the neo-Rankean concept of history and criticised it for its deficiencies, for example, with regard to its thematization. For instance, one of them, Karl Lamprecht (1856-1915) can be considered as a forerunner of social history, since he made efforts to integrate the results of art history, psychology, cultural history and other social sciences, which thereby became a catalyst of the so-called *Methodenstreit* debate. In addition, rendering disciplinary independence was also expressed by the fact that the journal for social and economic history with the title of *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* was founded in 1893 which was the first of its kind not only in Germany, but was unparalleled

globally as well. Nevertheless, political history continued its sway over German historiography.

Initiatives similar to those of Lamprecht were more favorably received in the late 19th century United States. As Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) argued "all the spheres of man's activity must be considered", since „no one department of social life can be understood in isolation from the others". James Harvey Robinson (1863-1936) assigned similar tasks to "New History".

Similarly, for a long time great men, then state and politics provided the material for historical enquiry in Great Britain, though John Richard Green (1837-1883) was relatively early on the opinion that one should depart from the "drum and trumpet history" and instead ought to learn to tell the story of ordinary people. After the First World War it was economic history that first set this view at variance. The institutionalization of this was represented by the foundation of the professional association under the name of *Economic History Society* (1926) with its journal, the *Economic History Review* (1927). These developments could be paralleled to the activity and achievements of the pre-war German Historical School. Contemporary British economic history pre-eminently focused on the research into the industrial revolution in England and the formation of national economies, and in turn had already begun quite early to investigate the social impacts of the industrial revolution, such as the formation and political mobilization of the working class or urbanization. Thus these various endeavors also inspired research into social history in several respects. Early British social history gained strong impulses from labor movement as well. The Christian socialist Richard Henry Tawney's (1880-1962) concern was rural history, the Fabian Beatrice Webb (1858-1943) and Sidney Webb (1859-1947) studied English trade unionism, while the guild socialist George Douglas Howard Cole (1889-1959) analyzed early labor movement in his works. These topics foreshadowed the social history of the second half of the 20th century in many respects.

Both in Germany and Great Britain political impulses had an additional significant impact on the craft of social history in the first half of the 20th century. In the latter country suffrage movement invigorated an interest in women's history and thereby social history from the beginning of the century. The Weimar period witnessed a rapid development of sociology in Germany that created favorable perspectives to social history as well, but the Nazi takeover forced numerous representatives of the underage profession of social history into exile, including among others Hans Rosenberg (1904-1988), whose works were thus received with considerable delay in Germany.

Traditional historiography began to yield in other European countries as well, and sprouts of economic and social history appeared. In East Central Europe Poland is to be mentioned first, where the establishment of economic history can be mostly attributed to Franciszek Bujak (1875-1953), and the first works of social history in Poland focused on the early modern age (rural history). A journal, entitled *Magyar Gazdaságtörténeti Szemle* (Hungarian Review of Economic History, 1894), appeared very early in Hungary, but after little more than ten years it ceased to exist. In interwar Hungary István Hajnal (1892-1956) pioneered the systematic implementation of the methods of sociology in historical studies. In Scandinavia – especially in Sweden – the social and political climate became particularly favorable to social history in the interwar period, since extensive social reforms demanded scholarly knowledge on various fields of social life, such as population and family policy, public health and social policy in general.

Although the slow accumulation of knowledge by German as well as British historians and those of belonging to other nations is not to be underrated at all, still the most far-reaching changes took place in France with respect to the long-run development of social history, when early modern historian, Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) and medievalist Marc Bloch (1886-1944) founded the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* also known in the short form as *Annales*. The two founders were characterised by many common features even during their earlier career: both of them found it important to study history not through the traditional modes of narration focusing on events, but by concentrating on "structural history" – as opposed to political history or the history of events – for which they frequently chose the comparative method. The history of mentalities also achieved a prominent position within their research. The program of the new journal had room for all these novel approaches. The two historians lay special emphasis on the long-run analysis of social and economic structures. Moreover, they paid attention to interdisciplinarity, namely to dismantle barriers between history on the one hand, and sociology, linguistics, geography, demography and other related disciplines on the other hand, and to apply the results and methods of the latter ones. In addition, places were also secured in the editorial board of the *Annales* for the representatives of these branches of social sciences. They also endeavored to erase the differentiation between the research of contemporary phenomena and that of history, as they maintained that the methods used to investigate the past and the present was not incongruous. They claimed as well that the knowledge about the past is indispensable to understand the present, and when researching the past our perspective originates from problems in the present and from the knowledge accumulated in the meantime. The journal, which was first published in Strasbourg, quickly became widely known and showed a particular preference for economic, urban and family history as well as the comparative study of nobilities in the 1930s.

