

INTRODUCTION

There are two questions that demand an answer in this introduction to the first number of the *International Review of Social History*. We believe the reader is entitled to know first what is understood to fall under the concept "social history", and, secondly, what motives have led to the publication of a periodical entirely devoted to this special branch of history.

No concise, clear-cut answer can be given to the first question because, in fact, there exists as yet no *communis opinio* on the concept "social history", though one may be gradually developing. Up till a short time ago scarcely any deliberate attempt was made to circumscribe the concept more closely, or to define it. The more important encyclopaedias, including the specialized ones, were searched in vain for a definition, whilst no study of any volume and depth on this question was found to exist. Such absence can only be partially attributed to the relative newness of this branch of study.

Those desirous of knowing what "social history" actually was had to consult works entitled or reputed to be such, and had to discover from the contents or from occasional, generally incidental remarks of a fundamental nature what goods the author wished to bring on the market under this label. In point of fact this "empiric" approach to the question still seems to be the desirable one, even though some theoretical observations have been put forward in very recent years.

An investigation of this nature carried out in 1950¹ shows that two divergent meanings are attributed to the concept "social history". These are to a great extent geographically limited and linguistically determined, though within the particular geographical milieu these meanings are, in turn, further gradated, and sometimes diverge greatly. In his *English Social History* Mr. G. M. Trevelyan has defined social history as the history of a people with the exclusion of political

¹ A. J. C. Rüter, *Rapport sur l'histoire sociale, temps modernes*, in: IXe Congrès Internationale des Sciences Historiques, Paris 28 VIII - 31 IX 1950, vol. I, p. 296 seqq.

events, and has allotted it the task of describing every-day life.¹ This definition flows naturally from the broad meaning associated with the English word "social", and can, indeed, be applied to the work of many English and American historians. Not to all, however, for there are historians in these countries who attribute a narrower meaning to the concept "social" in their writings. Nor can it be applied exclusively to English and American authors; some historians of other nationalities come near to Mr. Trevelyan's definition, be it circumspectly. The Belgian historian Mr. H. van Werveke, for instance, subscribes to this definition in his work *Gent, Schets van een Sociale Geschiedenis*. In doing so, however, he makes a reservation, namely that "the various aspects (of social history) should be studied in the light of the relationship of man to society"², and this last word "society" is used in the narrower sociological sense of the German word "Gesellschaft". In making this reservation he bridges the gap between the Anglo-American conception of "social history" as put forward by Mr. Trevelyan on the one hand, and what might be designated the continental European on the other.

The meaning ascribed to the concept "social history" on the continent is undoubtedly much more restricted than that ascribed to it by Mr. Trevelyan, but for this reason it is all the more pregnant. This difference in meaning is determined essentially by language; the term "social" differs not only in spelling, but also in denotation in the various languages. In English it covers a broad and comparatively neutral conception, in continental languages its meaning is more circumscribed – especially in the 19th century – and at the same time more expressive. In the second half of the 19th century the word "social" as it occurs in the terms "question sociale", "soziale Frage" and "sociale quaestie" approximates closely the word "labour", and in that period the Dutch words "socialen" and "socialisten" were even synonymous in the language of the people. The meaning was not always so narrow, and in any case has not remained thus. The greater the interest taken in the structure of society in all its ramifications, the broader the content of the conception "social" becomes on the continent, but it never becomes as broad as in English. In political circles it retains the secondary meaning of "progressive", whilst in academic circles it tends more and more to acquire the content of the word "society" in the above mentioned sense of "Gesellschaft".

These differences in the meaning of the word "social" are reflected in the definition given to their branch of study by continental social

¹ 1st edition, London 1944, p. vii.

² *Gent* 1947, p. 5. The French edition appeared in 1946 at Brussels under the title: *Gand, esquisse d'histoire sociale*.

historians. According to some the most proper theme of social history is the history of groups who live in economic dependence and without social security, thus paupers and workers. In 1936 Hans Stein very clearly and sharply formulated this opinion.¹ It appears to me, however, that he associates himself with an older tradition which clearly can be discerned in the work of Grünberg in his Institut für Sozialforschung and his Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung.

Others, on the other hand, wish to give the term "social" a broader scope. They wish to include in their research not one but all groups, be they nobles, bourgeoisie, farmers, workers or paupers. To them social history is the history of social groupings seen both as separate and as mutually dependent units.

