Introduction to Part 4

Social history, hegemonic within the wider discipline by the 1970s, reconfigured understandings of what constituted the proper terrain of historical investigation.¹ Labour movements and working-class culture were two areas of inquiry that received increasing attention, pioneering new approaches and generating theoretical insights. The study of the history of class society was now also necessarily done with due attention, in the aftermath of E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), to the agency of working people. Thompson explained his title in ways that charted orientations that would prove surprisingly innovative and influential:

*Making* because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at any appointed time. It was present at its own making.²

This approach unleashed a plethora of analytic possibilities, extending well beyond class. As the Pandora’s Box of subjectivity was pried open, the number of ‘categories of historical analysis’ that might be scrutinised in ways that revealed the wrestling of agency with conditioning multiplied and, in the process, often fragmented. Women’s history morphed into the study of gender.³ Addressing the history of families and their constitution and reconstitution in particular epochs blended into explorations of childhood and the importance of demography in the development of capitalism.⁴ Serious scrutiny of how sexuality had been forged through time necessarily prodded researchers to explore all manner of eroticised endeavours that related to the social construction of sexual minorities and identities that included not only the heterosexual, but the homosocial, the homosexual, the ‘queer’, and the transgendered.⁵ As social history intersected fruitfully with economic history even the basic Marxist conception of modes of production was complicated, encompassing sophisticated exploration of transitional phases such as proto-industrialisation.⁶

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¹ For one statement among many see Eley 2005.
³ Scott 1988 is one indication of this trend.
⁴ For one insightful statement see Seccombe 1983.
⁵ In this development, so central to modern historiography, see Foucault 1976.
⁶ See Medick 1976 for an early statement of significance.
Inevitably, the rich canvas of diversity on which the new materialist social histories, born in the 1960s but coming to fruition in the 1970s and 1980s, were painted, began to be looked at differently. What had originally been regarded as a breakthrough into the inclusive detail of a much-needed democratisation of historical study came to be regarded as a retreat into specialised silos of containment, in which large and important dimensions of the past (once regarded as the proper terrain of historical study, but now apparently displaced) were seemingly hived off from narrow particularities. Different national contexts and specific vantage points from which critique might be waged posed the problem in distinct and often dramatically divergent ways. The analytic level of sophistication, and the nature of disagreement, were always contingent on the political standpoint of the critic, with commentary ranging from the usefully suggestive to red-baiting banality. There was a world of difference in the ways in which discontents with social history’s practice were raised.

Criticisms of studies of class were indicative of the range of views. Some condemned the study of cultural aspects of working-class life because they were judged unimportant in the grand Whig march of labour’s consolidating respectability and entrée into the twentieth-century state’s apparatus of accommodation. Others insisted that the study of almost anything relating to workers paled in importance before the need to return history to the examination of powerful men and significant events. More complicated yet was a growing malaise arising out of the fascination with the particular and the exotic, often posed in ways that called attention to the need for a radical-edged, hard-nosed assessment of who held power and how it was exercised. Agency, some suggested, had its limitations in the face of structured necessity and the ever-present, and often decisively important, counter-agencies of determination.

The basic point, all of these nuances aside, was difficult to miss. As studies of workers revealed, social history’s project of inclusivity had focussed too much on what one mainstream Canadian historian in 1969 had called the ‘limited identities’ (which included class, ethnicity, and region) of the country’s past, to the exclusion of the ‘big picture’. This needed to be brought back into focus. To do so meant ordering historical study more concertedly around large developments. Politics, the state, and economic structures established undeniable boundaries within which human behaviour unfolded, and it was the historian’s task to explore this process of determination so that society’s overall makeup was not shuffled to the sidelines.

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7 Careless 1969.