

CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS?¹
**BRITISH SOCIALIST HISTORIANS AND THE UPS AND
DOWNS OF WRITING SOCIAL HISTORY**

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To examine British historiography since 1970 it is, of course, essential to begin with the 1960s, when a new generation of historians with new forms of historical writing demonstrated the growing importance of social history. This was epitomized by E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, which put a new conception of social history at the centre of historiographical debate.² Thompson inspired a whole generation of social historians to study a whole new range of topics in working class history or to revisit old ones with new questions.³ At the same time Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, George Rude *et al* were building on "history from below". They had cut their teeth in the Communist Party Historians Group, and although many resigned from the party after the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, they remained Marxist historians.

It was a remarkable time for left wing historians, both as a turning point in new ways of studying the past, and in the acceptability of their ideology – contrasting with their 1950s experiences when being perceived as a "Leftie" generally meant exclusion from academic institutions.⁴ The radicalization of the 1960s saw the espousal of left-wing, Marxist and even anarchist ideas by people

¹ The original title of my paper was "The Crisis in British Socialist History". However, having heard of the travails of my Balkan colleagues over the three days preceding my presentation, and of the tremendous difficulties many of them have to confront in gaining access to sources and in producing their texts, I was somewhat abashed by the title and felt it in need of some modification. That said, British socialist historians *have* had to face major challenges over the past decade and a half: some have risen to the challenge more effectively than others.

² See Willie Thompson, *What Happened to History*, Pluto Press, 2000, p. 34-44, for an excellent analysis of the impact of E. P. Thompson's book.

³ Richard J Evans, *In Defense of History: Reply to the Critics*, www.history.ac.uk/reviews/discourse

⁴ George Rude was one of those excluded, despite his obvious scholarship: eventually he had to leave for Australia, and subsequently Canada, to find an academic post commensurate with his talents. *George Rude, 1910-1993, Marxist Historian: Memorial Tributes*, Socialist History Society, Occasional Papers Series No 2, 1993.

from a whole range of backgrounds, including many lower middle class students as the number of university places expanded. This in turn led to increasing demand for Marxist writings with publishers eager to bring out both classic texts and new writings, in book or journal form, with Antonio Gramsci's work holding a special appeal for left-wing social historians. The trend continued into the 1970s, and many historians who would not class themselves as Marxist were, nevertheless, highly influenced by the new ideas and approaches to historical research that stemmed from the leading Marxist historians. Writing social history with a view to recognizing the contribution of "ordinary" people to British life and society was increasingly looked upon as a moral imperative for radical historians.⁵

As well as the CP Historians Group, the British Society for the Study of Labour History was an important base for research, which published *Past and Present* and the *New Left Review*. Initially, these tended to concentrate on organizational and institutional history, but during the 1970s as many of the radical 1960s – educated historians came into academe, the emergence of the radical feminist movement and the History Workshop, started by Raphael Samuel in 1968 at Ruskin, the trade union college at Oxford, stimulated new directions in research, taking it towards individuals and social/working class experiences and studies. The idea of social history took off to such a degree that at its height *some* social historians were willing to claim that history *is* social history because all history has social dimensions.

The new directions included feminist and black perspectives (both notably absent from Thompson's *Making of the Working Class*): Sheila Rowbottom describes how the emerging feminist movement "could draw on a new left influenced by anti-colonial theory and the black movement in the United States in which the 'personal' had become part of the terrain of politics. The radical intellectual politics of the late 1960s were thus concerned about power not simply in politics or the economy but in the constitution and hold of knowledge."⁶ Religious groups, gay people and other neglected or minority groupings all became legitimate historical themes. As these new areas of study emerged the challenge that was thrown up was *who* was qualified to write their stories? Should it be confined to "insiders" and, if that was the case, would the desire to promote a positive image and redress past negatives or neglect skew the picture? This question is still a live issue. The expansion of social studies that had been stimulated by the British Marxist historians was, ironically, one of the major challenges to Marxist interpretation. It was all very well to apply Marxist theory to quantitative analysis of the social/class make-up of cities but for historians working on smaller scale, more particular, studies it was difficult to

⁵ Thompson, *What Happened to History*, p. 159.

