SOCIAL HISTORY IN EUROPE

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1. The current situation of social history

Social history in Europe has passed through a period of changes and severe difficulties during the last twenty years or so. The general public became less interested in social history than in the 1960's and 1970's. Social history books sold less well than before. The big European newspapers now rarely present social history when they select history books for review. The same is true among history specialists themselves. Historians in general are far less enthusiastic about social history than before. New history journals no longer intend to promote primarily social history themes. New chairs in social history are difficult to imagine. Retiring social historians are often replaced by historians with other specialties. The glorious days of social history are a matter of the past.

At the same time, social history in Europe is not really in a situation of decline. The principal international meeting for European social historians, the congress organised regularly by the Amsterdam social history institute, is attended by hundreds of historians. The social history society in Britain is as active as ever before since its foundation in the 1970's. The Franco-German social history meetings are held as regularly as in the beginnings during late 1980's, and the steering committee recently created openings for a younger generation. In Central Europe social history became well established after 1989/90. Recent general history dictionaries contain many social history articles. Around 2000 the leading European journals in history, though difficult to compare, did not contain fewer articles on social history than around 1975. A monumental *Encyclopaedia of European Social History* was published by Peter N. Stearns. To be sure, this encyclopaedia presents primarily an outside view on European social history, i.e. from American historians who wrote about two thirds of the articles. But one could not write more than 200 articles in six volumes on a vanishing sector of historiography. The overall point is clear: social history has lost much of the radiant and glorious role as a leading voice in history that it enjoyed in the era of Fernand Braudel, E. P. Thompson, and Emanuel LeRoy Ladurie. At the same time it gained an established and uncontroversial position in history teaching and research.

2. Recent challenges and changes of social history

As part of this transition, social history in Europe changed substantially. It it is quite different today from what it was twenty or thirty ago. Major themes, the methods, the cooperation with other disciplines, the internationalism, and the relationship to political history are clearly different from what social history was in the 1960's and 1970's. Five changes probably were most important.

Most apparent was the change of *themes* of social history. In the 1960's and 1970's three major themes predominated in social history: the formation of *social*

classes, especially the working class, but also the middle class, the lower middle classes and the peasants; the rise of the modern intimate *family*, the emotional links between husbands and wives as well as between parents and children; the rise of the modern *welfare state*, not only public insurance, but also charity, housing policy, public health, labour law, and the relationship between the state and the trade unions. Especially the research on the formation of social classes often also involved a theoretical debate on class concepts between Marxists and others.

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. The classical topics are not abandoned, but major attention is given to eight other new themes which often overlap each other: the history of debates, communication, terms, language, public spaces, media, intellectuals; the history of memory, lieux de mémoire, symbols, rituals, myths, significations of objects; the history of values, social norms, social models; the history of identities, national, transnational, social, ethnic ones, and at the same time, a very prominent topic, the history of the other; the history of women; the history of migration, transfers, rise of ethnic groups and of hybrid societies; the history of consumption; the history of religion. Some of these themes were presented as cultural history. In fact in many ways this was a reaction to the cultural turn to which I will return.

Methods of research also changed in social history. In the 1960's and the 1970's social history was characterised by four methodological approaches: by structural history concentrating very much on the change or the continuity of social and mental structures; linked to this by the application of sociological theories and models of change; again often connected with this by quantitative history in the sense of descriptive quantification, counting cases and exploring simple statistical relations; finally by the assumption that political events and changes were strongly influenced and could be well explained by the social history context of politics. To be sure, social history never was totally confined to these four approaches and included always other modalities. But these were the mainstream approaches.

During the last thirty years, other approaches have become important, without giving up totally the methods already established. Analysing debates and discourses has become frequently applied as an approach in social history. This includes a large variety of methods, linguistic history, history of terms, history of arguments, history of ideas, history of philosophical and political concepts. In addition a large variety of heuristic approaches to investigate mentalities, hidden norms, rituals, symbols, lieux de mémoire were applied, and, hence, different new sorts of sources such as photos, paintings, pictures, movies, monuments, sculptures, diaries, autobiographies, travel reports became salient. Reflection on the approaches of former historians was seen less as a history of progress, and more interesting in itself as a change. The claim that political changes and events could be best explained by the social history context was also largely given up. I shall come back to this aspect as well.

Moreover, social history in Europe did not remain as national as it had been in the 1960's and 1970's in the sense of providing the main spatial unit of research. Social history became more international. The most apparent internationalisa-

tion was the rise of comparative social history in Europe since the late 1970's, first primarily as research on differences and parallels between national societies, and in this way remaining close to the national paradigm, later on also in the research of transfers between nations and civilisations and in transnational comparisons between entire civilisations, partly also as a global social history. Internationalisation of social history became also more distinct in research activities. European social historians attended more international meetings, worked more frequently in international research networks or in international centres, met more scholars from other countries and had more international exchanges of ideas.