1.2. The Age of Expansion



The real appreciation for the historical perspective cherished by the *Annales* circle was brought about by the decades after the Second World War when it evolved into an emblematic institution of a whole branch of history, and indeed, that of a distinct historical perspective. The person of Febvre guaranteed continuity, who was elected in 1948 to be the president of the so-called sixth section of the old-established and highly renowned *Ecole pratique des hautes études* devoted to the research and teaching of history and social sciences. Among the members of the second generation, the works of Fernand Braudel (1902-1985), who edited the journal between 1957 and 1969, achieved merit in particular. His most acknowledged books were written with the ambition of realizing total history ("*histoire totale*"). Braudel's multi-volume work on the modern history of the Mediterranean tried to interpret the motive forces and major characteristics of human-made events, the military, diplomatic and political occurrences rapidly following each other by simultaneously analyzing the structural history of the *long durée* (the climate, the geographical environment, the population, the mentalities, the patterns of economic life, everyday habits etc.). However, first and foremost he became widely known because of his novel perspectives on space and time. Further prominent *Annales* historians were Ernest Labrousse (1895-1988) and Francois Furet (1927-1997) who particularly excelled in quantitative history. The journal exercised a considerable intellectual influence in the 1950s and 1960s outside France as well: it strongly inspired Italian and Belgian historians, and had followers in Poland in particular among the East Central European countries.

The diffusion of social history accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s. The expansion was enhanced by the social transformation taking place in Western countries. This period witnessed a proliferation of higher education, during which the multiplication of the number of students was paralleled by the establishment of numerous new universities in Western Europe and the United States. This process also increased the number of available educational and research positions, so the reception of new ideas and approaches – not only in history, but in other disciplines as well – met favorable conditions, since new fields could expand without ousting already existing and neatly established approaches and disciplines from their positions. The latter is nicely exemplified in Germany by the Bielefeld University, which was founded as a greenfield investment, and thereby became a major German centre of social history in the 1970s. Other countries also witnessed a dynamic expansion of similar research facilities, and most of all the increase in the number of scholars studying social history. Research in this area was concentrated on the university departments of history and sociology in the USA and Western Europe, but specialized research institutes were also established or expanded to a great extent, such as the *International Institute of Social History* in the Netherlands.

Besides the existence of university departments and research centers devoted to social history, the publishing of specialized journals was a further major indicator of institutionalization. In the period referred to above several periodicals providing space for research in social history were established, which have had significance ever since, including *Past and Present* (1952, United Kingdom), the *International Review of Social History* (1955, the Netherlands), and the *Journal of Social History* (1967, USA). A further wave of journal foundation ensued in the mid-1970s. This was the period when *Social Science History* (1975, USA), *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (1976, FRG), *History Workshop Journal* (1976, United Kingdom), and *Social History* (1976, United Kingdom) were established. Besides these journals with general interest in social history numerous new periodicals were also founded so as to publish the results of certain specific research fields, such as *Journal of Family History* (1976, USA), or *Urban History* (1974, United Kingdom).

Institutionalization took additional significant steps by the foundation of learned societies and the conferences organized by these. International social history conferences have essentially been the events of certain branches of the discipline for a long time, such as the international urban history conference. The millennium also brought about a considerable progress for the institutionalization of social history in that respect as well. The *European Social Science History Conference* has been held in every second year since 1998, which, though, did not become the truly comprehensive and representative international forum of the discipline, but it attracted a previously unimaginably great number of social historians nonetheless, and it evidently stimulated the development of the discipline in Europe and beyond.

