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### Long Time Coming, Long time Gone: the Past, Present and Future of Social History

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This paper examines the past, present and future of social history, or at least one possible future for social history. Before beginning my discussion, there are a couple of qualifying comments that I need to make. First, I discuss primarily social history in the Anglophonic world and especially in the US. Second, rather than presenting a narrative account of the development of the field, this paper focuses just on key moments in the development of social history over the last 50 years. It ends by presenting my own personal view of where I think the field is going and why I think this is a particularly exciting moment to be a social historian.<sup>1</sup> As a branch of history, social history, of course, has been around for a long time. From the late nineteenth century onwards, there were historians who created a niche for themselves by focusing on the history of society rather than politics, the field of inquiry that dominated most of the discipline of history. But the type of social history that I am talking about in this article is what came to be called "new social history".

Unlike most fields, new social history actually has a birthday: 6 April 1966. That was the date the *Times Literary Supplement* published a group of essays entitled "New Ways in History". Among the authors in this special collection were many prominent British historians, including leading Marxists such as E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Moses Finley. The 13 pieces covered a wide range of topics and time periods but all shared two points: the first was that traditional history had ceased to be relevant to the general public and, second, that in order to regain relevancy history had to address the pressing issues of the day – the 1960s. This called for a radical reorientation of the discipline. The essays sketched out the key elements most needed to make history relevant

## *Long Time Coming, Long Time Gone: The Past, Present and Future of Social History*

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again. And the most important of these was that the study of society needed to become central rather than peripheral and that the subject of social history should be common people rather than elites. This approach came to be called “history from the bottom up”. In many ways, these essays set the agenda for the emergence of a new field – “new social history”. Two points about this development warrant special comment. The first is that new social history was from the very beginning a product of the intellectual and political climate of its time. The second is that it represented a radical approach to the study of the past. From then to now, these two elements have been closely intertwined.

Turning now to the US, what is remarkable is how quickly new social history caught on and achieved a position of dominance in the discipline. This was because of a very fruitful confluence of four factors. The first was the influence of the British Marxists and their new ways in history. The second was the appearance in English translation of important works by French Annalists. Together, these shifted American historians’ attention to new subjects. Two other factors were extremely important: one was technological and the other political. The technological factor was the introduction of the computer, which, for reasons I will discuss shortly, gave historians a powerful new tool that would allow them to study society broadly speaking. The political one was the radical movements that emerged in the 1960s in the US. Together these constituted a heady mix. It is important to note the new social history in the US was a very broad movement. There was no single foundational text or methodology. Instead, from its very inception it was seen as being explicitly interdisciplinary, and in particular historians looked to sociology for ideas, methods and models of analysis. US historians became especially concerned with studying social structure and aggregate behaviour, i.e., mass movements and the lives of common people. These reflected the political climate of the time. This was the era of the civil rights movement, mass student demonstrations, the anti-Vietnam war movement and the women’s liberation movement, but just as important though often forgotten, is that people were in general challenging the fundamental foundations of postwar American society. Young people in particular called for a questioning of all received authority and issued a demand that knowledge, especially university education, be relevant to their concerns. Among their demands was a call to historians to tell the stories of all people and not just the accomplishments of “dead white men”. And this is where sociology and the computer come in. Sociology was, after all, the discipline that had developed explicitly to study the social. The computer became important because it offered historians for the first time a way to study mass movements and the aggregate behaviours of common people. Quantification was one of the key elements of 1960s–1970s new social history. In the US, the field came to be known as well as social science history.

