The New History and the Old

CRITICAL ESSAYS AND REAPPRAISALS

Gertrude Himmelfarb

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Introduction

The "Old New Social History" and the "New Old Social History": thus one eminent social historian (Charles Tilly) distinguishes his mode of history from that of another eminent social historian (Lawrence Stone).[1] Recalling the history of this genre, one might be tempted to add some additional "old's" and "new's" to accommodate the several varieties that have emerged since James Harvey Robinson proclaimed the advent of the "New History."

Even in 1912, when Robinson issued that manifesto, the "new history" was not all that new. In 1898 the *American Historical Review,* bastion of the old history, published an essay, "Features of the New History," commending the "new" *Kulturgeschichte* as practiced by Karl Lamprecht—which itself was not so new, Jakob Burckhardt's classic work on the Renaissance having appeared almost half a century earlier. Lamprecht's new history was not quite Burckhardt's; nor was Robinson's Lamprecht's. But they had much in common with one another and with later versions of the new history, for they all rejected the basic premises of the old history: that the proper subject of history is essentially political and that the natural mode of historical writing is essentially narrative. Lamprecht's "genetic" method, emphasizing causation rather than narration, presaged the "analytic" method favored today. And Robinson's plea for a history of the "common man," which would dispense with the "trifling details" of dynasties and wars and utilize the findings of "anthropologists, economists, psychologists, and sociologists," is still the agenda of the new history.[2]

England had its own founding father in J. R. Green, whose *History of the English People* (1877–80) professed to take as its subject the "English People" rather than "English Kings or English Conquests," and to be concerned more with the Elizabethan Poor Laws than with the Armada and more with Methodism than with Jacobitism.[3] Less than half a century later H. G. Wells published an un-Victorian and irreverent version of the new history in the form of an *Outline of History,* in which a "world-historical" figure like Napoleon was seen strutting upon the crest of history like a "cockerel on a dunghill."[4] Determined to democratize history as well as debunk it ("demystify," the Marxist would say), Wells described his history as the "common adventure of all mankind," of all classes and all nations.[5] And he was pleased to report that his book was not only about the common man, it was for the common man, the common reader—in evidence of which he cited the sale of over two million copies in little more than a decade. Although most professional historians were as disdainful of Wells as he was of them, they could not ignore his work or its thesis. Reviewing the *Outline* in the *American Historical Review,* Carl Becker (himself often identified as a new historian) confessed that Wells's "new history" was too new for his tastes, too insistent upon judging the past by the standards of the present—or rather by Wells's vision of the future, when the "Great Society," the "Federal World State," would have ushered in a truly democratic and universal era.[6] If that prophecy now seems quaint, some of Wells's other fancies have come to pass. In 1900 he offered a "prospectus" for a history of mankind that would take into account all the forces of social change: biologic, demographic, geographic, economic. Later, in his autobiography, Wells remarked that if he were a multimillionaire, he would establish "Professorships of Analytic History" to endow a new breed of historians—"human ecologists."[7]

As it happened, the French had already started to produce that new breed. The *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* was founded in 1929 in opposition to the political and diplomatic historians who dominated the academic establishment—the Sorbonnistes, as they were contemptuously called. That epithet lost some of its sting when the *Annales* moved from Strasbourg to Paris, where one of its editors (Marc Bloch) joined the faculty of the Sorbonne and the other (Lucien Febvre) the Collège de France. With the establishment after the war of the Sixième

Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, the Annalistes acquired a powerful institutional base, and under the editorship of Fernand Braudel their journal became the most influential historical organ in France, possibly in the world.[8] It has also proved to be remarkably innovative. Going well beyond the more traditional forms of economic and social history, it now derives both its subjects and its methods from anthropology, sociology, demography, geography, psychology, even semiotics and linguistics.

While Americans have been developing their own modes of new history—econometric and cliometric, black and ethnic, feminist and sexual, psychoanalytic and populist—they have also been much influenced by their colleagues abroad. A large contingent of historians may be found making annual or sabbatical pilgrimages to Paris to take instruction from the masters. Others look to Britain for inspiration, especially to the Marxists, whose work has been used to fortify the indigenous tradition of radical history (typified by Robinson's student and collaborator, Charles A. Beard). Thus E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* has become the model for the making of the American working class; Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "primitive rebels" is taken as the prototype of inner-city gangs; and Perry Anderson's version of "Althusserian" Marxism is the point of departure for discussions of the theory and methodology of Marxism.