Cooperation with other disciplines also changed. During the 1960s and 1970s cooperation was intensive with sociology and with political science, partly also with economics. This was the period of the social science paradigm, in which historians saw the role of the historians in interdisciplinary cooperation often as a sort of consumer who applies ready-made theories and models from social sciences. The interdisciplinary orientation was a major achievement of this period and was not abandoned during the recent past. But the cooperation with other disciplines broadened and changed. Because of the changes in the themes and methods of social history, close cooperation also developed with ethnology, partly also with linguistics, with history of literature, with philosophy, with art history, with specialists on education, with psychology, and also with specialists in law. At the same time the character of interdisciplinary cooperation became different. Interdisciplinary historians were more selective, cooperating primarily with those social sciences which were oriented towards history. They were more conscious of the specific qualities of the historical approach. They were more often inclined to revise, reformulate and rebuild theories from other disciplines.

Whereas the connections of social history with economic history and with economics weakened clearly (and unfortunately one might add), the connections with political history changed in a more complicated way. One might discern two basically different approaches towards political history. One segment among social historians concentrated more than before on social and cultural topics, downplaying more than before political events, decision-makers and institutions, partly because they saw social and cultural topics as interesting on their own, partly also because they assumed that in the end cultural and social norms, values and symbols matter for politics as much as laws and institutions. The other segment continued to work on social history in close relation with political history, but on revised assumptions. The claim that social history produces major explanations for political history was presented less frequently. However, social history was still considered to be important for political history because it deals with a crucial part of the subject domain, i.e. with topics of civil society such as associations, social movements, interest groups, public space, citizenship, human rights, identities. In addition, social history was to evaluate important aspects of political history, i.e. the social effects of major political events, upheavals and legislations or the social continuities across major political events, also the history of elite networks and values behind elite politics. In these ways social history is seen as crucial for complementing political history.

It would be misleading to present these changes as one single consensual trend of social history on the entire European continent. Quite the opposite, these

changes were often the result of highly controversial and contradictory patterns, of large national and conceptual divergences, of different interpretations of these changes. Not everybody would see all these trends as part of social history. However, in this short essay I want to look at the results rather than at the process and the internal debates. It also would be misleading to see these changes as European particularities. In broad outline they occurred also in North America, in India and in East Asia, with variations which cannot be followed up here.

The changes were the responses to various challenges which social history has been facing during the last thirty years. Four challenges were particularly important.

A first challenge for social history involved the alterations of European societies since the 1970s. Major issues of society and politics in the 1960's and the 1970's, which were also major issues of social history, became distinctly less dominant. The social class of workers was reduced with the new predominance of tertiary professions and the decline of the industrial sector in employment. At the same time the trade unions weakened in major European countries such as Britain, France, Sweden. They never became very strong in post-Franco Spain and in post-communist Eastern Europe. The continuous rise of the modern intimate nuclear family turned into the emergence of a multitude of family models. The glorious era of the welfare state ended in the 1970's in long-term political, financial, and demographic difficulties. New social issues emerged. In this way social history writing was challenged by living social history.

A second challenge for social history was internationalisation. Social history in the 1960's and 1970's reflected the national framework of research in a double sense. On the one hand social history usually concentrated on national societies, national topics and explanations in the framework of individual nations. It was understood that national working classes, national family structures, and national welfare states were to be investigated. Special national ways were an attractive perspective in social history, such the German "Sonderweg", "l'exception française", the British special way, the Scandinavian or Dutch way of democratisation and tolerance. On the other hand social history was mainly done in national networks. To be sure, American and British historians sometimes helped to secure a more international opening of national scientific circles. But this remained in the end marginal.

This national orientation of social history was challenged since the 1960's by a more transnational situation in two ways. On the one hand, as we have seen, social history methods and topics became ever more international. This is true especially for international comparison and the study of transnational transfers, but also for various new topics such as international migration, the international growth and crisis of cities, the internationalisation of consumption and popular culture, transnational social movements and international human rights policy, and last not least the history of the images of the other. The history of special national ways in the end was difficult to write and unconvincing without serious research on other contrasting countries. On the other hand, the context in which social historians worked became also more transnational. The personal experience of Europeans became more international with more studies abroad, more tourism, better knowledge of foreign languages. Scholarhips, institutes specialised in international exchange of scholars, guest professorships,

international research networks of historians became more frequent after the 1970's. The rapprochement of West European societies and more recently after 1989 of European societies in general, controversial as it is, also had an impact on the national view of social historians. Transfers and parallels became so apparent that the national approach was more questionable. The rising political power of the European Union, which became clear especially after the 1980's, also had an internationalising impact on the view of the historians.

A third major challenge for social history was the cultural turn which reinforced and reassured cultural history rather than social history. This general turn in human sciences had various meanings. It included a rising interest in interpretations, significations, ideas, sometimes also actions rather than in socioeconomic structures and constraints. In this view the classical topics of social history were often seen as marginal. The cultural turn could also mean the search for major hidden and unreflected historical forces and constraints in norms, in languages and terms, in mentalities and basic mental orientations, perpetuated by rituals, myths and symbols. This was in opposition to the assumption often made at the time by social historians that it was through the social history context that major political events and changes could be explained. The cultural turn sometimes also meant a purely discursive interpretation of human sciences in which the individual scientist was to be fully taken in the cage of his own concepts, terms, and language. Hence, he was positioned not to encounter and analyze other present or past cultures. The claim by social historians (and historians in general) to investigate past societies and the social roots of present societies was naive and unrealistic in this view. In a milder, less fundamental way the cultural turn finally also included more reflection about how the values and languages of the historian strongly influenced his scientific work. The way in which history was constructed, how the interpretations of historical events, places and personalities changed over time became a major preoccupation. This included also the terms and views of social history.

