

Estimados colegas: mi intervención en la mesa redonda al final del congreso será, en el espíritu del formato, coloquial. Sin embargo, incluyo aquí un paper que presenté hace quince años y nunca publiqué pues discute el tema de la mesa y con tanta edad ya casi sirve de fuente primaria.

**Practices in Social and Cultural History; or, Can Cliometrics and Hermeneutics Unite?**

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My aim in this paper with a semi-facetious title is not to present research findings but to indulge in some ruminations about the relationship between the two principal trends in our craft during the last three decades: the “new” social history that became dominant from the late 1960s on and the “new” cultural history that flourished from the early 1980s on, the trends that inform the fine papers that we just heard.

An implicit desire here is to foster a dialogue between historians who stress social science methodology and those who place the accent on poststructuralist approaches. Because we tend to develop working relations with colleagues who share our theoretical and methodological predilections, these encounters are all too rare. Conferences and symposia tend to congregate like-minded scholars not likely to interrogate each other’s assumptions. On the other hand, if there is no common ground or shared interests, “mixed” encounters can degenerate into rhetorical contests between “positivists” and “postmodernists,” terms used more to attack opponents than to elucidate specific positions. And indeed it may be the case that the intellectual gap between certain approaches, for example econometrics and cultural studies, is too broad to bridge. But social and cultural histories would seem to be more complimentary than oppositional. Without a sense of peoples’ cultural ideals and constructions across time, social history would convert into sociology. Without a sense of local socio-economic contexts, cultural history would become literary studies or elite intellectual history. This paper therefore attempts not to eliminate disagreements but to move the discussion beyond abstract philosophical debates to the terrain of actual historical

practices: how can we best integrate, or at least combine, the methodologies of the social sciences and the humanities in our shared efforts to understand the historical experiences of past generations. Before we do this, we need to examine briefly the development and epistemological claims of the “new” social and cultural histories.

Like all “new” scholarly approaches or paradigms<sup>1</sup>—even those that assail teleological notions of knowledge and progress—these two arrived accompanied by claim of epistemological advancement or even of paradigmatic revolution. In part this reflects an inescapable element of justification: if the new approach does not improve our capacity to understand, even if in a negative sense (e.g., the “knowledge” that knowledge represents little more than a mask on power relations), what could be the rationale for replacing the previous one?

The claim also reveals a common generational hubris that tends to slight or simplify previous models and to exaggerate the novelty of new ones. After all, paradigmatic renovation resembles, more than we would like to admit, the process by which long skirts or wide ties continue to reappear as the “newest thing.” Like sartorial fashions, academic ones also fulfill a psychological need: our desire to perceive ourselves as being in the forefront, in the avant-garde (or at least not as old fashion), and the security of being like everyone else, which explains why new approaches continue to be portrayed as questioning traditional wisdom long after they have become that

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<sup>1</sup> A paradigm is defined here as a set of more or less consistent theories which, taken together, form a coherent worldview (e.g. Marxism). An approach, by contrast, consists of, first, a focus on certain factors deemed worthy of attention (e.g. social class, the daily lives of common people, ethnicity, etc.) without elaborating a set of theories, and, second, an advocacy for certain research methodologies. Both the “new” social and cultural histories made claims to paradigmatic renovation, or even revolution, but perhaps resemble more the latter than the former.

themselves. Moreover, old approaches are often discarded not because their intellectual deficiency or exhaustion, but because they do not conform to current ideological-aesthetic preferences.<sup>2</sup>

The new social history exhibited all of these traits. Its assertion of epistemological superiority rested on basically three claims. The first was demographic and social inclusiveness. On the face of it, one could hardly argue against this claim. The history of the many offers, by definition, a more complete picture of the human past than the history of the few. But proponents of history "from the bottom up" tended to overstate the newness of their enterprise. Previous scholarship consisted of more than tales about kings, presidents, and other "great men." The new emphasis on the masses (and the emphasis at least was new) mirrored the ideological milieu of the late 1960s and 1970s. This in itself was neither surprising nor detrimental. But academic populism often bred disinterest in elite issues or—since it continued to be easier to write about the few who led well-documented lives—sanctimonious denunciation. Nonetheless, the "new" social history fully incorporated groups who make up the bulk of the population but had been left out of traditional historical narratives (workers, women, children, ethnic and racial minorities). Moreover, a new emphasis on personal or collective agency made these groups active participants in the narrative rather than pawns of large impersonal forces (e.g. world systems, capitalism) or mere victims of powerful classes.