If the new history, as we know it today, is not as novel as some of its younger enthusiasts might think, neither is the old history as archaic as its critics assume. The old history, traditional history, has had a long time to assimilate and accommodate itself to the new. Indeed, even before the advent of the new, it was never as homogeneous or simplistic as the stereotype has it. German history managed to make room for a Burckhardt as well as a Ranke, for cultural history as well as political and "scientific" history. The English Whig historians, descending from Burke and Macauley, came in many sizes and shapes, including some notably un-Whiggish types. And their contemporaries in France had a breadth and liberality of spirit that even the Annalistes admire; one of the complaints of the new historians is that the Sorbonnistes abandoned the grand tradition of Guizot, Thierry, and Michelet. Nor are the great American classics merely political chronicles. Bancroft's history was not only a paean to Jacksonian democracy; it also

reflected his predilection for German idealism and romanticism. And Parkman's "history of the American forest," as he called his work on the Great West,[9] was as rooted in anthropology, geography, and ecology as the work of any new historian; the wilderness was as surely his hero as the Mediterranean was Braudel's.

The new history, then, is older than one might think, and the old not quite so antiquated. But what is undeniably new is the triumph of the new. In the historical profession as a whole the new history is now the new orthodoxy. This is not to say that the old history is no longer being written. Political, constitutional, diplomatic, military, and intellectual histories continue to be written by some eminent senior historians and even some enterprising young ones. (Although more often the old history is rewritten in the light of the new. Thus political history is quantified and sociologized, and intellectual history—the study of ideas—is converted into *mentalité* history—the study of popular beliefs and attitudes.) Yet the old history, if not entirely superseded, has been largely displaced. What was once at the center of the profession is now at the periphery. What once defined history is now a footnote to history.

In the spirit of collegiality, some historians (old and new alike) have argued that all this is of little consequence so long as a mood of tolerance prevails, so long as each historian can "do his own thing"—or, as has been said, "go to heaven his own way."[10] Others, taking a more cynical view of the matter, belittle the new history as yet another academic fashion that will disappear as soon as the novelty wears off, or as soon as some more venturesome novices assert themselves by rebelling against their elders. (In the profession this is known as revisionism.) In fact, this particular fashion has survived several generations and has become more entrenched with the passing of time. By now there are historians—serious, reputable, senior historians—who know no other kind of history and can do no other kind. For them the new history has lost its distinctive character. They recognize no legitimate criticism of the genre as such, any more than of history as such. To the argument that quantitative history, for example, has a tendency to elevate method over substance, permitting statistics to define the subject, they reply that this is no different from constitutional history, which takes its themes from whatever documents are available. To the charge that social history tends to be unduly concerned with the minutiae of everyday life, they respond by pointing to the no less

tedious machinations that make up a good deal of political history. The issue, we are told, is not the new history or the old, but good history or bad.

This is a tempting resolution of the matter. Who can refuse the appeal to good history? Who can deny that there is much bad in the old and much good in the new? Who can be so churlish as to revive old disputes and resist the call to rapprochement? Who indeed, except perhaps an intellectual historian who finds that ideas are not so easily reconciled, that important questions are at stake which have not yet been resolved, that the two modes of history reflect differences in subject and method which are tantamount to different conceptions of history, and that the new history has significant implications not only for the history of historiography but for the history of ideas as well.

The chapters of this volume deal with one or another mode, method, or aspect of the new history and the old. They testify to a variety that appears to contradict the singularity of "new history" and "old history," that may even seem to defy the labels "new" and "old." Yet for all the variations and qualifications contained within them, the categories have a reality that cannot be denied. That reality is reflected in common usage. "New history" has become the accepted shorthand term for modes of history that may not be consistent with one another but that do represent, singly and collectively, a challenge to traditional history.

The challenge is serious only because of the dominance ("hegemony," the new historian would say) of the new history in the profession today.[11] Indeed, it is the fact of dominance that is crucial to the argument of this book. Again and again I make the point that the issue is not the new history as such but rather the decisive role it has assumed and the superior claims made on its behalf. No one—certainly not I—can reasonably object to a study of popular unrest in Paris from 1557 to 1572; or of vagrants, beggars, and bandits in Cuba from 1878 to 1895; or of women's work in manufacturing in Central Europe from 1648 to 1870; or of stature and nutrition in the Hapsburg monarchy in the eighteenth century. But when, as recently happened, these constitute the entire contents (apart from book reviews), not of the *Journal of Social History* but of the *American Historical Review,*[12] and when the editors and editorial board of the *Review* see nothing

noteworthy in this grouping of articles—indeed do not recognize them as belonging to a distinctive genre—one may find cause for reflection and concern.