New social historians stormed the bastion of traditional historiography – much to the chagrin and opposition of many, mostly conservative historians. Between 1968 and 1972 a virtual torrent of monographs appeared, many of which are now considered classics in the field of history generally. They were new, they were radical, and they swept the field, with many of them garnering prizes and awards. More trappings of success followed. Just as important as the publication of these books was the appearance of new scholarly journals dedicated to the field. In 1967, for example, the flagship journal of the field first appeared. The *Journal of Social History*, as the articles in its first issue made clear, was dedicated to the study of all aspects of society in the past and would provide a forum for such studies from a variety of approaches. Soon after that the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* began publishing and then, and perhaps most importantly of all, the field got its own professional associa-

tion: the Social Science History Association. It also had its own journal: *Social Science History*. Soon the pages of these journals were filled with path-breaking studies devoted to new topics and groups that had hitherto been largely absent from the historian's purview. Quantitative methods revised how we studied and understand class and social structure, for example. The history of mass movements and collective action in the form riots and protests, topics that had not been studied previously, was completely revised. New topical areas such as the history of the family and kinship, crime, diet and nutrition, childhood and many more moved to the centre stage of historical analysis. The histories of women and African-Americans now took their place alongside those of presidents and plantation owners. In short, there seemed to be no group and no topic that social history could not study in new and exciting ways. If it could be counted, then social historians could study it. New social history, then, held out the promise of allowing us to write *total history*: it was new, exciting and relevant.

The sense of social history's triumphalism was aptly captured by Hobsbawm's observation in 1971 that "now is a good time to be a social historian".<sup>2</sup> A few years later, in the tenth anniversary issue of the *Journal of Social History*, Peter Stearns pronounced that the *bons temps* continued: "Never have there been so many practitioners in the field. The proliferation of relevant journals . . . and associations . . . attest to the popularity of the field. Courses generically under the heading of social history multiply. Methodological innovations plus the development of new topics – women's history, the history of leisure, the history of sex, mobility studies – plus the promise of still more in the offing . . . keep social history in the spotlight."<sup>3</sup> But even at the time that Stearns was writing, social history was beginning to lose some of its lustre. It was no longer the dashing ingénue at the historians' ball.

By the late 1970s–early 1980s, critiques of social history began to appear and they were different from the criticism the field had faced earlier in that they came from practitioners within the field rather than from outsiders whom it threatened. First, some historians argued that social history was privileging the trivial over the important. By collecting data on so many different aspects of human history, historians were becoming awash in a sea of facts. But what did they mean? As one critic noted, "we know more and more about less and less". We were advancing historical knowledge but not historical understanding and interpretation. A second criticism was that social history did not study power. Politics had been largely left out of 1970s social history. And they argued that no study of society, especially of traditionally marginalised groups like African-Americans and women, would be complete without the inclusion of power dynamics. Third, they objected that social history was fragmenting the discipline of history itself by covering so many different topical areas. Social history was also, they argued, becoming obscurantist. Few members of public or even undergraduates could understand what we were writing. Social historians were debating methods and quantitative techniques, not telling stories. We debated which statistical techniques worked best to solve different problems; we argued over the importance of K-coefficients or about how best to code our data. Few outside of the field knew, understood or even cared about such things. Next, they said that social history was incapable of providing an historical synthesis, of painting the big picture. Lastly, the critics concluded that social history was antihumanistic because it privileged social structure over human agency. They argued that, ironically, a field that studied society as a whole in fact had obscured the history of real people. We studied the group, not the individual, and we focused on the structural, not the experiential. This resulted in the loss of the "story" dimension from history. By the early 1980s, then, new social history looked to be going the way of that other icon from the 1960s – bell-bottom jeans.

