
Do we need a new social history movement?

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25 years ago, in 1992, the historian Harvey J. Kaye called for a 'longer view of the past and present - to begin to fashion a new historical narrative which can speak to contemporary experience and contribute to the making of an alternative vision of the future'. Kaye's called was based on the legacy of a history movement that had emerged in the 1930s, crystallising in the Communist Party Historians' Group in the 1950s. What did this new social history achieve and what can we learn from that tradition?

The tradition has four key parts. The first is the development of 'class-struggle analysis', derived from the *Communist Manifesto's* 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle'. This meant, for example, that the history of the Industrial Revolution was not to be written simply as a series of economic and social changes but as the formation of the working class determined in large part by the agency of workers themselves. E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) was broadly based on this approach. Secondly, the writing of 'history from the bottom up', initiated by the *Annales* School in France, and developing the history of peasants, plebeians, artisans, workers and rank and file trade unionists. It should be noted that this is not merely history of the bottom, but from the bottom up. Dona Torr's *Tom Mann and His Times* (1956) probably exemplifies this approach to the writing of trade union history.

Thirdly, the recovery of a 'radical-democratic tradition', deriving partly from the Popular Frontism of the 1930s. Movements and groups like the Levellers, Diggers and Ranters (Christopher Hill), the Wilkite struggles in the 18th century (George Rude), the Luddites, Captain Swing and the Chartists (John Saville), had all contributed to a popular ideology of resistance.

Lastly, this history challenged the narratives of both right and left. It confronted the Whig version of British history with its smooth evolutionary path towards democracy and the dogmatic Marxist view that historical development ran along determined, mechanical, unilinear and economic tracks. Eric Hobsbawm's work perhaps reflects this more thoughtful direction.

This rich historical work helped to develop and inform many other kinds and forms of history in later decades:

History Workshop, micro-history, working women's history, oral history, the Black Atlantic, LGBT history, the history of disabled people. We might note the work of Sheila Rowbotham, Anna Davin, Peter Linebaugh and Paul Gilroy. But right-wing politics and governments, coupled with the academic attacks of post-modernism - the latter described by Edward Said as 'a deep-seated wish to be rid of history' - slowed and then halted the 'forward march' of this approach. Now there is no such thing as a 'grand narrative' in the academic world despite the fact that history written by self-styled right-wing historians is a grand narrative of monarchs, ministers etc.

As Eric Hobsbawm remarked, much insightful history is focused on the character and outlook of small groups or communities with little attempt to relate them to the wider social context; similarly, the problem with the slogan of oral history - 'dig where you stand' - is that the historian can end up in a deep hole with no view of the wider world. There are small but significant signs that a more coherent approach to history writing is emerging. Local oral histories, trade union history, a wealth of new research into places and people (eg 'On the Record', the C. L. R. James film *Every Cook Can Govern*) as well as the many socialist history groups (eg the Mary Quaile Club) and, of course, Britain at Work, based at the TUC Library Collections; the Bishopsgate Institute archive, Warwick TU archive, SHL Collection and the Working-Class Movement Library.

All of this could be about building a new social history perspective which is situated within a much broader socialist education movement. This cannot be done by simply declaring it done or by producing a manifesto for historians to sign up to. The Communist Party Historians' Group, as the name implies, was largely made up of Communist Party members who were historians but who derived their confidence from their links with working-class struggles and organisations. A new movement will not be dependent on a party (nor should it be). It will be a diverse and many-sided network which will aim, at least initially, to link the projects and organisations in order to share information/ideas and to promote the writing/collecting of social history.

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