[Social History as Lived and Written]: Comments

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Comments:

Despite the vagueness of the phrase "new social history," I take myself to be a scholar of such a stripe. "Social history" is itself classically vague, of course, but I think I meet the very broadest criterion—in writing, I tend to leave out the politics. And I tend to use research tools unknown to historians a decade or so ago, hence by definition new, things like the computer, statistical inference, and model testing. Considering myself a "new social historian," I take James A. Henretta's essay as directed to me personally and I am prompted to reply personally, even to the extent of heading these comments "Dear James."

If I read you correctly, James, the gist of your critique is that we, as social historians, are a disparate lot. We do not form "a coherent subdiscipline" that you can put your finger on, but are instead "a congeries of groups," often complementary in our approaches, sometimes contradictory. We tend to talk to, and write for, each other, although parenthetically you neglect to point out that this in a measure was forced upon us by early rejection. You might recall J. H. Hexter's vicious attack upon quantification, or the academic loneliness described by Melvin Richter in 1970, the "hostility... or what was worse, indifference" of colleagues to one's interdisciplinary work. Finally, you seem to complain, at least by implication, that we have no common philosophy of historical analysis. I would go farther and say that most of our work is done in the absence of any philosophic consideration at all. A few work with some sort of grand scheme in mind. I suspect this to be true of you. But most work because they are simply intrigued with a particular problem, many because they are intrigued by the new tools themselves, and, let us be completely candid, some work only for tenure.

I think, too, that I have a grasp of your corrective, although I must admit to a certain impatience with the discursive nature of your essay and may very well do you an injustice in trying to cut through to the nub of the argument. You introduce the Annalists and English Marxists in order to demonstrate that "coherent intellectual systems of historical inquiry" are indeed feasible. Granted. But neither of these systems can serve us. You point out that the essential pessimism about the human condition of the Annalists fits the French historical experience but runs contrary to American optimism. The English Marxists are more promising as a role model, concerned as they are with the

dialectics of change and optimistic that "the world can be transformed by purposeful action." American liberalism, however, rejects the Marxist model out of hand, and you are enough of a pragmatic American to accept that rejection—albeit that I think I sense a small tear of regret on your part.

Still, you argue, if we can borrow neither system in toto, we ought to borrow parts. From both, I gather, we ought to take greater faith in our rational abilities, specifically, borrow the art of using social theories to probe behind those mere facts that have so concerned us as heirs of a pragmatic American tradition. From the Annalists we need to take a concern for the structural limitations on human activity, while from the Marxists we ought to borrow a sense of moral purpose (but directed toward what end?) and the optimistic view that men and women can direct their own lives and, within limits, exceed limitations. Finally, all of these borrowings ought to be merged with the American proclivity for narrative to the end that each of our works of history revolves around some well-defined histoire probléme; for, after all, as you put it, the clear task is for American social historians to reach a wide audience, and our audience likes narrative.

As a strategy for your next book, James, I think all of what you say is grand. I take issue only with your attempt to inflict this singular strategy upon the rest of us. A few years ago, at an American Historical Association session, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., pointed to the anarchy prevalent throughout American historiography, devoid as it was (and still is) of any overarching Turnerian or Progressive or what-have-you theme, and suggested a model of American development that could conceivably bring this anarchy under control. My response as commentator was simply, "What's wrong with anarchy?" Insofar as I am concerned, ruling paradigms too rapidly evolve into cant, and I revel too much in the relative freedom from cant, a freedom that the various historiographic "revolutions" of the past years have produced, to second any motion to reintroduce cant. My initial response to you is exactly the same. What is wrong with the fact that we are a disparate lot? Are we not learning a variety of new things by virtue of the multiplicity of our approaches? Would you stay a Daniel Scott Smith because his sometimes esoteric demographics do not fit into "a coherent subdiscipline" of social history or because they cannot be read by a wide audience? You might well answer that I am proceeding in this rejection from my own commitment to empiricism, and you would be right. But I put it to you that you can elevate the power of human reason to whatever high place you choose, exult to the skies our critical function, yet your rational philosophies will get you nowhere unless you have empirical data to be rational about!

Equally to the point in my rejection, however, is your failure to acknowledge that there are different levels of research. I make the point in terms of a concrete example, again from demographics. To ask the question, "What was the life expectancy of individuals living in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake region?" is to operate at one level. Such a question can be explored and an answer presented without reference to anything outside of the question itself, and the answer will have a distinct value. A different level is in-
volved in the question, "What relationship did such a life expectancy have to family structure?" and, again, question and answer will have a value distinct to themselves. Still another level obtains in the question, "What relationship did family structure have to the American Revolution?" As I read you, you would have us all, and always, working on this last level. The prescription is wrong on at least two counts.