Just as the field had emerged in the 1960s through a confluence of intellectual and cultural trends, so too in the early 1980s it was a combination of factors that suggested a way out of the crisis. One way forward, suggested by Lawrence Stone, was to return to a more narrative mode of analysis and discourse.<sup>4</sup> Social history, he argued, could stay true to its commitment to study society in all its rich aspects and incorporate a narrative mode of presentation. In other words, we could get back to telling stories but not just the stories of dead, white men. This approach connected to a trend that was emerging in Europe and that was microhistory. As practiced by, among others, Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi, microhistory was a mode of historical inquiry that focused on a single event or a single individual as a vehicle to explicate larger events or developments.<sup>5</sup> One could, for example, understand the Counter-Reformation in new ways by telling the story of how one obscure Italian miller understood the cosmos. Microhistory adhered to social history's core mission but eschewed the methods that had made it inaccessible by telling fascinating stories. These developments led social historians to turn away from sociology and to another discipline to find inspiration, methods and approaches: cultural anthropology. Three different anthropologists, practicing three different types of anthropology, exerted the most influence over social historians. The first, and most important of them, was Clifford Geertz.<sup>6</sup> In a series of works, he defined what became known as interpretative or symbolic anthropology. His essay on the Balinese cockfight, which exemplified his methodology of "thick description", in particular resonated with historians. It provided a way to examine microlevel events to illuminate key aspects of culture and society. It is not a coincidence that two most prominent early revisionist social historians in the US, Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton, were at Princeton University, Geertz's home institution. But there were two other anthropological approaches that found a following among social historians, though neither of them were as influential as Geertz; I will return to them, however, later in this article. These were cultural materialism, an approach most closely associated with Marvin Harris, and cultural ecology, a paradigm made best known by Robert McC. Netting.<sup>7</sup> A key moment came when the journal *Historical Methods*, a new social history periodical that was the leading publication for discussions on quantitative methods, published in 1986 a group of articles by anthropologists and social historians. As one of the participants, Darrett Rutman, the leading new social/quantitative historian of Early America, observed, Clio had embarked on a new dalliance and her partner this time was anthropology.<sup>8</sup>

Three other trends emerged in the mid-1980s that pushed social history even more towards a more culturalist approach to the past and that would set the agenda for the field for the next 15 to 20 years. These were, first, the introduction of gender as a key category of social historical analysis. Joan Scott's pioneering essay shifted the historian's gaze away from the study of women, an objective social category, to the study of gender, a subjective, relational cultural category. This opened the door to a reframing of the most basic categories of early new social history; class, for example, was no longer seen as an objective category but as a set of cultural relations. We saw a shift away from studying African-Americans as a group to a new focus on race as a set of power and social relations. This happened to many of the other fundamental analytical categories of social history as well. Related to this shift was the profoundly important introduction of the theory of structuralism into many of the humanities, especially literary studies. This connected to the move to make social history more a humanistic and less a social scientific field of study. Lastly, two intellectual movements appeared that offered ways to write power and politics back into social history, and these were Subaltern studies and orientalism.

These developments breathed new life into social history, albeit a social that was very different than the one that predominated during the 1970s. To be sure, the older way of doing social history persisted but its lustre was gone. One need only point to the tepid reception of a brilliant book that exemplified the old 1970s mode of social history; Darrett and Anita Rutman's two-volume *A Place in Time* should have become a classic of the genre, but instead it was largely ignored, regrettably in my view, when it appeared in 1984.<sup>9</sup> Ironically as well, new social history's place of prominence only became mainstreamed and institutionalised in history departments' graduate curricula and in the discipline's most important professional organisation, the American Historical Association, during the 1980s, precisely when the field was undergoing the sea change we just discussed. The new social history that had been the Young Turk of the 1970s was becoming the embattled Old Regime of the 1980s, and the challenge from the culturalist approaches just kept getting stronger and the older social was not up to the task: "Social history, once the great hope of an increasingly inclusive and scientifically minded profession, seemed inadequate to the task of offering a new, gendered, and inclusive narrative."<sup>10</sup>

By the 1990s, the cultural moment had arrived and it took on new and even more radical forms as social history yet again responded to the tenor of the times. Intellectually, social history's engagement with literary theory became even deeper and more integral. Historians increasingly looked to the leading critical theoreticians such as Foucault, Derrida and Raymond Williams for ideas, approaches and inspiration. And they were not alone. Scholars in most of the humanities became drawn to this new way of thinking, and there emerged a series of new intellectual movements that promised to move us beyond past paradigms. These were the "posts": postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism being among the most prominent among them. Influenced by these new trends, there emerged within social history a new way to study the past that embraced the theories and approaches of the "posts" and this came to be called "new cultural history".<sup>11</sup> It challenged the very foundation of new social history – though, by this point, it might be better called the not-so-new social history.