⁶ Sheila Rowbottom, *Shush Mum's Writing: Personal narratives by working class women in the early days of British women's history*, in "Socialist History", No. 17, Rivers Oram, Ed. Kevin Morgan, 2000.

fit their research into a grand narrative. While the practicalities of Marxist methodology – the search for contradictions, conflicts, dissonance – still remained useful to a degree, Marxism became much more diffuse.

Social history flourished in the 1970s, with the appearance of *History Workshop Journal* and *Social History* in the middle of the decade. However, with economic problems stemming from the 1973 oil crisis and later the industrial strife in Britain and the disarray of the institutional left, it became apparent by the end of the 1970s that the radicalism of the 1960s was a spent force. The 1980s and the ascendance of Thatcher and the rightwing Atlantic axis saw a major challenge to left-wing ideology as the traditional socialist base (or what was perceived as the traditional base) was eroded and changed. The decade, culminating in the 1989 “revolutions” allowed the right (prematurely) to proclaim “the end of socialism”; the apparent ascendancy of capitalist social democracy prompted Francis Fukuyama to write (also prematurely) about *The End of History*.⁷ In the early 1990s demise of communism stimulated debate among the left about what had “gone wrong” – not so much with the Eastern European systems (which was all too clear) as with ideology. Socialist historians were faced with the challenge of moving from Cold-War to Post-Cold-War climate in international terms. Domestically they were also confronted by a “New Labour” – as opposed to the ’50s and 60s “New Left”, an entirely different animal – and its concept of the “third way” later in the decade.

Political changes from the 1980s onwards led to the erosion of the idea of historical progress and the concept of society heading for some ultimate destination, the idea which had provided the framework – often unconscious – for much historical work. In the 1960s E. H. Carr stated that, whatever their formal political colouring, English historians were essentially liberal due to the implicit belief (at the time he wrote this) after centuries of conflict, ending in the 1940s, the secret of improvement and progress (assuming we could avoid nuclear holocaust) had finally been cracked. Marxist historians shared similar presumptions, consciously working within a framework of a grand narrative driven by inevitable progress.

In the realms of social history some broadly left historians felt, by the turn of the century, that a huge change (some even described it as a crisis) had occurred. Over the preceding decades the industrial working class, perceived as an essential element in the 1960s was no longer the “vehicle of social and political progress” and that new kinds of division within society were the ones that needed to be seriously addressed by any historian with socialist principles. Contemporary debates in left history were much more far-reaching than those of the 1960s: there was now disagreement over the *concept* of history, rather than debate over *content*. Another turning point seemed to have arrived with new forms of historical writing breaking on to the scene, and younger historians increasingly favouring cultural history rather than social history. The new

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Penguin, 1992.

political climate had seen social history being overtaken by cultural and intellectual history in which language and discourse play an essential role: the influence of cultural and literary studies became an important element in historical methodology. Poststructuralism and postmodernism, initially confined to literary and media studies found their way, via cultural studies, into historical studies. Proponents of both, in the main, regarded themselves as being on the left with postmodernists feeling their role was to “give a voice to previously marginalized and subordinated subjects”.⁸ Part of this process was to investigate how identities are constructed and how they relate to “the Other” and to use this as a means of exploring how historical events were *perceived* or *represented* at the time, rather than analyzing the events themselves.

Left historians’ reactions to postmodernism varied from outright antagonism to a recognition that it had its uses. Richard J Evans’ assessment was that “despite all the various pronouncements of its demise by postmodernists, social history is not dead. Undeniably, it has lost, or is in the course of abandoning, its universalizing claim to be the key to the whole of historical understanding. To this extent, the postmodernist critique has been not only successful but also liberating. By directing historians’ attention to language, culture and ideas, it has helped free them to develop more complex models of causation and to take seriously subjects they may have neglected before.”⁹ In 1999 *Socialist History* journal produced a special issue on *The Future of History* which included a Roundtable discussion on Revisionism and Postmodernism by six prominent socialist historians with the title of “History Today”. The consensus was that things had changed radically and the conclusion was that the conviction that historiography has been developing – through the Enlightenment, the Whigs, Liberals, Marxists, Socialists... – as a narrative of human progress and emancipation had been challenged by the postmodernists and that a “grand narrative” no longer applied. Meanwhile, the revisionist undercutting of the significance of what had hitherto been viewed as the major landmarks – the English and French revolutions, the Industrial revolution, the Russian revolution and the establishment of Nation States – also pointed to major changes in the way history was interpreted. Nevertheless, they felt that Marxism was still – despite everything – a useful intellectual tool and while acknowledging postmodernism as potentially a useful critique, it did not constitute an analytical system in itself. However, at least two concluded “we are all postmodernists now”.¹⁰