A fourth challenge was the upheaval of 1989 in Eastern Europe. Not only did it open up new themes and new opportunities for social historians in the eastern part of Europe. It was also a challenge for social history in Western Europe in various contradictory ways, a shock as well as an encouragement. It was a shock for social history as for social science in general since this secular event was not predicted by social scientific methods. The claim that political events could be explained by the social context received a substantial blow. The upheaval of 1989, often seen as a revolution, was also a challenge for the national approach in social history since this major event of the 20th century had a clear transnational character and could not be understood by an exclusively national view. At the same time, the upheaval of 1989 encouraged and reinforced social history, since it became clear that the results of the upheaval depended to a large degree on the existence of a lively and intensive civil society, which is a social history topic beneath the surface of formal politics.

3. The future topics of social history

Social history will continue to change in the future. Forecasts are always difficult to make. They consist of prolongations of recent trends and of hopes.

In this sense social history has various options for change in the future. These can be listed briefly.

One first option is a traditional interest for social history, which perhaps was seen as less important during the most recent decades: historical debate and research on burning social questions. These include unemployment, change of work life stories, poverty and social exclusion, immigration, new ethnicities, urban crisis, change of values, quality of education, new family models, the crisis of the welfare state. Historical research has a special role to play in the debates on these burning issues. It might dedramatise debates, which overestimate change. It might widen policy discourse by reviving forgotten solutions of problems. It might also render the public more sensitive for dangers, which exist in the present, but whose effects can be investigated more clearly in the past.

A second option of social history is transnational history. This option is important since most topics covered by social history are not limited to nation states or to national territories. Hence, transnational history does not lead to any contradiction with the logic of social history. It applies to the whole range of social history themes. Transnational history includes the comparison of societies, or research on divergences and convergences between nations, regions or civilisations. It includes the history of transfers, the transfers of people and ideas, the encounters between different cultures and their wide variety of effects from dialogues and hybrid societies to wars and genocide, the image of the other. It includes also the social history of the transnational, i.e. transnational movements, organizations, public spheres and identities, transnational communication and languages, transnational networks and elites. Finally it also includes the social and cultural side of world history, which has become once again an attractive new preoccupation of the historians.

A third option will remain definitely the social side of political history, the social effects of policies, the social context of policies, but also specific social and cultural areas of politics which were mentioned above. Four thematic fields seem to offer the most promising and most attractive themes: the large field of history of civil society which includes a wide range of associations, civic organizations and movements, the change of the public sphere, the social history of democracy and its endangerments; the history of communication, of the media, of public debates, publicity, intellectuals; the social history of elites, prosopographic as well as network and value studies; finally the social history of war, but also the social history of peace settlements.

A fourth option could be labeled as the cultural enlargement of social history. Facing the cultural turn social historians have three contrasting options. Social historians may hold a defensive position, demarcating social history in relation to the topics proposed during the cultural turn and concentrating quite as before on the classical themes of social history, on social classes, family, or welfare state. Social historians may become cultural historians themselves, turning away from social history, sometimes rejecting research in this field, redefining their field of activity, becoming influential in cultural history, and working on topics such as the history of space, time, the body, and emotions. In fact social historians in Europe to a large degree founded the recent cultural history. Social historians may also enlarge the topics and methods of social history by reflecting the new themes and methods proposed during the cultural turn, assimilating and appropriating

what could be combined with social history and creating a new synthesis of social and cultural history. In my view this third option is the most promising one.

A fifth option of social history in Europe will be the history of entire Europe, not just of one single or several countries of Europe. The history of entire Europe has been neglected so far in social history more than in economic or political history. Writing the social history of entire Europe is not an easy task. It cannot be written in the same spirit, on the same topics, with the same methods, with the same information on research and with the same interdisciplinary cooperation as national or regional social history. Topics of national social history might not be interesting on the European level and topics on the European level might be different. Methods are different, since European wide sources are rare and since conclusions on European processes must take into account variations among nations in Europe much more seriously than studies on national processes deal with variations among regions in a nation. Information on research is different since besides literature on Europe as a whole, the literature on national developments must be read. Other disciplines with which one can easily cooperate for studies on the national level, might be weak in the research on the European level.

Assessments on social history in Europe are contradictory and variable, ranging from the desire for a return to mid-20th century social history to the anticipation of a new social and cultural history. In fact, a simple conclusion is not possible in the present situation. Social history in Europe is difficult to define, highly differentiated, without distinct common questions and common debates, without one single leading journal, institute, or steering committee, without a few big names, but at the same time a lively, consolidated, attractive, promising sector of research on history. 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.

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