New cultural history espoused the exact opposite of many of the things that new social history had. Where social history privileged structure, cultural history was explicitly antistructural and humanistic. Social historians believed that we could recapture past peoples' lived realities, whereas cultural historians argued that all we could do was glimpse at the representations of their lived experiences. The essential positivism that social history shared with the other social sciences was replaced by the idea of contingency. While social history brought understudied groups on to the historical stage, new cultural historians wanted to give them their own. A multivocal chorus of groups telling their own stories replaced the authoritative voice of the historian. The facts and data so dear to social historians were replaced by perceptions, images and imaginings, and representations. Historical sources were no longer objects of enquiry but rather "texts" to be read, and reread, through the application of literary theory. History, in short, had undergone a "linguistic turn".

There were a number of reasons why new social history was unable to respond to this upstart challenger. Yet again, factors outside the academy were critical. Ronald Reagan's America of the 1980s proudly and explicitly repudiated much of what the 1960s had stood for. Conservatism and conformity replaced radicalism and defiance of authority; self-interest replaced altruism. Young



people no longer wanted to make the world a better place; they wanted to make money. The Me-generation had arrived. Then, at the end of the decade came the fall of communism and the Marxist/materialist ideology that had undergirded it became relegated to the scrap heap of history. The cold war was over and liberal capitalism had triumphed. As noted earlier, Marxism and materialism had been core elements of new social history and so it too looked like a dinosaur on the verge of extinction. All that was left to do was to write the field's obituary.

The rapid rise to prominence of new cultural history within social history in the 1990s, even more than new social history had in the 1970s, threatened traditional historiography, and for many this was an existential threat. To some historians what was at stake was nothing less than the very future of history itself. New cultural history, in their view, was literally killing history. And so the battle for the discipline's soul commenced. This was the "history war" in the US and the battles were fought on many fronts. Institutionally, graduate students now were required to take courses on critical theory rather than quantitative methods. The holy trinity of race–class–gender became the staples of seminars and dissertation topics. Every new history department hire became a contest with factions supporting candidates who espoused their way of doing history. Professionally, works in new cultural history swept the major prizes and dominated the programmes at the meetings of the major professional associations. So bitter did the fighting become that a strange alliance of historians from the left and right in 1996 seceded from the American Historical Association and formed their own organisation, the Historical Society. For the left, the loss of the overarching analytical framework that Marxism provided and the privileging of representation over reality stripped history of any purpose and meaning. For those on the right, mostly politically conservative historians specialising in the more traditional disciplines such as economic history, diplomatic history, military history and political history, what struck them was the absolute triviality, in their view, of the topics covered by new cultural history. "It was hard to imagine that people – indeed, apparently the majority of the profession – could actually view the kind of work that was being held up in that way as *important*" [italics in the original]. They also bemoaned the loss of the older standards regarding proof and evidence and the old historical ideals of objectivity and honesty – ideas, of course, that were completely antithetical to new cultural history.<sup>12</sup> Finally, not only were new cultural historians studying topics no one cared about, they were writing about them in a language no one could understand. If the technical language of quantitative new social history had been obscurantist, the critical theory jargon of new cultural history was downright incomprehensible. "Many of my bewildered colleagues, those for whom this language [of Foucault and Derrida] had little, or no, meaning, were filled with a woozy sensation that coherent writing, speech, even thinking, were near collapse."<sup>13</sup> The result of all this was that not only was history dying in the academy but even more importantly, it was in danger of losing the public's trust.