It is this species of the new history, social history, that is the subject of the opening chapter of this volume. "History with the politics left out" is the way G. M. Trevelyan described social history almost half a century ago. The phrase is now used facetiously, but it does characterize a mode of history that either ignores politics, or relegates it to the realm of "epiphenomena," or recognizes it as a subject deserving of study only when it has been transmuted into social or political science. When such a history professes to be "total" history, or even the dominant and superior form of history, the implications are momentous—not only for the writing of history but for the historian's conception of the polity and of the human beings who are the subject both of the polity and of history.

The chapter on the "New History" focuses on quantohistory and psychohistory, each of which exhibits its own kind of determinism and its own methodological problems. "Two Nations or Five Classes" describes an exercise in sociological history and contrasts the abstractions and models of this type of history with the "moral imagination" of the Victorians. "The 'Group'" deals with the influential school of British Marxist history: its origins in the Communist Party, its ideological commitments and revisionist strategies, its relation to non-Marxist history and to the new history.

The paired essays in the following chapters analyze specific works and themes of the new history. The first, on social history, considers the views of two founding fathers of that genre and reflects on its present status. The second presents psychohistorical interpretations of two major English thinkers, which serve as case studies of the method itself. The third, comparing recent historical works on France and England, concludes that one of the supposed casualties of the new history, national history, may not yet be as defunct as is sometimes claimed.

The counterpoint to the new history is generally taken to be "Whig history," which is preeminently political in subject and narrative in form. "Who Now Reads Macaulay?" points out that Victorian historians of all political persuasions, Tories and Radicals as well as Whigs, shared the view that the history of a people is primarily the story of its

political heritage and that English history is peculiarly the story of a "liberal descent." "History and the Idea of Progress" traces an idea that is often associated with Whig history but is in fact characteristic of a long line of thinkers who differed about what constituted progress but agreed that some concept of progress was necessary to give meaning to history by bringing the past into a continuum with the present and the future. "Does History Talk Sense?" suggests that the challenge to traditional history does not come only from the new history: the conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott is in this respect more radical than Nietzsche, and Nietzsche more Whiggish than Oakeshott; for Nietzsche's historical muse makes sense of the past by speaking to our present concerns, whereas Oakeshott's is a beloved mistress who cannot "talk sense" because the past itself is dead.

Most of the chapters of this book were published in the 1980s, the earliest, "Clio and the New History," in 1975. The "Frenchness of France" has not previously been published, and a somewhat different version of the essay on Macaulay appeared in my volume of essays, *Marriage and Morals among the Victorians*. All the essays but one have been edited, expanded, and in some cases extensively rewritten. The one exception is "History With the Politics Left Out," which is included here in essentially its original form. When it was first published in 1984, it provoked a good deal of controversy, and rather than blunt the issues by revision, I chose to keep the original intact and add a Postscript by way of commentary.

The passionate response to that essay, favorable as well as critical, caused me to reconsider an opinion I had come to a few years earlier. In 1980, in a review of *The Past before Us* (a volume of historiographic essays commissioned by the American Historical Association), I wrote of "intimations" in this book and elsewhere that some new historians were becoming sensitive to the concerns of traditional historians. I predicted that "the 'humanization' of social history will eventually lead, not to a restoration of the old history, but to an accommodation in which old and new can live together."[13] I came to this conclusion despite other intimations in the same work that so far from seeking an accommodation with the old history, some new historians were embarking on a still more radical mission. In his contribution to that volume Carl Degler observed that while a great deal of attention was

being directed to the history of women and the family, these subjects had still not been properly integrated into the "mainstream" of history, and that this could be achieved only by altering our conception of history and our sense of the past: "In sum, what is meant by history or the past will have to be changed before these two subdisciplines become an integral part of it."[14]

Since the publication of *The Past before Us* the demand for "mainstreaming" has been echoed by other subdisciplines dealing with workers, blacks, ethnic groups, and social and sexual "deviants." One might well wonder whether anything would remain of the discipline of history if these subdisciplines were brought into the mainstream, and whether such an effort of integration would not result in the disintegration of the whole. The "total" history that some new historians pride themselves on might turn out to be a total dissolution of history—history in any form recognizable to either the new or the old historian. This is, in effect, the prescription offered by Theodore Zeldin (discussed in Chapter 7); pursuing the historical revolution to its end, Zeldin seeks the liberation of history from all the categories and concepts (cause, time, class, nation) that still enslave it.

