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Social History

A complicated subfield to define, social history attempts to explain change over time by exploring the interrelationships between many different lenses of history, such as urban history, economic history, behavioral history, anthropology, cultural history and more. Rather than trying to approach history as a series of linear events, social history is “an approach to history that emphasizes patterns or processes of culture, power relationships, and behavior”[[1]](#footnote-1) and it endeavors to provide a detailed look into the lives of everyday people. A common misconception associated with social history is that the field tells us only about the lower classes, which is what a typical person would assume the term ‘ordinary people’ means. However, social history is not aimed at isolating specific groups of people; the definition of the word “social” implies that the field is looking at people’s interactions, relationships, and behaviors.

“Part of the difficulty in determining the influence of social history [is that]…there has been a merging of the terms of “cultural” and “social” history so that the two have become virtually synonymous.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Many historians suggest that studying history through the lens of social history is extremely problematic due to the fact that the field is so broad and encompasses so many categories, and so while it is a popular field (especially for contemporary historians), it is also a great source of debate. Peter N. Stearns, a history professor at George Mason University, argues that social history’s aim has not been to be a “catch-all category;” rather, the whole point is to study and explore the various interactions of historical sub-fields, how they affect each other, and what that can ultimately tell us about understanding our past.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson, famous social historians of the mid-20th century, also defended the all-encompassing nature of social history. “Social history should be: expansive, elastic, eclectic, reluctant to privilege one field of inquiry over another, [and should be] willing to examine mentalities as well as concrete economic processes and structures.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This quote from E.P. Thompson dates back to the 1960s when social history was more closely linked with economic history and urban history, and essentially comes from the period of the cultural turn that more and more commonly linked the subfield with anthropology and cultural history.

Contemporary research in social history has taken a whole new direction, causing it to gain some separation from cultural history. Much of the new focus is on sensory history, that is, “how individuals experienced, understood, made sense of, and invented their environments and themselves in ways beyond mere seeing.”[[5]](#footnote-5)Now, instead of trying to put ourselves in their shoes so to speak and “looking through their eyes,” some historians are now considering the other senses as well: hearing, touch, taste, etc. The big idea behind this new approach is the possibility of being able to literally recreate past experiences to understand how the actors really felt. By looking at a more “total” view of history, social history can lead to a deeper understanding and a more accurate and complete picture of the past. “Moreover, social historians’ tendency to see history not just from the top down but from the bottom up [has challenged] naturalized, dominant ways of understanding the past.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The popularity of the social history field, both the cultural and sensory approaches included, has led to the publication of numerous journals. Some, like the Cultural and Social History Journal put out by the Social History Society, defend the position that the cultural and social approaches to history complement each other and can be used to better aid our understanding of historical events. The Economic History Review, published by the Economic History Society, reviews books and periodicals in the field and keeps people up to date on current developments, and includes information on economics, society, intellectual history, politics, etc. One of the most widely known of the journals is the Journal of Social History, which covers the various topics of social history, both past and modern, while also focusing on developing methodologies. The journal was founded in the 1960s by Peter Stearns, a professor and historian mentioned previously in the essay.

“During the last two or three decades, social history has become the fastest growing and the most fashionable area of professional historical writing, research, and teaching in the English-speaking world.”[[7]](#footnote-7)Miles Fairburn, who specializes in historiography, is one of many leading contemporary social historians. But while Miles Fairburn’s work is contemporary and can perhaps shed a more detailed light on what the actual field of social history encompasses today, one of the best books to read concerning social history is E.P. Thompson’s book “The Making of the Working Class.” Unlike Fairburn, E.P. Thompson tackles a specific people and time period in history: the English working class during the late 18th century and early 19th century. Over 800 pages long, “The Making of the Working Class” was both well-received and highly debated among historians. The book had a big influence on the field as a whole because of its bottom-up approach, and the passionate and detailed writing by Thompson.

E.P. Thompson was a British Marxist historian who wrote about the idea of class-consciousness and the Marxist concept of class struggle. While the book was first published almost 50 years ago, which technically takes it out of the running for being a contemporary outlook on the social history field, the content remains relevant today and “his approach is more than history [from] below, it is about analyzing cause and effect in history.”[[8]](#footnote-8)The book is divided into three main parts, and the story is told from the perspective of the historical actors with an interesting new twist on the old Marxist ideas of how distinct classes are formed. The first section talks about ideologies of the working class during that time period that influences how these people made their decisions that impacted history. The next section discusses the effects of the First Industrial Revolution on working class people and the ways in which it changed how they viewed the world.

The third section of the book, arguably the most important, combines the first two parts to “explain events by referring to the motives, reasoning, meanings, and intentions of the actors.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Thompson advocates for the workers, saying that they create their own agency, and claims that the “culture of working people played a crucial part in motivating and enabling them to engage in these struggles.”[[10]](#footnote-10)Though Thompson’s book has left a lasting legacy and is arguably one of the classics of social history, his ideas have been called weak by several outspoken historians in the modern era. They claim that the relationship between how the classes are structured and how they obtain agency for themselves was underrepresented in the book, and so therefore readers could not gain a clear understanding of class-consciousness.

E.P. Thompson’s “The Making of the Working Class” is arguably the best example of a social history book from the twentieth century, a classic model of how social and cultural histories are inextricably linked. But the more recent approach to social history, through the lens of the senses, is best portrayed by Mark Michael Smith’s work entitled, “Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History.”

It examines the importance of the senses…principally in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [and how] the senses informed the emergence of social classes, race and gender conventions, industrialization, urbanization, colonialism, imperialism, nationalism…typically associated with the “modern” era.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Sensory history is not a new concept of researching; however it is an aspect of social history that has been underutilized and largely unknown to the public up until the turn of the century. Smith takes on many different time periods and places in history, breaks them down, and gives detailed examples of how different senses have helped evolve the field of social history. “Histories of the senses promise to rescue us from an Enlightenment conceit with visuality that [is] also responsible for a sometimes misleading, partial, and distorted “views” of the past.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Social history challenges the traditional linear view of history and provides a deeper understanding of historical actors themselves by exploring behaviors, ideologies, and people’s interactions among other things. The field questions the past approaches to history and contemporary studies constantly provide new ways to understand the past through people and societies.

1. Peter N. Stearns, “Social History and History: A Progress Report,” *Journal of Social History, Vol. 19, No. 2* (1985) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark M. Smith, “Making Sense of Social History,” *Journal of Social History, Vol. 37, No. 1* (2003): 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Smith, “Making Sense of Social History,” 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Smith, “Making Sense of Social History,” 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Smith, “Making Sense of Social History,” 167 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Smith, “Making Sense of Social History,” 177 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Miles Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies + Methods* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Resolute Reader, April 12, 2011 (9:09 p.m.), comment on E.P. Thompson, “The Making of the Working Class, *The Making of the Working Class*, 1963 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies + Methods,* 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies + Methods,* 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (California: University of California Press, 2007), 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Smith, “Making Sense of Social History,”167 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)