

## Emergence of Social History writing: Approaches and Interpretations

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**Abstract:** *Modern historiography observed a continuous change in the domain of thinking and creative activity of the historians. Social history has emerged as a new trend of historical thinking. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed many theories and writings on social history as a rising phenomena. The period of emergence of social history can be dated back to the second half of the twentieth century. As a specific academic area, social history is quite new as it was not been treated as a specialized academic field until the 1950s. Essentiality of interdisciplinary social history gradually arose. One of the significant features of the new social history is its concern with common men and common experiences – the business of everyday life. The approach and nature of writing social history creates much controversy and various differences of opinions among the specialists.*

**Keywords:** Social history, History from below, *English Social History*, British social historians, interdisciplinary social history, Annales school, *Past and Present*.

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History is the attempt made by scholars through centuries to reconstruct, describe and interpret their own past. As a discipline, history is tremendous rich, varied and heterogeneous. It is the subject which has the human spirit for its object. Ever since its elevation to the status of a discipline and the emergence of a hierarchically organized profession, history has been very largely concerned with the problems of its own making. It can be said, the past will never change, but the ways we think about it have never stopped changing either. Past can be treated in particular ways. Sometimes historians focused on the lives and accomplishments of Great Men and at other times studied the personal thoughts of obscure people. Modern historiography noticed a continuous change in the field of thinking and creative activity of the historians. Social history has emerged as a new trend of historical thinking.

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The period of emergence of social history can be dated back to the second half of the twentieth century. But as a specific academic area, social history is quite new as it was not been treated as a specialized academic field until the 1950s. In the writings of eighteenth-century thinkers various aspects of social history thinking were revealed. Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*, Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, John Millar's *Observations on the Distinction of Ranks in Society* and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* were all concerned with 'the philosophy of society'. The authors discussed economic and social systems, such as the 'feudal system' in medieval Europe or the mercantile system (contrasted with the 'system of agriculture') in the work of Smith.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars, who were less concerned with theory, started to turn from the traditional subject-matter of history, politics and war, to the study of social history, in the sense of developments in commerce, arts, law, customs and 'manners'.<sup>2</sup> Voltaire's *Essay on Manners* dealt with social life in Europe from the time of Charlemagne. Edward Gibbon's famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was a social as well as a political history.

Leopold Von Ranke did not reject social history outright, but his books were generally focused on the state.<sup>3</sup> In the late 1880s, James E. Thorold Rogers, the then Professor of political economy at Oxford and of economic science and statistics at King's College, London, began his lecture 'The economic interpretation of history' by lamenting that, '... records as illustrate social life and the distribution of wealth at different epochs of the history of mankind, have been habitually neglected'. This 'neglect' as he saw it, rendered 'history inaccurate or at least imperfect'.<sup>4</sup>

Essentiality of interdisciplinary social history gradually arose. There were important works dealing with labour history, focused on the life of the poor. Arnold Toynbee's lectures on the Industrial Revolution in England, published posthumously in 1884, focused attention on the social consequences of industrialization on the towns and on the enclosures in the country side.<sup>5</sup> His efforts of projecting the harsh effects of industrialization on the lower classes were continued by John Lawrence Hammond and Barbara Hammond in their pioneering studies: *The Village Labourer*, *The Town Labourer* and *The Skilled Labourer*. These were all attempts to study the Industrial Revolution in terms of its impact on the working classes. *The Village Labourer* showed the darker side of industrialization as the old social networks was based on manual production. Village life gave way to the impersonal and economic calculation of the factory and city life. It is a concentrated and impassioned study of the effects of parliamentary enclosure on the rural proletariat.<sup>6</sup> Elie Halevy's masterly treatment of most departments of English life in *The History of The English People in the Nineteenth Century* in 1815 is another important

effort in social history. It is considered as one of the most influential studies of modern English social history. The writings of R.H. Tawney, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Eileen Power and H.N. Brailsford shaped the continuing identity of this branch of history. G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate's *The Common People* is an important work in the direction. The works of these authors are primarily concerned with the condition and movements of the lower classes and the commoners.<sup>7</sup>