First, our craft is properly cumulative and cooperative. Viewed one way, my progression of questions forms an ascending rank order, the answer to the last depending upon the answer to the second, which is itself an outgrowth of the first. The scholar working in your ideal genre—that is, at the third level—must do all the work, for you have left no room for scholars to work on the "lesser" levels, no room for cumulation and cooperation. I suggest, too, that when such a scholar completes the work, it will be so idiosyncratic and subjective as to defy cumulation on even higher levels. Carl Sagan quoting D. H. Lawrence on the nature of the moon is illustrative in this regard: "It's no use telling me it's a dead rock in the sky! I know it's not." Well, there is a finite way to demonstrate and demonstrate again that the moon is, indeed, a dead rock, and there are finite ways to build upon that knowledge. There is no way to demonstrate that it is whatever Lawrence thought it was, and no place to go from his subjective musings.

Viewed another way, however, my three research questions form a descending rank order. Again, let us be candid and admit in this forum that the higher the level of abstraction, the easier it is to wax eloquent and the harder it is to test the generalizations expressed. In other words, the rules of the game of high generalization (the historian's favorite game, it seems to me) are so loose that anyone can play and win at least a few adherents. Conversely, the rules of the game at the lower levels are tight, even restrictive, on the one hand but, on the other, offer firm guidelines for acceptance or rejection of the conclusions presented. Viewed in this way, my three questions pinpoint the second fallacy in your prescription. You urge us to rush into easy generalizations at the higher level before we have really learned to live with the new and difficult lower-level tools at our disposal.

I AM NOT AT ALL SURE, James, that this last will cut much ice with you; you have elsewhere expressed your dismay at the "quest for technical exactness and statistical finesse." Hence, I will simply state it as the grounds for my own discomfort with the condition of the new social history—in direct opposition to yours—and leave the matter. It is not the lack of generalization and overweening concern for facts that offends me but the too cavalier attitude toward the rules by which (in these new games of ours) the most probable realities are to be established and the too precipitous rush to grand generalizations so much in evidence. A recent, highly statistical article exemplifies both ten-

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dencies. The piece in question reports an examination of eighteenth-century
data on marriage and birth from two Virginia counties, places the findings in
opposition to Edward Shorter's sexual revolution thesis, then rushes to high
generalization: "Industrialization is not necessarily a prerequisite for sexual
revolution." On the way to this grand conclusion, the author casually ignores
one rule after another of statistical inference. His research plan required corre-
lating tobacco prices and various measures of premarital sex. But he neglected
to ensure that his price index would reflect a single marketplace. (It does not;
one of his counties is devoted to Oronoco tobacco, the other sweet-scented—
two varieties with quite different market histories during the century.) And he
failed to test for statistical significance. (Of seven leading correlations in-
volving his own price index, four prove to be statistically insignificant; when a
more appropriate price index is introduced, no correlation is such as to allow
any inference as to the reality whatsoever.) From your hands, James, I might
well accept a work done according to the model you present. But casting all
of our studies in your terms would I fear, with good reason, be disastrous.

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4 Lee A. Gladwin, "Tobacco and Sex: Some Factors Affecting Non-Marital Sexual Behavior in Colonial

The chief significance of this essay lies less, in my opinion, in James A. Hen-
retta's efforts to solve some of the knotty problems of contemporary historiog-
raphy, important as this aim is, than in what his solutions tell us about the
state of the American historical profession today. According to Professor Hen-
retta, social history is more than just another professional specialty; it is rather,
to use his quotation from Harold S. Perkin, "all of history from the social point
of view." Such a claim announces the ascendancy of a new paradigm in Ameri-
can historiography to replace the older, so-called consensus interpretation of the
American past. If the older interpretation emphasized ideas and made, implic-
ity at least, the concept of culture central to understanding the American past,
then a new generation of historians stresses behavior and social relations because
they see the concept of society as the key to understanding the structure of
American history. The synthesis of all of United States history according to the
social interpretation is very near, I believe, and so Henretta's article offers a ra-
tionale for an approach already predominant in the profession rather than a
plea for one seeking to establish itself.4

1 For comparison, see Lawrence Veney, "The 'New' Social History in the context of American Historical
The article not only provides a rationale for the social interpretation of history in general, but Professor Henretta argues for a particular variety of it, one that is extraordinarily influential at the moment in terms of publication and frequency of citation. His solutions to contemporary historiographical problems point to the hegemony of a special brand of social history that has emerged as a major approach to the American past as a result of the demography of the profession as well as of changing intellectual and social currents. The largest age cohort in the profession today grew to intellectual and professional maturity during the foreign and domestic controversies of the 1960s. For many of these scholars the social interpretation of history represents, therefore, a repudiation of the moral and ideological presuppositions of consensus history as well as its conceptual bases.