The history war took place at exactly the same time that Newt Gingrich and the New Right were storming the Capitol. It was widely perceived by them, as well as the general public, that radical liberals had hijacked higher education and had imposed on it a monopolistic, almost totalitarian, political agenda based on postmodernism and cultural relativism. Students no longer had to read the "classics" of the western canon of literature, instead anything went. The American mind was closing, the core values of the west were under siege and "real" history was dying. In addition, tenured radicals were silencing all voices that opposed this takeover of higher education. Political

correctness ruled the day. Traditional historians, not surprisingly, stoked the fire of discontent. The political controversy over history centred on the debate during the mid-1990s over the setting of a national standard for the teaching of US history. The central issue was: what did children need to know about US history in order to be historically literate citizens? And this meant, of course, a debate over the content of school textbooks. To Republican politicians the idea that students would study race, class and gender rather than war, diplomacy and politics was shocking. That, in one of the proposed textbooks, more space was devoted to a biography of an African-American slave than to George Washington was abhorrent. What most appalled them, however, was the idea that there could be multiple narratives of American history – a Native one, an African-American one, a gay and lesbian one or a feminist one – rather than a single, unitary success story that chronicled the founding of the nation, its continental expansion and its rise to global prominence. Social history in the cultural vein threatened the nation: “At its best, [Republican congressmen] argued, social history was disloyal. At its worst, it was treason.”<sup>14</sup>

In spite of the political controversy, cultural history continued to dominate the profession. But not for long. It appeared that once again social history was dying and it was cultural history that was killing it. But now it was the cultural turn that was under attack, and as had happened before with social history, the critique came from within and without. A leading figure within cultural history, Patrick Joyce, noted that “by the early 2000s, its [cultural history’s] intellectual edges that once cut have become dull with habitual use” and that, moreover, “the cultural turn has indeed turned, and there is no going back”.<sup>15</sup> One need only look at the special issue of the *Journal of Social History* published in 2003 to gauge the sense of gloom and doom. The tone of Peter Stearns’s introductory essay says it all. Gone is the sense of excitement and triumph that characterised his earlier pieces. Instead, now was a time, he almost pleaded, for nostalgia and soul-searching.<sup>16</sup>

What had changed? There were a number of new political, cultural and intellectual developments outside of history that had an impact. First was 9/11. It was not the event itself that was important in this context but what it signified: sudden, abrupt change. The slogan “9/11 changed everything” may sound trite but it captures an important point. Things can change radically and quickly. So, the idea of change became profoundly influential. A second factor was globalisation. During the 2000s the world was becoming a smaller and more interconnected place, and so people began to think about how we can understand historical change on a global scale. Third, was the economic boom of the early Bush years. The first part of the decade was a good time economically for the US (and indeed Greece as well). Conservatives trumpeted the triumph of late industrial capitalism and gloated about the failure of the left and liberalism. Intellectually, critical theory and the “posts” became passé in literary studies and its cognate disciplines. The cutting edge of scholarship shifted to the “new social sciences”. Lastly, among historians there were initiatives to reconceptualise space and to move away from the nation-state to larger, supranational geographical frames of analysis and to focus more on transnationalism.

The crisis of cultural history had arrived and the critics pointed to numerous deficiencies. The first of these was the inability of cultural history to explain historical change; in their view, the emphasis placed on representation and the experiential stripped history of agency and causality. What caused change? It was human beings acting, not representing that did. Given the heightened em-



phasis that was now being placed on change, this was seen as a critical failing of cultural history.<sup>17</sup> The next problem was the trivialisation of history. Cultural history simply ignored the big issues. "Cultural historians tend to . . . literally build a mountain around a molehill and that molehill can lie on the periphery of the subject."<sup>18</sup> This called into question the field's relevance to contemporary society. The last two criticisms were linked, and they referred to scale and comparability. Given the greater awareness of globalisation and the increased emphasis placed on interconnectedness, fluidity and movement between regions on a global scale and on processes such as transnationalism, cultural history's commitment to a close, deep, hermeneutic reading of the social and the embeddedness of cultural representation impaired social history's ability to compare cultures.<sup>19</sup> Scalability and comparability were highlighted as key weaknesses. Social history after the cultural turn, then, seemed doomed.