For a long time, the work of social historians appeared unprofessional when compared with that of Rankean historians of the state. 'Social history' is really too precise a term for what was still treated in practice as a residual category. Political history was regarded, at least within the profession, as more real or more serious than the study of society or culture.<sup>8</sup> T. B. Macaulay wrote his famous third chapter on society in the late seventeenth century in his Victorian classic book *History of England* (1848). It was criticized by a contemporary reviewer, as an 'old curiosity shop' because the different topics – roads, marriage, and newspapers and so on were followed one after another in no apparent order.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars rejected social history because it could not be studied 'scientifically'.<sup>10</sup>

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The first half of the twentieth century witnessed many theories and writings on social history as rising phenomena. Some writing of social history with different approaches can be discussed here. Social history, as outlined by J. R. Green in his *Short History of the English People*, was directed against 'Great Man' theories of history, championing the peaceful arts against the bellicose preoccupations of 'drum and trumpet' history.<sup>11</sup> George Macaulay Trevelyan made significant contribution in the trends of history writing in some unparallel ways, sometimes even raising new debates among historians. His major and distinguished role is that he was considered as one of the pioneering social history writers and he is specially famous for his path-breaking creation *English Social History*. His ideas regarding social history writing and his writing of a whole book on this theme have created excitement in historiographical approaches. He played a prominent role in shaping the thought of social history writing, though his dealing with social history is different in manner and treatment than his contemporary social historians. Idea of social history, as given by Trevelyan, arose great criticism among the critics. It is said that Trevelyan's view is 'history of the people with the politics left out.' His statement created much misunderstanding and led some people to think of his book as 'polite chat about the past.' But to him, social history has some distinct features and significance, for which, it is acceptable to readers of History. Social history as conceived by Trevelyan is such '... social history does not merely provide the required link between economic and political

history. It has also its own positive value and peculiar concern. Its scope may be defined as the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages: this includes the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and of leisure, the attitude of man to nature, the culture of each age as it arose of these general conditions of life, and took ever-changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought.<sup>12</sup> Its true reflection can be found in his *English Social History*.

One of the pioneers of British Social history after 1945, Edward Palmer Thompson recast the histories of labor, crime, protest, and popular culture - areas that came to be known collectively as 'History from below'. His most influential book was undoubtedly *The Making of the English Working Class*. This proved to be a clarion call for a new labour history. It is probably 'the most important work of social history written since the Second World War'.<sup>13</sup>

During the five years that E. P. Thompson spent on writing *The Making of the English Working Class*, he taught local history to working people on evening classes. He was deeply impressed by their eagerness to learn about their own cultural and social history. He wrote his massive book to show that the gradual formation of class-consciousness is an intrinsic feature of human relationships, one that can only be explained through an appreciation of the actions, ideas and expressions of working people over a long time. For Thompson, social history required the study of creative cultural expression, interpreted through the context of economic relationships and doing so in cogent and accessible language that could appeal to readers beyond academia.<sup>14</sup>

Thompson invoked the category of 'culture' and insisted that class is inseparable from class consciousness. Hence he felt it necessary to reconstruct the living experience of historical participants, investigating folk customs and rituals. Thompson viewed class in cultural terms. For him, the working class is not an abstract entity, but consisted of Englishmen, who had to be understood in terms of English history and what Thompson called the 'Peculiarities of the English'.<sup>15</sup> Having dealt with the period between 1780 and 1832, Thompson moved further back in time to open up the then neglected field of 18th century social history. He launched a series of studies on custom, crime, and the penal code which were published in *Whigs and Hunters*, *Customs in Common* and a mention worthy collection of work with his students at the University of Warwick, *Albion's Fatal Tree*. Thompson argued that certain kinds of crime such as poaching and riot could be interpreted as social protest against the 'patrician oligarchy' and the new commercial order. In an article, he tried to establish the existence of a 'moral economy' among the 'plebeian crowd' that resisted the imperatives of the market in favor of a just price, legitimated by custom and tradition.