With regard to learned societies the institutional situation was clearly different from the previous two areas. International associations covering special fields of social history have existed and continue to exist, which can be exemplified again by urban history (*European Association for Urban History*). Nevertheless, an international academic association embracing the whole field of social history has been missing until recently, since it was only established in 2005 under the name of *International Social History Association*. The lack of an international organization for social history was quite astonishing because several other branches of history had already developed such comprehensive forms of organization for a long time. The existence of this long standing gap, which had remained unfilled even during the most extensive expansion of social history, was most probably so much due to the diversity of themes and the multiplicity of sub-fields, as because of the methodological

heterogeneity of social history. The newly formed association's main goals were to stimulate all forms of research and publications relevant to the advance and diffusion of social history, most of all by strengthening its international character by establishing further academic forums and promoting communication as well as personal contacts between scholars.

Although the diffusion of social history was a general tendency in every country after the Second World War, and thereby it could even be regarded as a transnational phenomenon, but at the same time the peculiarities of national historiographies remained significant in the post-war era nonetheless both considering the features of the most frequented topics, as well as the approaches applied. In Great Britain the research into the early modern age and the processes as well as the consequences of the industrial revolution continued to be a prominent area of social history, where the slow accumulation of knowledge was dominant. It was also in relation to the exploration of the industrial revolution as a distinguished British event that economic history had achieved high prestige by the mid-20th century in Great Britain, hallmarked by such names as Hrothgar John Habakkuk (1915-) or Max Hartwell (1921-). Economic history up to this time facilitated the advance of social history in many respects: common departments were established at the universities, journals hosted papers and debates related to such themes. Among the latter the so-called living standard debate that had a long history itself in the 1950s occupied a prominent position. The opposing opinions were divided on whether the working class experienced a radical pauperization during the industrial revolution, or its living standard decreased only in comparison to other social groups. Indeed, labor history had long traditions in Great Britain, the emblematic post-war figure of which is Asa Briggs (1921-) who, besides labor history, significantly contributed to other fields as well. In addition, the research into the history of mass movements, interpreted in the widest possible sense, also yielded considerable results. The research of these topics were greatly influenced in the 1950s by Marxist social historians, such as Eric Hobsbawm (1917-), Christopher Hill (1910-2003) and George Rudé (1910-1993). Several of them participated in the foundation of the journal, *Past and Present* in 1952 that had considerable international impact, and provided ground for comparisons and interdisciplinarity similar to *Annales*. The work of Edward Palmer Thompson (1924-1993) (*The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963) exercised a most profound international influence, in which the author combined an anthropological approach with a historical one. From the 1960s British urban history and historical demography proved to be highly productive as well (Peter Laslett, 1915-2001; Edward Anthony Wrigley, 1931-).

Interdisciplinarity spread particularly rapidly in the US, where renowned sociologists, such as Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt or Seymour Martin Lipset, had plausibly argued for the necessity of the convergence between history and sociology already in the 1950s. American social history, if only because of the sheer size of the country's academic capacity, showed a very diverse picture in every respect in the 1960s and 1970s, thus it is hard to single out one theoretical direction or school. Due to the peculiarities of American research, US social history did not centre around inequalities and conflicts among social classes, but rather focused on ethnic and racial problems, family history (Tamara K. Hareven, 1937-2002), labor relations, and lately gender history (Joan Wallach Scott, 1941-). The need for larger syntheses also appeared nonetheless (Peter Stearns). The relationship between history and social sciences remained continuously intensive and rewarding that was rather obvious if the impressive achievements of historical sociology were taken into consideration (Barrington Moore, 1912-2005; Theda Skocpol, 1947-; Michael Mann, 1942-; Charles Tilly, 1929-2008).