Such were the views of the social historians regarding their branch of study. Meanwhile in recent years, as has been indicated above, more deliberate, theoretical observations have been devoted to the content of the term "social history". Proesler in his Hauptprobleme der Sozialgeschichte has laid down the following definition: "Die Sozialgeschichte hat es mit der methodisch-kritischen Ergründung und zusammenhängenden Darstellung des gesamten historischen Verlaufs unter dem Blickwinkel der Sozialität zu tun."² In this definition everything hinges on the conception "Sozialität", which, as Proesler further explains, is extremely closely connected with the conception "Gesellung". The latter, in turn, is meant to convey a synthesis of the conceptions "Gemeinschaft" and "Gesellschaft". Roughly speaking these indicate the community to which one belongs because of birth or tradition on the one hand, and personal volition on the other. The Handwörterbuch der Sozialwissenschaften states, among other things, that social history "sich insbesondere ~~beschäftigt~~ mit der Genesis und den Werdeprozessen von minder oder mehr kohärierenden und lockerer oder straffer organisierten Sozial-(Gesellungs-) Gruppen, mit deren wechselseitiger Beeinflussung und den Veränderungen in ihrer Schichtenlage."³ By reason of these definitions, Proesler, who very closely approaches Trevelyan, sets the social historian the task of studying the history of social groupings, the mass and its habits as well as every-day life. The Handwörterbuch der Sozialwissenschaften, on the contrary, allots him the study of the history of estates, classes, political parties, "zweckorganisierte Gruppen" and, in particular, the conflict between the propertied and the property-less, thus following the German, strongly sociologically tinged views.

¹ Hans Stein, Pauperismus und Assoziation, in: International Review for Social History, vol. I, 1936, p. 6.

² Hans Proesler, Hauptprobleme der Sozialgeschichte, Erlangen 1951, p. 13.

³ 6. Lieferung, p. 447 seq.

Thus there is as yet no communis opinio, though, as aforesaid, it is perhaps evolving. Meanwhile the purpose of these observations is nothing more than to justify the choice from the possibilities made by this journal. It decides in favour of the more restricted meaning of the word "social", but interpreted as broadly as possible within these limits and including all consequences. Social history is taken to mean the history of estates, classes, social groupings regardless of name, seen both as separate and as mutually dependent units. No distinction is made between countries or periods. Studies on the history of antiquity, the middle ages or the modern period are given equal consideration as regards publication, though it is natural to expect that the last mentioned period will receive more preponderance. Consideration will be paid in all this to the close connection between social groupings and economic structure as well as to the interaction between their development and that of political events, ideas and culture. Finally contributions describing present-day events are in no way barred in advance from this journal. Apart from their intrinsic value they can serve as sources for the future historiographer.

In answer to the second question as to the motives underlying the publication of this review it may be said that it is neither the first nor the only journal entirely devoted to social history. Carl Grünberg already began the publication of his aforementioned *Archiv* in 1911. The *Archiv* ceased to appear, however, in 1930. The International Institute of Social History was the next in the series with the publication of a year-book that began to appear in 1936 under the same title as the periodical to which these observations form an introduction. The Second World War put an end to these activities; the last issue appeared in 1939. After the war there appeared in 1949 *Movimento Operaio*, published by the Biblioteca Feltrinelli in Milan, a journal intended for Italian readers, primarily because of the language.

For the most part social historians have had to seek refuge for their studies in historical journals of a general nature, in journals devoted to economic history and occasionally, as for example the *Annales*; *Economies – Sociétés – Civilisations*, in those devoted to both economic and social history. Sometimes their articles appeared in periodicals of a definitely political character.

It cannot be denied that the amount of space devoted to social history in these journals is, on the whole, rather meagre, a fact readily explained by the space available on the one hand and the supply of manuscripts on the other. This limitation of space is not, however, the first nor the foremost motive for the publication of this Review. There are two other reasons which we consider more weighty:

firstly the strong international trait and, secondly, the emancipation of social history.

One might say, be it somewhat of an exaggeration, that in social history national variations on international themes are to be discerned. Social groupings undoubtedly do show national, and sometimes very strong national, traits in their character, ideas and activities. A comparison between the ways in which the middle class way of life, or socialism, for example, has manifested itself in England, France, or Germany demonstrates these national differences most clearly. It is equally true, however, that internationally there are common features that can be called fundamental. If one compares the social phenomena of regions located in different continents, the nuances and differences definitely increase, but the similarity does not disappear altogether. Certainly as regards more recent periods this also applies to regions in varying stages of development.

The international aspect of social history is perhaps more obvious than its emancipation. Is it not repeatedly coupled with economic history, an association that often implies subordination? Is social history really recognized as a separate branch of learning?

Social history is still comparatively young. It has grown up in the protective shadow of economic history and if the recognition of its independence may already be called general, it is certainly not yet old.¹ Along with Proesler one might consider Machiavelli, Vico, Bodin, and Montesquieu as forerunners and Voltaire as founder, but social history only properly began in the 19th century when, for instance, the phenomenon of the French revolutions had to be explained, and when the rise of the labour movements stimulated the interest in social questions, also in academic circles.