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<sup>2</sup>. For example, proponents of conflict theories impugned functionalism during the 1960s and 1970s, ostensibly, because its presumed inability to explain change but, in reality, because a theory that stressed social mechanisms of adaptation and equilibrium became politically unpalatable to a generation that viewed itself as revolutionary. The same continues to be true among many scholars espousing Gramscian versions of conflict theories. Nestor Garcia Canclini, Transforming Modernity: Popular Culture in Mexico (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), for instance, dismissed both functionalism and structuralism not by demonstrating their scholarly inadequacy but by alluding to their philosophical and political implications.

The second claim to epistemological advancement was thematic amplitude. It rested on social history's expansion of thematic space to areas other than manifest power relations. By going beyond (perhaps "under" is a more accurate term) the discipline's traditional concern with politics, diplomacy, institutions, and military affairs, social historians revealed the quotidian universe that encompasses the bulk of our lives and actions: work, family relations, leisure activities, food and drinking habits, sex, and so forth. Again, not all of this was entirely novel (Herodotus, for one, wrote about it) and the new partisans—among them myself—indulged in their share of fashion-driven hyperbole. The class-race-gender trinity—more mentioned than examined—came to surpass the metaphysical one in its omnipresence and exegetic powers. The study of the formal (e.g. electoral politics, economic systems, etc.) became "passe." And the effort to rescue the everyday at times degenerated into an indiscriminate record of triflings. Yet, one of the permanent contributions of social historians was precisely to demonstrate the significance of the apparently trivial.

The third claim was methodological. It was the least trumpeted in the public arena but not necessarily the least important. Methodology may be too prosaic a subject to compete for public attention with stirring declarations about a new, inclusive history from below. But the latter was in large part made possible by the former since it allowed historians to study the lives of the majority who left few written records behind, or at least to do so from a perspective other than those afforded by surviving elite descriptions.

There were three main methodological lines. The first represented not so much a new method as much as a more intense exploitation of sources that had been underutilized before: diaries,

memoirs, family photographs, letters, testaments, and other mundane documents. The second was oral interviews, something that had long been used by anthropologists but less so by historians (in part because historians had not traditionally studied recent events, the chronological gap between us and our subject of study used to be much wider than it is now). At any rate its use (unless one engages in spiritist interviews) has obvious temporal limits.

The third method was prosopography, or a new type of prosopography. Historians had long constructed collective biographies but as long as this was done manually, in index cards, there was a limit to the number of individuals included and the amount of information about them. Most prosopographical studies therefore tended to concentrate on the career patterns of elite groups (conquistadors, bureaucrats, merchants).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the information on index cards remained as inert and difficult to analyze as in the original sources. What changed this was technological innovation: the advent of the mainframe computer. This gadget allowed new social historians to gather information on thousands of people from nominal sources (manuscript census returns, electoral rolls, labor union membership lists or applications, etc.) or from collections of personalized documents (birth and marriage certificates, notarial records, police files, and so on).

This not only provided information on the anonymous masses but also-- by detailing that information--it facilitated social history's second claim: thematic expansion. Published official

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the earlier examples in the Latin American case are James Lockhart, *Spanish Peru, 1532-1560: A Colonial Society* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968) and *The Men of Cajamarca: A Social and Biographical Study of the First Conquerors of Peru* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), and Susan M. Socolow, *The Merchants of Buenos Aires, 1778-1810: Family and Commerce* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

material, such as censuses and statistical reports, offer information in aggregate form and within categories that are not always pertinent to the social historian's inquiries. For example, occupational classifications common to censuses such as "industry" and "transportation" may suit an examination of economic sectors but are quite useless in determining social class (an inescapable issue in social history) since they include under the same rubric anyone from wealthy factory owners to their most impoverished workers. By going directly to the original manuscript sources, researchers could find not only the specific occupation of individuals but also a variety of other data. What in the published census appeared as aggregated abstractions (e.g., "economic sectors" or "immigrants") could be transformed into a list of real people with their specific jobs, birth-places, addresses, ages, sex, marital status, literacy, and so forth. Moreover, one could make the individual the unit of analysis or arrange them into categories deemed meaningful (e.g. "households," "single women" and so on.) rather than being constrained to the categories appearing in the published material. In large part, it was the analysis of the relationship between these personal variables included in nominal sources that enabled social historians to expand their focus to new fields such as family and women's history.