West German social history had to work within relatively narrow bounds in spite of the scholarly efforts of Werner Conze (1910-1986) and others, but the advance it witnessed from

the late 1960s was all the more spectacular. Scholars paid special attention to the social history of politics and to the research into the social origins of Nazism that was interpreted by many historians by resorting to the concept of *Sonderweg* ("special way") – thus initiating in the 1980s the most extensive debate of post-war German historiography up to the present day. German social historians excelled in an international comparison with their conceptual and theoretical awareness, exemplified by the so-called *Bielefeld School*, the members of which (Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 1941-; Jürgen Kocka, 1941-) regarded their mode of writing history as downright social scientific history ("*historische Sozialwissenschaft*").

The expansion of social history could not be treated separately from post-war social changes in other respects as well. The consolidation of democratic institutions and the changes in political culture in Western Europe and the US was a substantial factor in the diffusion of social history. As the thematization of historiography is always biased by what problems a particular society has to face in the present, research in these countries focused on pivotal social issues (situation of disadvantaged groups, crime, etc.) because of the more or less efficient functioning of political institutions. Power relations among different social groups also affect thematic choices, so the change within these relations enabled the problems of previously marginalized social groups to emerge in public and academic discourse, and subsequently in social history as well. The innovative capacity of democratic societies also promoted changes: the democratic political culture, the flexible and effective science management also supported the spreading of new scientific paradigms.

Gender history, which pre-eminently deals with the historical changes of women's position in society, neatly exemplifies this. On the one hand, the spreading of this branch of history was facilitated by the fact that the social equality of women was not realized even in the most democratic and affluent societies. On the other hand, gender historians exploited the possibilities democratic political culture and institutions could offer when establishing and popularizing the emerging field.

The significance of the democratic political system is particularly evident in the advance of social history, if Western European and American developments are contrasted to those of East Central Europe, where the rigidity of the regime, its insufficient capability of innovation and low efficiency in implementation surfaced not only in the economy, but in research as well. The communist takeover in Poland, Hungary and other countries in the region terminated any experimentation and the diffusion of innovations in historiography for a very long time. Moreover, the regularly low-efficiency academic institutions, which were established in this period, and the vested interests of scholars advancing to higher echelons of the academia, determined the course of historical research in many respects in the region even after the fall of communism.

1.3. The Era of Fragmentation



Social history in the United States and Western Europe became a completely institutionalized major historical discipline in the 1980s. For instance, in the mid-1980s 35% of all historians in the USA considered themselves social historians. As a by-product of the expansion, a high level specialization of social historians emerged. Differentiation within social history was significant geographically, thematically, and methodologically as well. Consequently, social history increasingly embraced divisions that had only loose relations with each other and often applied diverging, and occasionally hardly reconcilable theoretical perspectives, such as "everyday history", or microhistory, on the one hand, and macro approaches, on the other hand.

The cleavage among different schools was particularly pronounced in the Federal Republic of Germany, where the representatives of *Alltagsgeschichte*, that is, the "history of everyday life", such as Alf Lüdtke (1943-), came up against the protagonists of social scientific history whose embeddedness had grown full by the 1980s with having a preference to macro perspectives.

Therefore social history was characterized by a higher differentiation and even fragmentation than several other branches of history in the late 1980s. While the majority of economic historians, for instance, accepted the method of neoclassical economic theory and quantitative methods as a common vantage point, social history had already lost such a common ground by the 1980s. Social historians had defined themselves in opposition to other approaches in history in earlier decades, and regularly considered themselves as pioneers of historical research. But as a consequence of the advanced differentiation of social history, methodological positions within the scholarship of social history became increasingly antagonistic, and many even questioned whether it was possible to postulate a coherence of social history as a discipline. Even social historians themselves started to doubt about the discipline's capability of remaining innovative, and subsequently the 1980s witnessed an insurgent need for synthesis.