Richard Henry Tawney in his lecture on *Social History and Literature* told, 'Whatever else the world may contain, man's relations with nature, his commerce with his fellows, and the convictions, aspirations and emotions composing his inner life, are for us, as for the poet, its capital constituents.' According to him, 'religion, law, government, the conquest of the material environment and the ordering of social life - that are also ours .... It is part of the process by which we surmount the limitations of our isolated personalities and become partners in a universe of interests which we share with humanity'.<sup>16</sup>

Eric J. Hobsbawm opened up new frontiers with the concept of 'primitive rebels'. He, in his writings, studied on banditry, pre-industrial urban 'mobs' and their riots, some labour religious sects, the use of ritual in early labour and revolutionary organizations, various peasant revolutionary movements. According to him, all of these can be described as 'primitive' or 'archaic' forms of social agitation. Hobsbawm himself wrote about his book *Primitive Rebels*, 'The curious reader may simply read this book as a description of some social phenomena which are interesting, and surprising little known, having provoked only a rather literature in English'. The 'outlaws' or 'mafias' are the subject matter of his analysis. According to his analysis, 'Social banditry, a universal and virtually unchanging phenomenon, is little more than endemic peasant protest against oppression and poverty: a cry for vengeance on the rich and the oppressors, a vague dream of some curb upon them, a righting of individual wrongs.' Mafia is 'best regarded as a somewhat more complex development of social banditry'. Hobsbawm, in his writings, pointed out that they take some of the forms of collective resistance to the invasion of the 'new' society. He saw banditry 'as a social phenomenon' .....what 'is about class, wealth and power in peasant societies.' He opined, 'Bandits and highwaymen preoccupy the police, but they ought also to preoccupy the social historian.'<sup>17</sup> His book reviewed as 'A wise as well as an exciting book, a very valuable addition to the history of mentalities and to that of popular protest'. Also it is mentioned as, '.... This is human history at its very best.'<sup>18</sup>

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The pioneering work of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in establishing the 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 conceiving throughout Europe and the United States thereafter. It was the characteristic of the approach 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.<sup>19</sup> This was in reaction to the view 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 a turbulent decade which encouraged a much broader understanding of the past.

Twentieth Century Marxist scholars founded *Past and Present* in 1952. Their research was not concerned with political change but focused on the structured nature of social life. Their emphasis was on the history from below. Journals like *Past and Present* and *History Workshop Journal* widened history from below by writing not only about crucial but neglected social topics, including the history of childhood, the family, education, popular culture, leisure and crime. During that time, to the historians, history gradually becomes as 'the science of human societies'.

Social history owes its prosperity, both as a popular enthusiasm and as a scholarly practice, to the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and reproduces its leading inspiration. The spirit of 1960s social history - tacking in its own way to the 'winds of change' - was pre-eminently a modernizing one, both chronologically, in the choice of historical subject matter, and methodologically, in the adoption of 'multi-disciplinary perspectives.'<sup>20</sup> It can be said that in the 1960s and 1970s, social-scientific history was a field of experiment, excitement and innovation in which many new insights were generated, old legends criticized and challenging hypotheses were brought forward for further research. It helped to raise the standards of accuracy, rigidity and self-reflectivity within the historical discipline as a whole.

One of the significant features of the new social history is its concern with common men and common experiences - the business of everyday life. Their purview is labor of all kinds - they are interested in the lives, working experiences and attitudes of workers, not just labour leaders. Strikes, riots and other labour disturbances still figure in this work, and in an important way. But they are now placed in a much broader historical and analytical context, designed to show their wider meaning. Third characteristic of the new social history, which is found to be both attractive and familiar, is that it has an intimate relationship between the quantitative evidence assembled and a comprehensive analytical apparatus.<sup>21</sup> Some examples are cited in this regard - one by Peter H. Wood, the other by Joan W. Scott.<sup>22</sup> The culminating event in one is a slave revolt; in the other, a major industrial strike. Each of these books is a careful, perceptive, heavily quantitative analysis of a long-term socio-economic evolution that eventuated in a social rupture.

Each is a wonderfully rich piece, a careful reconstruction of unique historical events, placed in an analytical and comparative framework that gives them a larger significance.

Social historians have long aspired to offer, drawing us away from the exclusive history of elite medical men and their honoured institutions, towards the historical position of ailing patients and their physical, psychological and inevitably social lives. Examining the history of medical thought and medical treatment from the patient's point of view is not only a more humane approach to a crucial element of scientific and social history, Roy Porter, the great social historian argued, but it also offers a useful entry-point to interpreting the social meaning of suffering and healing. Its aim was to focus on neglected groups and neglected topics of particular contemporary importance. He, in an interview with E.P. Thompson, described about 'getting hold of documents and reading them upside down'. He tried to envision what silent but responsive people thought of what the more vocal and important said and did.<sup>23</sup>

Since the 1970s, women's history entered with a more sophisticated manner in the arena of social history writing. History of women's position in social organizations, women's roles in domestic life and in professional spheres, gender identities, sub-cultures, social mobility, crowd psychology, the fate of the outcast and the oppressed, private lives of individuals, marriage, family, school, home were some aspects which comprised 'the fundamental elements of social life' and subject-matters of social history.