Then various historians who were primarily students of economic history begin to view their problems from a more or less "social" standpoint, though they do not as yet write social history. Then, too, articles on the history of the labour movement appear, written by authors who, however, seldom belong to the guild of "official" historians and are certainly not recognized as such. In the ranks of "official" historical science social history has, for the time being, no definite, let alone recognized, place and it will only win this with difficulty.

This can be explained to a great extent, but not entirely, by the fact that social history very often presents itself as such in the 19th century as the history of the labour movement and therefore is not considered to be "kathederfähig", being socialistic. Moreover social history has to

¹ C.f. Proesler, *op. cit.*, p. 70 seq., and Luigi dal Pane, *Storica economica e Storica sociale*, in: *Giornale degli economista e Annale di economia*, 1952.

battle against a strong current which was present in 19th century historiography. Political history was preeminently concerned with the great statesman, the state and the nation, cultural history with the élite as the pillars of civilisation, and the history of ideas (“Geistesgeschichte”), from the nature of things, with the ideas that were the forces guiding and inspiring man. Certainly they had to take account of the facts of social history. Socialism had its share of ideas and theories. The élite of cultural history were social groupings. And the student of political history was faced with the rise of estates and classes and their often revolutionary activities. There were, therefore, undoubtedly points of contact between these branches of history and social history, but the former started from different premisses. Whilst social history was occupied with the mass and the social grouping whose history was in a large measure influenced by the economic situation and development, the aforesaid branches of study directed their attention primarily to the important individual, statesman or thinker. In doing so they overestimated the importance of the idea as an historical factor just as they underestimated that of the economic event. The fact that social history can be associated with the primitive form of cultural history which was concerned with usages and customs and is incorporated in folklore at the present time, and that some classified the views of social theorists under the history of ideas, are details that do not alter the over-all picture.

As we have seen social history has grown up under the protection of economic history and it has remained very closely associated with, and even dependent on, the latter. Economic history also had to struggle against the said current that was so strong in 19th century historiography, though it was aided by a counter-current, materialistic thinking, from which it profited more easily than social history. It developed more quickly and was sooner accepted because it seemed more “businesslike”, perhaps also more “objective”, and, above all, had no objectionable political leaning.

Economic history was therefore obviously the most suitable protector of social history. Both looked upon the human being not so much as an individual but as a member of a collectivity. Both considered the economic factor of prime importance in the historical events forming their field of research. Because of its nature and development the field of research of social history, i.e. social groupings, is to a great extent determined by that of its sister-science, i.e. economic events. Under the “free play of social forces” present in the 19th century that determination meant, in fact, a one-sided dependence of social on economic development. Historical materialism has not postulated this dependence any more than class warfare, but it has

established it, and has thereby lent it a very strong accent. The consequences of this actual situation and theoretical explanation on historical science are noticeable to the present day: the belief that, in essence, social history registers the social consequences of economic development has not by any means disappeared.

If one may now talk of an emancipation of social history, this is not in the first place due to a declaration of independence by the social historians. Such a declaration would, moreover, be meaningless since economic and social events cannot be considered independently of one another, and neither can the related branches of learning. The emancipation must be considered as a modification in the relationship between economic and social history as a result of a change in that relationship, or at any rate in the opinion concerning that relationship, between economic and social events.

In the 19th century man in the social-economic polity was generally looked upon as the practically involuntary tool of the economic event of which he had to bear the consequences. With the rise of the labour movement and of the reaction against the "free play of social forces" of which it formed a part this opinion underwent a change. Then the view that the human community and not the economic event should be primary, and that economy ought to be controlled as its tool, began to take root. Apart from the question as to how far this control has advanced, it can be said to be evident that the striving after control of the market, a full employment policy, the welfare state and five or ten year plans are efforts in this direction which, though not entirely, yet to a great extent, arise out of this change in insight. The relationship between social and economic polity evolves from a one-sided dependence to an interaction in the same way as this could be more easily and completely discerned between the social polity on the one hand, and politics, culture and ideology on the other. An allround interdependence is gaining in strength and the various provinces of life seem to pervade each other more and more.

In conjunction with this development it does not seem presumptuous to speak of an emancipation of social history, the reflex of the social event on learning. Here, too, we have the evolution from dependence to interaction; here, too, the interdependence and pervasion. All this conduces to the drawing of less rigid dividing lines, to keeping open the possibility that the concept "social history" will gradually become broader.

It is for these reasons, then, that the International Institute of Social History undertakes the publication of this journal. It is with pleasure that it endows it with the name borne by the year-book published by it before the Second World War, the more so since this name so clearly emphasizes its international character.