With a slight touch of irony, and some benevolence, this outcome can even be regarded as the "revenge of success". However, the so-called "*cultural turn*" that blossomed out in social sciences and humanities in the 1980s posed a challenge to social history perhaps greater than ever before. The "cultural turn" emerged from and at the same time coalesced anthropology, literature and cultural studies, and it directed attention to those factors which had been hardly built in into the analyses of social historians: the importance of context, reception and semantics all belonged to these aspects, and because of their close connection to language, this challenge and change is also referred to as *linguistic turn*. The "new cultural history" that was based on this latter approach criticized mainstream social history because of its perspective and premises, so, for example, its often recurring determinism. The challenge was much more serious than before, since earlier revivalists and critics of social history did not question that historical knowledge could be acquired by studying past texts and objects, and instead they looked for new types of sources and methods suitable for analyzing them. As opposed to this, poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers posed more fundamental questions: What is the role of the historian during learning about the past? How objective are the methods of history? Is history really a science? Their answers pointed towards one direction, namely that they cast serious doubt on the objectivity of historical research and epistemology, and emphasized the relativity of knowledge: the subjectivity of the historian determines his work; the attributes of the language can influence the results of a historical work in the same way as the reality that the historian is studying; consequently, historical reconstructions ought to be understood rather as aesthetic objects, than scientific achievements. The historical-philosophical works of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) on power, knowledge and punishment as well as Hayden White's *Metahistory*, published in 1973, all had a considerable impact on the new approach, which had recruits among historians, such as Lynn Hunt (1945-), but even the Annales historian, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1929-) experimented with this approach as well. Though the new perspectives in social history also dwelt upon social factors, still because of the critiques, they also approached cultural history nonetheless.

However, this rapprochement had its own limits. Postmodern standpoints plausibly maintain that there is no inner logic or coherence in history on the whole; and that all concepts of history are constructions greatly influenced by language and discourse; or that every text can

be interpreted in various ways. Not only do we describe reality through language, but we create it as well. Nevertheless, the emphasis put on the role of language is not so convincing in the case of history, as in literature. The latter chiefly aims at interpreting literary texts, while the former, though it deals with texts, still mainly endeavors to somehow reconstruct the past. Therefore the majority of social historians could hardly follow in the footsteps of the authoritative scholars of postmodernism, when they, while "deconstructing" texts, are on the verge of demolishing any potential reality as well.

Consequently, it became clear at the millennium that most of the expectations the cultural turn was believed to realize proved to be illusory, since the new approach did not produce more convincing historical interpretations than the previous ones. Thus, as far as the recent years are concerned, several observers talk about the "swing of the pendulum", and expect a "social turn", that is, they claim that social history is on the right track to reclaim its earlier acknowledged position of being the most innovative discipline of history. And though it is still uncertain whether it would happen, yet it can be stated nonetheless that in the last two or three decades international social history not only preserved its openness toward the approaches and results of other disciplines, but it even increased it as well. Openness, or the blurring of boundaries was the strongest towards cultural history, and at the same time it seems as if the relations with sociology would have faded somewhat. At any rate, this process was so immense that occasionally even the integrity of social history came into question as well.

2. Themes and Methods: Openness and Its Consequences



When specifying social history as a discipline, one can set out from the widely held contention that a discipline is primarily defined by its subject and its methodology. As it can be seen from what has been said so far, social history is a very diverse branch that is at the same time continuously changing, so attempts to generalize its themes and especially its methods are full of pitfalls. Yet it seems necessary to summarize – taking the risk of oversimplifications – the most important characteristics of the discipline in these areas.

2.1. The Facets of Thematization



It seems obvious that the subject of research is of key importance when defining what social history is, since the field enlarged the spectrum of phenomena undertaken by historical research to a great extent. As it has been pointed out in the historiographical survey of the article, this was precisely the reason for its onset even at its early stage of development in the second half of the 19th century, when social historians studied interesting yet so far quite ignored phenomena – that is why social history was mocked as '*pans and pots*' history, and for that matter, at that time it was not really more than that either. Later scholars in the profession willingly endeavored not only to research into new fields, but also to re-evaluate the significance of the subject of historical sciences.

Therefore social history has already defined itself thematically since its formation in opposition to the yet dominant and traditional approaches and branches of history. At the beginning of the 20th century this demarcation concerned most of all political history, military history and diplomatic history. To refer to John Richard Green's statement again, social historians wished to exchange drums, trumpets and swords for knives and forks, that is, instead of investigating political and military events one should put emphasis on the study of everyday life. The discipline has been often described negatively since then, as its definition is based on the demarcation from other fields, that is, social history is shown as what it is not

dealing with, what is not characteristic of it. This type of clarification can be exemplified by the famous definition of the English historian, George Macaulay Trevelyan (1886-1962), according to whom social history is "*history with the politics left out*".