In 1969, Harold Perkin became 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 symbolized social history's status as a true social science.

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The emergence and nature of writing social history creates much controversy and opinion among the specialists. Social history is more difficult to define than political, economic or military history. While these terms apply to the history of distinct kinds of activity, the term social covers virtually everything. It consists of historical studies which focus on any aspect of social life - ranging from statistical analyses of demographic research to examining the material elements of everyday experience. All come in the purview of social history. Such historical writing tries to recover, articulate and interpret the experience of people who are typically overlooked in studies of political elites and of major historical events. This trend is more socially-oriented than labour history and more attuned to human experience than economic history. Unlike political history, which

traditionally had focused biographically on specific individuals or groups that held powerful state offices, social history concerns itself with relatively neglected individuals or groups. It reveals and interprets the cultural expression of ordinary working people. This requires reading documents against the grain and examining materials that were previously not counted as history.

Long ago in 1971 E. J. Hobsbawm wrote an article on social history, where he opined, 'The term social history has always been, difficult to define and until recently there has been no great pressure to define it, for it has lacked the institutional and professional vested interests which normally insists on precise demarcations. Broadly speaking, until the present vogue of the subject - or at least the name - it was in the past used in three sometimes overlapping senses'. He pointed out specifically three tendencies, first, 'it referred to the history of the poor or lower classes, and more specifically to the history of the movements of the poor ('social movement)'. Second, the term was used to refer to works on a variety of human activities difficult to classify except in such terms as 'manners, customs, everyday life.' The third meaning of the term was certainly the most common and for our purposes the most relevant: 'social' was used in combination with 'economic history'. He again stated that none of the three versions of social history produced a specialized academic field of social history until the 1950s.<sup>24</sup> Actually, as a pedagogic enthusiasm, and latterly as an academic practice, social history derives its vitality from its oppositional character. It prides itself on being concerned with 'real life' rather than abstractions, with 'ordinary' people rather than privileged elites, with everyday things rather than sensational events.<sup>25</sup>

In a recent article, the ideas and 'meanings of social history' has been identified. Social history as a specialized sub-discipline, concentrates on social structures, processes, and actions in a specific sense (inequality, mobility, classes, strata, ethnicity, gender relations, urbanization, work and life of different types of people and not only elites), in contrast to other sub-disciplines like economic history, constitutional history or the history of ideas. As a specific approach to or as a way of looking on general history, it stresses upon the broad structures and processes as well as the dimensions of historical reality in their truest sense.<sup>26</sup>

The fundamental change and expansion during the last twenty or thirty years contributed greatly to this new social history. It was a quiet, unreflected and undiscussed social turn which has not yet ended. Present social history themes vary much more. Social history has become much more diversified in terms of thematic orientation, which is mainly a consequence of the expansion of this field of research. Major attention are given to new concepts, such as, history of debates, communication, language, public spaces, media, intellectuals, history of memory, rituals, myths, history of values, social norms,

social models, history of identities, rise of ethnic groups, hybrid societies, religion.<sup>27</sup> The general effect of the new social history has been to enlarge the map of historical knowledge and legitimate major new areas of scholarly inquiry.

Lastly, it can be said, most of the evidences of social history are fragmented. Materials for writing social history are present everywhere in any document. A published papyrus from Roman Egypt, dating from the first or second century AD, contains an appeal by a slave - owner to the authorities for compensation from the careless driver of a donkey, which had run over and seriously injured a young girl on her way to a singing lesson. In her plea, the appellant wrote, 'I loved and cared for this little servant-girl, a house-born slave, in the hope that when she grew up she would look after me in my old age, since I am a helpless woman and alone'.<sup>28</sup> Such trivial but fascinating fragments encapsulate many of the problems and ideas we face in constructing social history.

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