Even some of the Annalistes are beginning to suspect that they have unleashed a force they cannot control. The very disciplines they have used to subvert the conventions of the old history threaten to subvert history itself. It is curious to find the editors of a collection of essays by prominent Annalistes complaining of the "aggression of social sciences," and still more curious to hear of the effect of that aggression on history: "The field which it [history] used to occupy alone as the systematic explanation of society in its time dimension has been invaded by other sciences with ill-defined boundaries which threaten to absorb and dissolve it."[15] The same volume contains an essay by one of the editors with the provocative title "The Return of the Event." But the "return" heralded there is not of the kind of "event" familiar in traditional history. On the contrary, Pierre Nora confirms "the effacement of the event, the negation of its importance and its dissolution," as the great triumph of the new history. It is quite another event that he sees as returning: one that has been produced by the mass media of modern industrial society and that is often indistinguishable from a "nonevent" or "illusion," a "sign" or a "function."[16]

A similar retreat, more semantic than substantive, may be noted in

the United States, where one of the founders of the new history has called for a "new old history" to correct the excesses of the new and restore some of the virtues of the old. But the "*mentalité* history" that Lawrence Stone invokes as the distinctive mode of this "new old history" is nothing like traditional intellectual or even cultural history. And the "revival of narrative" he points to—the "narration of a single event" exemplified by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou,* Carlo Cipolla's *Faith, Reason and the Plague in Seventeenth Century Tuscany,* Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels,* E. P. Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters*—is far from the old narrative history, where the narration was not of a single event but precisely of a series of events chronologically connected so as to tell a story over a significant span of time.

One is not surprised to find other signs of misgiving and dissidence. Orthodoxies breed heresies; dominance generates discontent. As the new history loses the glamour of novelty, the old acquires a new allure. More and more often one hears confessions of nostalgia for an old-fashioned history that has dramatic movement and literary grace; for a political history that regards constitutions and laws as something more than ploys in the manipulation of power; for an intellectual history that takes serious ideas seriously, as ideas, rather than as instruments of production and consumption; even for a social history that does not presume to be dominant or superior, let alone "total." It may be that we are witnessing the beginning of yet another wave of historical revisionism—not the restoration of an old regime (historians are skeptical of such restorations) but the inauguration of a new regime.

It is tempting to say (as I once did) that we can now look forward to a real accommodation of new and old, a merging of the best of both. It is a pleasing prospect but not a very hopeful one. At a time when the "old new" historian adamantly rejects the small, tentative overtures of the "new old" historian, one can hardly be sanguine about the prospects of reconciliation with the "old old" historian. There is a good deal at stake, not only in terms of professional interests (careers dependent upon particular subjects, methods, and institutional affiliations), but of philosophical convictions—ideas about history, politics, society, even human nature. The new historian cannot concede the preeminence of politics in the Aristotelian sense, which supposes man to be a "political animal"; and the old historian cannot admit the superiority, let alone totality, of a mode of history that takes man to be a "social

animal." Nor can the new historian conceal his contempt for a history that persists in studying "important people, significant events, and successful historical movements";[17] nor the old historian find it anything but bizarre that such subjects should be derided and that *l'histoire historisante* should be used as an invidious term.[18] So long as new historians announce that "Mickey Mouse may in fact be more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt,"[19] or that "the history of menarche" should be recognized as "equal in importance to the history of monarchy,"[20] traditional historians will feel confirmed in their sense of the enormous gap separating the two modes of history.

One would like to think that reality will inevitably assert itself to produce a more sensitive and realistic history. But here too one cannot be sanguine. It was, after all, during the most catastrophic event in modern times that two of the greatest Annalistes affirmed their faith in a doctrine that belittled events and located reality in the "impersonal forces" of history. In his moving account of the fall of France in 1940, Marc Bloch alluded to the theory of history that contributed to the prevailing mood of "intellectual lethargy."

> We were all of us either specialists in the social sciences or workers in scientific laboratories, and maybe the very disciplines of those employments kept us, by a sort of fatalism, from embarking on individual action. We had grown used to seeing great impersonal forces at work in society as in nature. In the vast drag of these submarine swells, so cosmic as to seem irresistible, of what avail were the petty struggles of a few shipwrecked sailors? To think otherwise would have been to falsify history.[21]

Even then Bloch did not consider the possibility that this "cosmic" theory may have falsified history itself, that it was not only politically enervating but historically stultifying. One wonders whether that possibility occurred to him when he later joined the Resistance movement—and gave his life to it.

It was the same tragic event, the fall of France, that ironically provided another historian with the opportunity to launch an attack on *l'histoire événementielle*.[22] Historians have paid homage to Fernand Braudel, who managed to write the first draft of his monumental work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*,

while confined in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany during World War II. That work extolled *la longue durée:* the "inanimate" forces of geography, demography, and economy that were the "deeper realities" of history, compared with which the passions of Philip II and the ideas of the Renaissance were "cockleshells" tossed on the waters of history.[23] The book was indeed an impressive achievement, but also a profoundly ironic, even perverse one. For it was written at a time when Europe was being convulsed by the passions of a single man and by ideas that very nearly destroyed a people and a religion of considerable *durée*. Braudel himself has said that he wrote it in prison, partly as a "direct existential response to the tragic times I was passing through."