Although this kind of negative or residuary elucidation points out important attributes, nonetheless it is not fully sufficient, since it disregards the fact that social historians did not only debate the *raison d'être* of the dominance of political history, but they also had definite ideas about how history could be thematically and methodically reinvigorated. As for the clarification of the subject of social history, one should evoke – after Jürgen Kocka – two additional concepts.

1. According to the first approach, social history is a sub-discipline of history that studies specific, well-demarcated aspects of the past, namely social structures and processes in a strict sense, and thus, it can be differentiated from other sub-disciplines, such as military history or economic history. This is called the "sectoral" interpretation of social history because it is based on the fact that social history deals with one distinct segment, or sector of historical reality.

Provided this approach is applied, social historians research the status, composition, behavior of different social groups or classes (workers, middle class, etc.), social institutions (family, school, etc.), social processes (industrialization, urbanization), social inequalities and social mobility, or social relations (kinship, social conflicts, communication), etc. Obviously, social historians choose these topics as their subjects of research because they expect that their analyses genuinely contribute to the observation of the past, and that without the exploration of these aspects one could not fully understand overall historical processes. Thus their work reflects a particular historical and social theoretical perspective; however, this approach lays no claim to regard the analysis of social development as the cornerstone of historical interpretation.

2. According to another important, though much more ambitious approach, social history means a specific scholarly perspective or even outlook, which centers on social processes and intends to build up the whole historical interpretation through this perspective. In this approach social historians attempt to create a synthesis by including politics, economy, culture and other possible fields, but at the same time also emphasizing social processes and structures proper. Therefore, contrary to the sectoral interpretation of social history, a particular idea of history and society emerges more directly and emphatically, while explicitly distinguishing itself from other, rival historical and theoretical approaches. Instead of social processes, the latter claim that other aspects, such as the military rivalry of great powers, or technological-economic factors, are the most important motives behind historical changes.

Numerous historians belonging to the Annales circle in France championed this kind of approach, when they were talking about "total history" (*histoire totale*). The program of *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* in Germany had the same ambition when placing society in the focus of historical interpretation, while in the Netherlands this perspective was called *Maatschappijgeschiedenis*. It is obvious nonetheless that the pursuit of total history faces considerable methodological and practical obstacles, and thereby it can rather be regarded as a program that is rarely realized in concrete historical works. Moreover, according to Charles Tilly, this is fortunate because total history would lead to such an ambitious enterprise that would certainly terminate itself at the end. The very majority of the products of social history always belonged to the first, sectoral approach referred to above, and as the case may be, they have even specialized within this narrower boundary.

Because the number of potential subjects of social history is practically unlimited, it is quite obvious that certain thematic focal points emerged in research. In order to get a reasonably accurate image of these, it is worthwhile to look at what the members of the international social historian profession cover in the major reference books and periodicals, as well as discuss at conferences. Beginning with reference books, in the last two decades, the six volumes of the *Encyclopedia of European Social History* had been probably the most impressive international publication enterprise in the field, with the contribution of dozens of leading experts. By carrying out a basic quantitative analysis, one can determine the proportion of the subjects covered in these volumes. Most of the chapters of this encyclopedia centre on the themes of social inequality, social structure, and social mobility. The second most frequented topic is family and the history of different age groups (excluding demography here), followed by consumption and leisure, then culture, and finally the social history of politics as fifth belongs to the five most frequent themes. Other topics are considerably lagging behind these. The *Journal of Social History* is selected out from the academic journals since it covers a wide scope of themes of social history, and is doubtless one of the leading periodicals in the field. The recent volumes of the *Journal of Social History* most often published articles about family and age groups, and then papers on gender history, which are followed by articles on deviances and crime, work, as well as on social policy and health care. Finally, the largest European social history conference, the *European Social Science History Conference* (ESSHC) was selected for analysis, which has been organized in every two year since 1998. The phrase of "social science" in the conference title has no specific significance because the event is open to any scholar who belongs to any social historical approach. This conference hosted the most presentation in the recent years from the following five research areas – in order of frequency: social welfare and health, ethnicity and migration, family and age groups, social structure and social mobility, and lastly the social history of politics.