Why not, some suggested, adopt approaches from the new social sciences? They were, after all, the disciplines that undergirded late liberal capitalism's triumph. Phillip T. Hoffman implored us to open our eyes and embrace the new social sciences, especially new legal studies (as opposed to the 1990s critical legal studies) and political science. He opined that: "Methodologically, [cultural and social] history have become dull and monotonous, unlike kindred disciplines such as law and political science."<sup>20</sup> Herbert S. Klein likewise saw the future of old social history in the new social sciences.<sup>21</sup>

There were three paradigms that they saw as holding the key to social history's future and they were rational choice theory, game theory and cognitive psychology. These theories supposedly rectified many of the deficiencies in cultural social history. Take the issue of causality and change. When confronted with social (or political or economic) situations, people make rational decisions predicated on cognitive processes. When the majority of people makes the same or very similar choices and then act on them, they cause change. And since cognitive processes are not culturally specific but the range of choices and the social context in which they are made are, the new social sciences facilitate cross-cultural comparison.

The new social sciences' moment in the sun, however, was short lived. The crisis of late liberal capitalism that began in 2008 and continues to this day called into question many of their key tenets. The Wall Street collapse, the bursting of the housing bubble, the debacle of the derivatives markets, and the massive economic crisis that they started, all showed the essential irrationality of late liberal capitalism. By extension, the epistemological status of the theories that underpinned it was called into disrepute as well.

So, where do we go from here? Let me emphasise that what I am proposing here is just one possible way forward and that it is one based on my personal experiences. First, I think that just as in the past, social history should be shaped by and should influence society's responses to the pressing issues of our time. In other words, we should remain true to social history's political (activist) roots. In my view, they are these: environmental change, globalisation and the crisis of late liberal capitalism. Environmental change at the global, regional and micro scale is emerging as a key issue for the twenty-first century. This begs the question, how have societies in the past coped with environmental change? Grounding our studies on the developments of the last 30 years, we can adopt a more sophisticated way to study the relationship between human societies and the en-

vironment, realising that people act on human cognitive recognition of the natural environment, much as Netting's paradigm of cultural ecology suggested many years ago. The crisis of late liberal capitalism makes clear that the material world as we once knew it is changing and so we must consider how best to think about this historically. Finally, globalisation asks us to think about how developments at the macro scale impact the peoples' lives at the micro level.

Second, intellectually we should respond to the critiques that were levelled against social history over the last few years. That means that we need to address the issues of agency and causality. A new social history should be accessible and should privilege narrative. It also must be multiscalar. We need a social history that connects the macro and the micro; that allows us to study "big structures" and "large processes", as Charles Tilly called them, and then to explore how people experienced them.<sup>22</sup> What will this new, new social history look like?

Over the last few years a number of new approaches have emerged in social history and I see them as the trends for the rest of the decade. The first is a shift to the study of materiality or to what some have called the "material turn". As Richard Grassby noted: For too long "cultural historians ignore[d] the physical environment in which culture is embedded".<sup>23</sup> Notice that the term historians are now using is materiality and not materialism, as scholars such as Marvin Harris did in the 1970s. The former suggests an understanding of the material world as an entity constructed and experienced through an interactive cultural process, and not the more deterministic perspective suggested by the latter. Material cultural approaches analyse how the social is constituted and how power is exercised by examining the role of material infrastructure in the organisation of power and the role of material cultural practices. Some excellent examples of the potential for a social history informed by materiality can be found in the recent edited collection by Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce.<sup>24</sup>