The computer thus not only expedited the recording of information on thousands of people, but-equally important--it made feasible the tabulation, arrangement and control of numerous variables. The resulting analytical refinement budged a discipline traditionally associated with the humanities closer to the social sciences. Data sets culled from manuscript sources became

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for historians the equivalent of sociologists' survey questionnaires. Not surprisingly, the new social history came to be labeled by many "sociological" or "social science" history.<sup>4</sup>

This, however, often led to a slavish emulation of the social sciences, to grand pronouncements about the epistemological superiority of cliometrics, and to a disdain for "softer" approaches, for "anecdotic" or "impressionist" evidence.<sup>5</sup>

The "new" cultural history that began taking shape in the early 1980s in part reacted to this hyper positivism. But it also shared many traits and goals with the "new" social history. Indeed, for a while they were seen as a related endeavours, or even the same, enterprise. Social and cultural history was often amalgamated in the conceptual map of contemporary historiography in a manner similar to what had happened to socio-economic history during the 1960s and 1970s. The same amalgamation was, and is, common outside of the discipline. Social and cultural anthropology, for example, are used interchangeably rather than as separate terms and in contrast to physical anthropology. Both the "new" social and cultural historians tended to come from the Left politically, saw themselves as "progressive," and were indeed often the same people.

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<sup>4</sup> Some examples of the use of those terms are: Andrew Pickering, *Constructing Quarks: A Sociological History of Particle Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989); or the journals *Social Science History* and *New Approaches to Social Science History*, appearing in 1976 and 1981 respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most glaring example was French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's 1973 dictum that positivist history would be replaced by quantitative history and that "In the future the historian will be a programmer or he[she] will be nothing. *Le territoire de l'historien* (Paris, 1973), 19, 22.

After all, what earned the "new" cultural history's claim to novelty was its emphasis on the culture of the many rather than of the few, on popular rather than "high" culture. As with similar claims from social historians, this one was a bit inflated. Histories of popular culture formed a well-established, indeed traditional, genre in Latin America that found expression in countless "costumbrista" studies with titles such as "Costumbres y tradiciones populares" of thousands of regions. Most of the "new" cultural history, however, tended to be more theoretically sophisticated.

From its birth, the new cultural history was highly constructionist. It assailed essentialist definitions and treated culture as a historical process—something that it is difficult for a historian to disagree with, indeed for most of them this sounded more like a truism than an insight. It treated apparently natural concepts, such as sex, as cultural notions constructed, and negotiated, in a temporal dimension—thus the increasing use of the term "gender" rather than the more biological "sex" in the literature and the supposed transition from "women's" to "gender" history. The new cultural historians rejected Marxism's materialism, its view of culture as the outcome of economic conditions, and its characterization of ideology as superstructural. Borrowing from Foucault's power/knowledge nexus and from Gramsci's concept of hegemony, they focused instead on the efforts of hegemonic classes to naturalize their own cultural constructions, and the compliance or resistance of subaltern classes in this process.

Some critics—and not only orthodox Marxists—denounced this "cultural turn" as the abandonment of a materialist dialectic and of conflict theory (that were seen as still informing social, or at least socioeconomic history) in favor of an idealist approach that dealt with struggles over symbolic, as

opposed to material or "real," goods. To be fair, this was less the case in Latin American historiography, which had a strong Marxist—or materialist—tradition and which deals with a region where economic exploitation is too obvious to ignore and too palpable to turn into a conflict over meaning. This may be may be one of the reasons why in Latin American historiography the new cultural history was often referred to as the "new political history." But given the fact that the principal source of external disciplinary inspiration switched from sociology to literary and cultural studies and poststructuralist anthropology, the emphasis naturally shifted toward the discursive and interpretive.

Related to this shift the new cultural history often abandoned—and on occasions vociferously rejected as "empiricist"—the social scientific methods of the new social history (though not the wide use of sources or of oral history).

This was a particularly unfortunate decision because while the new cultural history existed in a theoretical cornucopia, its methodological milieu seemed rather barren. The two propositions closest to a methodology, Geertz's "thick description" and Demida's deconstructionism, seemed more applicable to ethnographic field work and literary criticism respectively than to historical research, or, at any rate, were more likely to be mentioned than used by historians (in part because they are very difficult to apply in approaches other than microhistory or to large amounts of texts).

This is also particularly regretful because the nominative methodology has advanced beyond its cleometric origins in significant ways. The increased power of personal computers eliminated the reliance on main frames, the restrictions to eight character variables, and 80 column entry lines.

With portable computers, data can now be entered directly from the archival source. And with the advent of the scanner, the data do not even have to be keyed in if the original document is legibly printed. Portable computers also allow the exploitation of non-nominal sources—that is, documents that do not include lists of names. One can easily add new names to the database, or new information about the people already in it, as one comes across them in newspapers, magazines, diaries, and even in oral interviews.

The result is an integrative methodology that incorporates the best of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Depending on how extensive and deep the research is, one can build veritable biographies of thousands of common individuals who left little organized information behind. Moreover the method is not limited to prosopography or individuals. One can apply it to other entities (e.g. books, patents, plantations, paintings, trial records).