2.2. Methodological Features



Social history is, however, more than a simple thematic extension of historical studies. Historians belonging to diverging research traditions agree that social history adheres to specific methods, or at the very least to a particular analytical style. With methods dissimilar to the ones utilized by more traditional branches of history, social history also examines themes that can be regarded as traditional. This methodological stance might have an impact on the relation to other disciplines, the sources characteristically researched, and on several other aspects as well. It is nonetheless also a fact that there is a huge heterogeneity in this respect in social history. It is not simply that there is no unified or single methodology, which is not particularly surprising, but rather that parallel to the extension of the research into novel and increasingly specialized themes – as it has been pointed out, especially in the 1980s – diversity rather increased than faded.

When discussing the characteristic methods, it should be emphasized first that social history is, after all, a sub-discipline of history, and thereby it naturally carries the important methodological features of historical research. First of all, similar to traditional or mainstream history writing, social history investigates the diachronic changes of human society. Furthermore, its primary aim is to grasp past phenomena through empirical research, and it is less interested in establishing general tendencies. Accordingly, social historians apply analytical-hermeneutic research methods. Source criticism plays a similarly significant role, and the types of sources applied also show numerous similarities. For instance, written sources are of primary importance to social history as well.

However, even when applying these methodological considerations shortly referred to above, social history manifests its peculiar differences to other branches of history. Social historians generally show keener interest in mass phenomena than in individual ones, and subsequently favor information and data pertaining to larger social units. Besides or instead of events, social history pays greater attention to long-run processes.

These characteristics also influence the methods employed by social historians. Typologies, generalization and comparison occupy prominent places in the scholarly toolbar of social history, which in turn imply a more systematic treatment of methodological issues than what are required in the case of traditional historical works focusing on political events. When posing research questions and goals, social history often relies on theories of social change. All of these particularities bear consequences on the style and manner of presentation as well. While traditional historical works primarily adhere to narration, social histories rather rely on analytical discourses to a greater extent, and quantification is often performed as well.

An additional significant attribute of social history is its peculiar relation to social sciences, which has important methodological implications as well. Demography, political science, economics, anthropology and sociology all had a strong impact on social history. The concepts, theories, and methods employed by these academic fields are widely used by social historians as well. But the relation is not one-way: the representatives of the disciplines referred to above also often exploit the achievements of social history, which, according to some observers, significantly humanized and historicized these disciplines which are usually quite abstract and disregard the diachronic dimension. The connection to sociology had been particularly close for a long time, then, towards the millennium the less paradigmatic approaches of new cultural history began to emerge in social history as well. The dismantling of the sharp demarcation lines between the academic fields mostly originating from the 19th century considerably contributed to the development of novel approaches and more plausible accounts of 20th century social history, but at the very least to more complete representations of the past. It probably holds for the whole 20th century trajectory of the discipline that social history furthered the renewal of historical research to the greatest extent by its inclination towards interdisciplinarity. And indeed, it is this openness that signifies the formation and expansion of social history as a substantial development regarding the history of the whole of social sciences and humanities.

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Glossary



Gesellschaftsgeschichte, : The concept refers to the program of representatives of the German, "history of"historical social science" to consider the history of the whole society by relying on the results of diverse branches of history and by using the methods of the social sciences to analyze the past. In this approach social historians attempt to construct a synthesis by including political, economic, cultural and other aspects, but at the same time giving emphasis to social processes and structures proper.

Neo-Rankean concept of history : The Neo-Rankean school of historians in imperial Germany adhered rather closely to the principles of Leopold von Ranke as far as the preeminence of the nation state and the foreign policy in historical interpretation was concerned. Historians belonging to this

school assumed that history was essentially political in nature and therefore historians had to concentrate on the nation-state as an individual entity and its relationship with other nations.

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