From this perspective, the social interpretation of American history might be viewed as a revival of the social concerns expressed so often in the Progressive, or economic, interpretation of history that preceded consensus history. If the earlier, Progressive historians emphasized the economic system as the clue to class conflict and social democracy, then many social historians utilize the social system as the basis for understanding the same topics. Thus, the newer interpretation presumes the history of American society as a whole in the same way that the economic interpretation presupposed the history of the overall economy, and both for the same critical as well as analytical reasons. In the newer interpretation the economic system has been placed in the context of the larger social system, but for many of these interpreters the priority of material existence lies at the heart of social criticism and explanation.

The success of Professor Henretta's specific prescriptions for social history depends upon how well his scheme transcends certain categories of understanding usually considered mutually exclusive or at least difficult of reconciliation. What philosopher Louis O. Mink sees as mutually incompatible modes of comprehension, Professor Henretta argues are fusible in both analysis and exposition. While many philosophers and social analysts argue over the priority of subjectivist and objectivist approaches to explaining human behavior, Henretta proposes a union of phenomenological and objective structuralist perspectives as the resolution. This framework and paradigmatic episodes, he suggests, solve the problems of analyzing change in time, narrative viewpoint, social explanation, and even moral perspective. His essay quite rightly rejects the old problem of Cartesian versus Baconian views on fact and framework and the older arguments over relativism and perspectivism, but, in doing so, he makes certain assumptions about the nature of history and the nature of the historian's task. These assumptions and commitments may be suggested by distinguishing the various kinds of social history Henretta discusses.

Social history definitely no longer means history with the politics left out. On
the other hand, social history as distinguished from political, diplomatic, and even economic and intellectual history usually deals with fields not covered or only secondarily treated by these other specialties: the family, minorities and migrations, working-class life, social welfare, demography, social mobility, and urban history. In turn, social history in this sense deals with the other specialties as subordinate to its interests.

The social interpretation of history places ideas, events, and behavior as well as institutions in the larger context of the overall social system. Politics, economics, diplomacy, and intellectual trends are all explained and connected through their nexuses in specific social systems and preferably in relation to the workings of the overall society. Explanation of electoral behavior in the new political history is a conspicuous example of the trend, but tying professional ideals to professionalization movements is evidence of the same trend in intellectual history. Some intellectual historians even feel beleaguered as a result of this new interpretive turn of events.¹

The social interpretation of history presumes the history of society. Just as the economic interpretation supposedly rested upon a complete analysis of the entire economy, so the social interpretation draws conclusions about the parts of society from its overall nature. Unfortunately, in American history at least, we know too little about the precise nature of the overall social system at any one time, let alone its changing nature over time.² Thus, most of the recently hailed monographs basic to the new interpretation more often presume than prove the overall nature of American society upon which they supposedly rest. The best example of this tendency is the many community studies said to be the chief contribution of the new social history. Their findings generally rest upon a sample for which the authors have no idea of the exact universe. Therefore, the cosmos said to be found in the microcosm of the community may be entirely erroneous. Recent efforts at evolving a comparative framework for communities may help place these hallmark studies in their proper perspective—I almost said place.³ Likewise, inferences about the class system, the corporate structure, and the bureaucratic state all rest more upon intuition than research and certain knowledge. It is always easier to presume the context than to prove it. Just as the consensus historians often presumed the culture that they used to prove their case, so now the new social historians frequently presume the overall society that supports their contentions.

Whether social being in the end determines or merely constrains and conditions human consciousness divides the social-materialist interpretation of history in particular from the social interpretation of history in general. All social historians tend to infer ideas from social behavior, but the distinction between the two kinds of social historians hinges upon the exact role human intention and

