

## **SOCIAL HISTORY AS A DISCIPLINE: DEVELOPMENT, THEMES AND METHODS**

**Béla Tomka**

*University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary*

**Keywords:** social history, historiography, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, interdisciplinarity

### **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

Glossary

Bibliography

Biographical Sketch

### **Summary**

The academic field of what we regard as *social history* today has emerged in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and underwent a remarkable expansion in the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century, and underwent a remarkable expansion in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

-  
-  
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE 16 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,  
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

## Bibliography

Anna Zarnowska and Janusz Zarnowski, "Sozialgeschichte in Polen", in Jürgen Kocka, ed., *Sozialgeschichte im internationalen Überblick*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989, 141-162. [A survey of the development of social history in Poland.]

Alf Lüdtke, *Alltagsgeschichte: Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen*, Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 1989. [The locus classicus of the German school of the history of everyday life.]

Béla Tomka, "Perfecting Institutionalization: On the Foundation of the International Social History Association", *Journal of Social History*, vol. 42 (2007), no. 2, 987-989. [On the recent efforts of social historians to create an international umbrella organization.]

Béla Tomka, "Társadalomtörténeti hagyományok, irányzatok, módszerek – a nemzetközi gyakorlat szemszögéből", *Korall*, vol. 15 (2004), 341-348. [A quantitative analysis of the thematic structure of presentations on the major social history conferences and handbooks from the mid-1990s onwards.]

Christopher Lloyd, "The Methodologies of Social History: A Critical Survey and Defense of Structurism", *History and Theory*, vol. 30 (May 1991), no. 2, 180-219. [A critical examination of the methodological frameworks within which the history of society is being studied.]

Christoph Conrad, "Social History", in Neil H. Smelser, Paul B. Baltes, eds., *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Amsterdam, 2001, vol. 21, 14299-14306. [A well-structured introduction to the topic.]

Donald M. MacRaild and Avram Taylor, *Social Theory and Social History*, Houndmills and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004. [The book argues that an awareness of the complex relationship between social theory and social history is the key to a deeper understanding of the process of historical change.]

Dennis Smith, *The Rise of Historical Sociology*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991. [A survey addressing major interdisciplinary connections of social history.]

Eric Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society", in Felix Gilbert and Stephen Graubard, eds., *Historical Studies Today*, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972, 1-26. [Another classical statement on the tasks of social history from the heydays of the discipline.]

Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1949. [The probably most influential work of Braudel covering the social history of the Mediterranean world in most of the 16th century.]

Peter Burke, "The Annales Paradigm", in Stearns, ed., *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, vol. 1, 41-48. [A concise survey of the contribution of the Annales School to the development of social history.]

Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992. [A classic survey addressing the relationship of history and social sciences.]

Geoff Eley, "The Generations of Social History", in Peter N. Stearns, ed., *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, vol. 1., 3-29. [A balanced overview of the history of the discipline.]

Gerhard A. Ritter, *The New Social History in the Federal Republic of Germany*, London: German Historical Institute, 1991. [An excellent survey on social history in Germany.]

Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005. [A major historiographical survey.] Tony Judt, "Social History and Historians: Clown in Regal Purple", *History Workshop*, Issue 7 (Spring 1979), 66-94. [A much-debated statement on social history.]

György Kövér, "Milyenek vagyunk? A Hajnal István Kör–Társadalomtörténeti Egyesület – tíz év után", *Századvég*, (1997) no. 4, 43-52. [Article dealing with the history of the Hungarian Social History Association in general.]

Hartmut Kaelble, "Social History in Europe", *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37 (Fall 2003), 29-35. [An excellent survey on recent developments in European social history.]

Jürgen Kocka, *Historische Sozialwissenschaft. Auslaufmodell oder Zukunftsvision?* Oldenburg: Universität Oldenburg, 1999. [A concise volume on the perspectives of 'historical social science' after the cultural turn.]

Jürgen Kocka, “Losses, Gains and Opportunities: Social History Today”, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37 (2003), 21-38. [On the prospects of social history after the cultural turn.]

Jürgen Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte. Begriff – Entwicklung – Probleme*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1996. [The work most systematically presenting the approaches of the German ‘New Social History’ school.]

Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: History, Culture, and Text”, in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989. [On new developments in related disciplines.]

Peter Stearns, ed., *The Encyclopedia of European Social History*, vol. 1-6, New York: Scribner’s, 2001. [The most comprehensive handbook on the social history of modern Europe.]

Peter Stearns, “The Old Social History and the New”, in Stearns, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Social History*, vol. 1, 237-250. [An account of the trajectory of the discipline from an American perspective.]

### Biographical Sketch

**Béla Tomka**, born in Salgótarján, Hungary, in 1962 and studied history and geography at University of Szeged, obtaining the degrees of MA (1988) there and PhD at Debrecen University (1996). He was a DAAD Scholar at Münster University, Germany in 1991-92, and IRSEP Scholar at University of Minnesota, Minneapolis (MN) in 1992-93. He received the Humboldt Fellowship in 2001-02. He is Professor of History, University of Szeged, Hungary and has held visiting fellowships in Amsterdam, Berlin, Oxford, Mannheim, Portland (OR), and Jena. He is the author fourteen books and has edited several other volumes. His books include *A Social History of Twentieth Century Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), *Gazdasági növekedés, fogyasztás és életminőség: Magyarország nemzetközi összehasonlításban az első világháborútól napjainkig [Economic Growth, Consumption and Quality of Life: Hungary in an International Comparison, 1918 to Present]* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2011), and *Welfare in East and West: Hungarian Social Security in an International Comparison, 1918-1990* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004). He is on the board of the *International Social History Association* (Amsterdam).