As with any methodology, there are drawbacks and limitations. An obvious one is that the process is an exceedingly laborious one. The ratio, of research to written output is very low. A week of research can produce just a paragraph, or even a few lines, in a monograph or article. For example, the last chapter of my book a fifty-plus page intellectual-cultural history of Hispanophobia and Hispanophilia, took me less time to complete than some of the tables in other chapters. Moreover, I wrote it in the comfort of my home while reading mostly literature and comic plays. There are clearly some rather pragmatic advantages to doing pure "cultural" history. Another drawback is that because the information in the database eventually comes from scores of different sources, keeping track of the provenance is a daunting task. The

reliability of the data varies greatly and, of course, one has to consider the producers, intended purpose, and intended public of the various documents and their potential biases.

But if collecting, recording and cleaning the data is an incredibly timeconsuming and tedious process, analyzing it is fast and rewarding. With some minor programing, the computer can manipulate, control, and analyze the data with impressive speed, something that encourages exploration and experimentation. Most of the hundreds of searches and experiments with different combinations of variables do not produce any meaningful results. Other searches simply confirm what everyone already knew, an unexciting but worthy accomplishment. At times, however, the results contradict received wisdom, or they reveal patterns in what seemed random occurrences, forcing the investigator to dig deeper. Or they detect hidden connections that would have never been exposed through reading and analyzing text (the traditional tool of historians and humanists, and still the only tool of new cultural historians.<sup>6</sup>

The method thus is complimentary, rather than conflicting, with hermeneutics. It can illuminate the socioeconomic context within which text and "knowledge" are produced, and offer a sociology of the producers and/or consumers of cultural goods. It can assist socio-cultural

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<sup>6</sup> An example from my own work can illustrate how the mixing of two methodology (in this case oral history and the nominative method) can produce findings that neither in isolation could have. During my interviews of some sixty Spanish immigrants, a high number of them told me that they had come to Argentina by themselves without previous family connections. However, the databases I had compiled showed that when this people first arrived in Argentina there were already dozens of conationals from the same village, with the same surname, and sometimes with the same paternal and maternal surnames. Instead of questioning their version, I simply continued the conversation and somewhat later asked them to describe their trip and arrival. Suddenly, memories of numerous relatives waiting for them in the docks came to mind. The use of contrasting methodologies not only served to check the veracity of oral accounts but also to give meaning to what at first seemed either lies or faulty memories. When I double checked the information, the fictitious accounts of unassisted migration came only from males. This enable me to interpret them as voicing ideals of masculine independence ingrained in Argentine, Spanish, and capitalist value systems and expressed in a variety of archetypal figures (El Cid, the explorers and conquistadors, the gaucho, pioneers, the self-made man, etc). But, again, what enabled me to treat this as a discourse of masculinity was the combination of methods. After all, their accounts could have just represented an accurate statement of fact.

historians in their exploration of the relationship between social realities and public discourses, avoiding the hyper-idealist escapism of equating the two. When the method produces results that contradict those gained from our interpretation of public texts, it forces us to revisit the evidence and perhaps re-read, even deconstruct, the text. With the exception of biographical or ethnographic analysis at a very micro level, the alternative is to abandon the effort to understand social processes and the lived experiences of the participants, and settle for an interpretation of public rhetoric normally produced by elites.

The approach and methodology that I have proposed here do not belittle the accomplishments of the new cultural history and the so called "linguistic turn" in the historical profession. The influence of semiotics has increased our sensitivity to language, codes, intertextuality, and omission-the notion that what is not said may be as important as what is said. But the "linguistic turn" has also infected us with a common malady in some domains of that discipline: the notion that realities and language are so inextricably connected that they cannot be analyzed separately. If we take this epistemological stand, then methods other than critical text analysis are superfluous. However, if we treat the relationship between socioeconomic reality and discourse not as an a priori assumption but as an open question for historians to explore, then exegesis is insufficient. Cultural constructions, in this scenario, could reflect, contradict, or camouflage socioeconomic realities. And sociocultural historians exploring these relationships cannot afford to be methodologically choosy. We should be instead methodologically omnivorous and this of course includes the tools of social science history. Historians have long occupied a complicated position between the social sciences and the humanities, between analytical and interpretive modes, between empirical demands and theoretical aspirations. But this balancing act is also the

source of creative tension. Whenever, we have moved to far into one direction the tension may have lessened, but so has the creativity.

To go back to the notion of paradigmatic innovation as fashion: I am not sure that power determines knowledge. But it is obvious that power defines fashion and this apparent fact will make it very difficult for us, as students of the “periphery,” to dictate the “latest trends.” If we play this game, we are almost condemned by power inequalities in the academic world to act as followers. The only way we can counteract this built-in disadvantage is with an inordinate level of scholarly integrity—more than is expected from our other colleagues—and with equally generous portions of intellectual curiosity, imagination, and even passion.