¹ See the expression of this concern, for instance, by many of the authors in John Higham and Paul Conkin, eds., New Directions in American Intellectual History (Baltimore, 1979).
² For this same point, see Veysey, "The 'New' Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing," 5.
³ What such an approach involves is exemplified by two recent studies: see Edward M. Cook, Jr., The Fathers of the Towns: Leadership and Community Structure in Eighteenth-Century New England (Baltimore, 1976), and J. Rodgers Hollingsworth and Ellen Jane Hollingsworth, Dimensions of Urban History: Historical and Social Science Perspectives in Middle-Sized American Cities (Madison, Wis., 1978).
ideation plays in "praxis," "habitus," "action," or whatever the intersection between the objective structures and subjective experiences is called. What, in short, is the role of consciousness in the production and reproduction of society that is said to be basic to the social interpretation of history? This question does not ask whether consciousness plays a role in the base as well as the superstructure, to use those time-honored phrases for a moment, but whether the basic direction of influence among the hierarchy of levels is always the same. Should one even think of the levels as hierarchical? Both Raymond A. Williams and Pierre Bourdieu have wrestled with this problem so central to the humanistic, more voluntaristic Marxism of today. Eric J. Hobsbawm has argued that a Marxist in the end must believe in a consistent hierarchy of levels. For history to have direction the basic flow of influences must proceed from material forces of production to institutions and ideas. It is this assumption that separates the social-materialist interpretation from the more general social interpretation of history. It is also this assumption of the primacy of production in everyday life that accounts for much of present-day interest in mentalité, in material culture, and in the ethnohistory of ordinary people.

Lastly, must the social interpretation of history, whether materialist or not, be critical of the existing power relations in a society, especially in a liberal capitalist one like the United States? Must the social historian reveal who dominated whom in order to condemn past social arrangements of that society and to construct those of the future? Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in an article aptly entitled "The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxist Perspective," have distinguished radical from liberal and conservative interpreters of the past according to their willingness to focus upon class conflict and political power in criticism of current social arrangements. Because liberal social historians fail to confront, even if they describe, class exploitation and cultural hegemony, the Genoveses have lumped them with conservative historians. Should we not call the version of social history they advocate critical social history or the critical-social interpretation of history to distinguish it from a liberal, even if materialist, version?

Only by embracing the varieties of social history listed above can Professor Henretta claim to resolve all the knotty historiographical problems of the relation between historical actors and modern observers, between subjective experience and objective structures, and between critical and analytical history. A phenomenological perspective does not in itself solve the problem of aggregating world views, although it enhances the idea of human agency as central to social change and continuity. If, however, world views are determined as well as constrained during interaction with underlying social and productive forces, then subjective experiences can be inferred from behavior as interpreted by the observer as opposed to the documented thoughts of all of the actors. At the same

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5 James A. Henretta has taken this premise as his own "epistemological assumption"; see his "Families and Farmos Mentalité in Pre-Industrial America," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 25 (1978): 20-21. Henretta is the first historian of the American past to use mentalité in the title of an article as far as I know.
time what Mink has seen as mutually incompatible modes of comprehension in analysis and exposition are readily reconciled by Henretta through his fusion of a particular theoretical framework and a specific kind of narrative viewpoint and moral outlook. Without these assumptions, the historiographical problems he poses remain unsolved.

Problems of understanding social change and continuity over a long time and of narrative form even remain under Professor Henretta’s assumptions. For some interpreters of materialist persuasion, both problems are resolved by portraying the plot of the story as a plot in the story. Employment of history is the tale of a plot in history. Henretta eschews such an easy but simplistic form for the paradigmatic episode. But the paradigmatic episode avoids the hardest problem of time by freezing time in much the same manner as the durées of the Annales. What the community study does to space, the paradigmatic episode does to time. Instead of relating all understanding to a single point in space, the episode makes all connections to a single point in time. Dynamic as such a story may be, it fails to treat many such major points over time—many paradigmatic episodes in succession—the quintessential histoire problématique. Just as the Annales abandoned the interconnections among durées partly because causal connections are more difficult to assert today, so too in its own way the paradigmatic episode avoids the ultimate complexity of causal relationships across long periods of time in favor of the easier (but no less interesting or demanding) task of establishing connections through the focus of a single analytical moment.

Such a focus and narrative mode also sidesteps the problem of expository viewpoint and form demanded by modern consciousness. Whether the social interpretation is critical or not, materialist or not, the problem of narrative form and viewpoint arises in light of the fragmented focus and continuity employed by some of the best twentieth-century novelists to capture the essence of modern experience. Should the new social history follow suit and abandon the omniscient observer’s viewpoint for a pluralistic perspective on cause, time, and form? Louis O. Mink has argued that the basic assumptions of old-fashioned, universal history still shape implicitly the modern historian’s consciousness, and chief among these, it seems to me, must be reckoned the retention of the omniscient viewpoint in the story. The fragmented perspective and narrative sequence in some Annales history is an early effort to bring narrative form into line with the twentieth-century consciousness. Does the action framework and paradigmatic episode advocated in Professor Henretta’s essay take a radical stand on this issue, or does it still espouse nineteenth-century narrative viewpoint and expository form?

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