> All those occurrences which poured in upon us from the radio and the newspapers of our enemies, or even the news from London which our clandestine receivers gave us—I had to outdistance, reject, deny them. Down with occurrences, especially vexing ones! I had to believe that history, destiny, was written at a much more profound level.[24]

It is curious that historians, admiring the intrepid spirit that could bring forth so bold a theory in the midst of such tragic "occurrences," have failed to note the gross disparity between that theory and those occurrences—the extent to which the theory did indeed "outdistance, reject, deny them." It is still more curious that in the years following the war, as historians tried to assimilate the enormity of the individuals and ideas responsible for those "short-term events" (known as World War II and the Holocaust), the theory of history that belittled individuals, ideas, and above all events became increasingly influential. The irony is compounded by the fact that what Braudel took to be an "existential response" to reality—distancing himself from it and seeking a "much more profound level" of meaning—was exactly the opposite from the response of the Existentialists, who found meaning precisely in the actuality of events, however contingent and ephemeral. Because the Existentialists respected the meaning of events, they also respected the integrity of the individuals involved in them—the conscious, responsible, autonomous individuals whose actions were freely willed, even "gratuitous." Braudel, by denying the "underlying reality" of events, denied both the efficacy of individuals and the possibility of freedom. *The Mediterranean* concludes by asserting the triumph of the long term over the individuals doomed to live in the short term.

> So when I think of the individual, I am always inclined to see him imprisoned within a destiny in which he himself has little hand, fixed in a landscape in which the infinite perspectives of the long term stretch into the distance both behind him and before. In historical analysis, as I see it, rightly or wrongly, the long term always wins in the end. Annihilating innumerable events—all those which cannot be accommodated in the main ongoing current and which are therefore ruthlessly swept to one side—it indubitably limits both the freedom of the individual and even the role of chance.[25]

If historians have shown themselves, on occasion, to be strangely resistant to historical reality, they have also proved to be peculiarly vulnerable to boredom. In his *Philosophical Dictionary* Robert Nisbet has an entry on "boredom"—nothing so pretentious as "ennui," "anomie," or "apathy," but the simple "insistent and universal" human trait of boredom. Toward the close of the article he quotes Bertrand Russell: "If life is to be saved from boredom, relieved only by disaster, means must be found of restoring individual initiative not only in things that are trivial but in the things that really matter."[26] Some new historians have confessed that their initial disaffection with traditional history came from boredom with the old subjects: dynasties and governments, wars and laws, treaties and documents. So it may be that a new generation of historians, bored with the "everyday life of common people" and the "long-term structures" of geography and demography, may find a renewed excitement in the drama of events, the power of ideas, and the dignity of individuals—"not only in things that are trivial but in the things that really matter."

"History with the Politics Left Out"

.1.

You, the philologist, boast of knowing everything about the furniture and clothing of the Romans and of being more intimate with the quarters, tribes and streets of Rome than with those of your own city. Why this pride? You know no more than did the potter, the cook, the cobbler, the summoner, the auctioneer of Rome.

—Giambattista Vico, 1702

When the history of menarche is widely recognized as equal in importance to the history of monarchy, we will have arrived.

—Peter Stearns, 1976

A few years ago, in a discussion of recent trends in the writing of history, one young historian proudly described his work as being on the "cutting edge of the discipline." He was writing a study of a New England town toward the end of the eighteenth century, an "in-depth" analysis of the life of its inhabitants: their occupations and earnings, living and working conditions, familial and sexual relations, habits, attitudes, and social institutions. He regretted that he had to confine himself to that one town, but some of his colleagues were doing comparable studies of other towns and their collective efforts would constitute a "total history" of that time and place. I asked him whether his study, or their collective studies, had any bearing on what I, admittedly not a specialist in American history, took to be the most momentous event of that time and place, indeed one of the most momentous events in all of modern history: the founding of the United States of America, the first major republic of modern times. He conceded that from his themes and sources—parish registers, tax rolls, census reports, legal records, polling lists, land titles—he could not "get to," as he said, the founding of the United States. But he denied that this was the crucial event I took it to be. What was crucial were the lives and experiences of the mass of the people. That was the subject of his history; it was the "new history," social history. My rebuttal—that even ordinary people (perhaps most of all ordinary people) had been profoundly affected in the most ordinary aspects of their lives by the