By adopting this approach, social historians can fruitfully collaborate with and draw from two cognate disciplines: material culture studies and historical archaeology.<sup>25</sup> Over the last fifteen years, historical archaeology has emerged in Britain and the US as a vibrant discipline dedicated to the study of human society over the last few centuries based upon the combined use of material remains and textual sources.<sup>26</sup> The range of topics studied by historical archaeologists includes capitalism, social inequality, biography, and heritage and memory.<sup>27</sup> Some topics, such as the social and the cultural history of African American slaves in the US, have been revolutionised by historical archaeology. The approach espoused by these fields bridges the social and the cultural. "Historians of material culture use artefacts, as well as written evidence, to reconstruct the patterns of meanings, values, and norms shared by members of society."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the study of materiality can tell us about culture because material objects can convey hidden meanings such as gendered practices, moral standards, social fears and other emotionally laden issues.<sup>29</sup> The study of materiality also connects social history to the "real world" – the environment. There has developed recently approaches to the study of the environment that combine the natural sciences with a cultural history approach, emphasising that people act within constraints and parameters set by nature but that they do so based on culturally constructed perceptions of it.<sup>30</sup>

There is, I suggest in the way of a conclusion, one field where all of these recent developments come together, and where I think social history of the early twenty-first century should move, and

that is to microhistory. We are at the microhistorical moment in social history. There are many advantages to adopting a microhistorical approach. First, microhistory bridges the division that has beset social history since the 1990s because it is in the microprocesses of everyday life where the social and the cultural are united. It provides us with an analytical frame in which the social, the cultural and the material come together.<sup>31</sup> Second, it overcomes the problems of causality, agency and narrative.<sup>32</sup> "Microhistory is total history because it describes all aspects of human life (social, economic, and cultural) using one particular event, and it uses the concept of causation to do this."<sup>33</sup> Microhistory also foregrounds agency because of its "commitment to a humanist agenda which places human agency and historical meaning in the realm of day-to-day transactions [that] sees social reality as grounded in the quotidian . . . [in peoples'] daily, lived experience".<sup>34</sup> Third, microhistory provides us with an analytical frame that connects the social and the material worlds, and so much else. The potentiality of microhistory lies in its power to recover and reconstruct past events by exploring and connecting a wide range of data sources, social, cultural, environmental and material, "so as to produce a contextual, three-dimensional, analytic narrative in which actual people as well as abstract forces shape events".<sup>35</sup> Lastly, microhistory addresses the issue of scalability. It is an, maybe even the only, historical approach that enables us to explore the myriad ways that people experienced in their daily lives the major developments occurring at the macro scale. It thus can bridge the macro–micro divide.<sup>36</sup> Because of its potential to address many of social history's previous shortcomings and because of its capacity to speak to the issues of our time, I think that one way forward for social history lies in microhistory.

On 6 April 2012, social history turned 46 years old. Over the span of its intellectual level, the field has been declared dead, or at least on life support, on three occasions. Each time it has recovered and in a revised form continued to advance our understanding of the past. So too will it now undergo a process a reformation that will enable it to speak to the key issues of our times. I have suggested that microhistory is one path that the field might take; it will not be the only one. Social history was, is, and will continue to be a broad intellectual church, marked by a diversity of approaches and committed to interdisciplinarity. While our precise future may be uncertain, one thing I am sure of, and that is, as my title suggests, that social history may have been a long time coming, but that it will also be a long time gone.

## NOTES

- 1 Moments of crisis tend to lead to self-reflection. That is certainly the case with social history. Two leading social historians of the generation previous to mine have written intensely personal accounts of the field's development and of their places in it. I have been influenced by their views but have tried to my shape my account based on my own experience. The two works are: Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to a History of Society*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005, and William H. Sewell, *The Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformations*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- 2 Eric Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society", in Eric Hobsbawm (ed.), *Historical Stud-*

*ies Today*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1972, 287; it is interesting to compare his reflection on the same subject 16 years later: "History From Below Some Reflections", in Frederick Kranz (ed.), *History From Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Ideology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988.

- 3 Peter N. Stearns, "Coming of Age", *Journal of Social History* 10/2 (1976): 246–55, here 246.
- 4 Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History", *Past & Present* 86 (1979): 3–24.
- 5 Edward Muir and Guido Ruggerio (eds), *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991, provides a very good overview of the development of microhistory in the 1980s.
- 6 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays on Interpretive Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books, 1983, and his earlier *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.
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