Another challenge to social and socialist historians thrown up in the 1990s was the re-emergence of national myths, first brought into play with the creation of nation states as the great European empires crumbled in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Competing national mythologies were brought out and dusted

⁸ Thompson, *What Happened to History*, p. 65.

⁹ Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History*, Granta Books, 1997, p. 72-73.

¹⁰ *Socialist History*, No. 14, Rivers Oram, Ed. Willie Thompson, 1999. The participants were Jim Sharpe, Peter Jones, Mike Savage, Eileen Yeo, Kevin Morgan and Richard Evans with David Parker as chair.

down as Yugoslavia collapsed and three decades of violence in Ireland fuelled by equally conflicting national myths might, or might not, have been drawing to a close. At the same time, devolution of power to Scottish and Welsh assemblies stimulated English nationalism among some sectors of society who had hitherto been perfectly happy to be just British.

The 1990s was not an arid desert in terms of historical studies and developments however. It is worth noting here that in the mid 1990s no fewer than four new editions of Gramsci's prison writings were published; even after the demise of Eurocommunism and Soviet communism he remained an important influence on the left who recontextualized and reconsidered his writings nearly seventy years on. The combination of Class and Gender continued apace with interesting studies such as Melanie Tebbutt's *Women Talk? A Social History of "Gossip" in Working Class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* coming out in 1995. Tebbutt used autobiography, press reports, popular literature and oral testimony to demonstrate how gossip played a complex but formative role in shaping working class social values in the period covered. The following year Eileen Yeo published her *The Contest for Social Science: Relations and representations of gender and class*. Her study of "Do-gooders", from 19th century middle classes to current Social Services staff, their application of social science to the poor and their social problems and the response of the latter to being 'done good' to was described by one reviewer as a "blend of feminist theory, Marxist historiography and a dash of post-structuralism".

Another positive development has been the emergence of Community History: Oral history has long been recognized as an invaluable source, especially for social historians, but now the people are collecting and writing their community's history for themselves rather than feeding professional historians with raw material. This could be the ultimate "history from below", and the democratization of history, as people and communities take ownership of their own history and, as a result, understand and value history and their place in it. This is not as parochial as might be imagined as various websites – such as Valley and Vale – have been established to facilitate the sharing of experiences, not just at a national but also at an international level, between communities in order to enable them to compare their experiences.

Comparative history is playing an increasingly important part in left thinking, and has been a major focus of conferences over the last few years. The perception is growing that in addition to developing beyond organizations and ideology, comparative social and labour history needs to take on an international dimension. Stefan Berger noted in 2000 that the early days of socialism saw a great deal of cultural exchange and argued that a return to this original internationalism will revive and renew left history.¹¹ Some comparative studies have been published, but they are very few in Britain (due to the generally hopeless provision of language teaching in schools there): since the 1970s an

¹¹ Stefan Berger, Editorial, "Socialist History", No. 17, Rivers Oram, 2000.

increasing number of comparative histories has been published beyond British shores, but often with a tendency to be Eurocentric and focus on Western Europe. Berger suggests the solution may be found in collaborative historical studies with scholars from other countries including Eastern Europe and the rest of the world. He also argues for an end to the distinction in British universities between British and European history.

History is an ongoing and moveable feast. No-one would dream of consigning Michelet to the bin, and similarly it would be foolhardy to consign the past thirty years of social history to oblivion because political realities and theories of how to write history have moved on. We learn from the past and this is particularly true of past historical approaches and methodology. One thing that came home to me very clearly during the Historian's Workshop in Bucharest was how very fortunate British socialist historians were over the last three decades of the twentieth century: they were able to *choose* Marxist methodology and theory, or any variation on those.