

Marxism and Social History

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I entered graduate school in 1968 and started teaching in 1974. So I was near the chronological epicenter both of "the new social history" and of the revival of radical politics that came in response to the Vietnam War. Also one of the geographical epicenters-- I attended graduate school at Berkeley. From that vantage point, the relation between Marxism and social historical practice was much more complicated than one might imagine looking back from 2006. That complexity forms the main theme in what I want to say: I believe that historians do work within mental structures, but these are loose, filled with contradictions, and as a result quickly changing—rather different from what Thomas Kuhn meant when he started us all using the term paradigm. The role of Marxism for my generation of social historians fits that description.

The first complication is that Marxism wasn't at all alien to 1950s American historical writing about Europe, despite the deep conservatism of American politics in those years. On the contrary, the establishment figures seemed to be deeply imprinted with it. Perfect example R. R. Palmer, Princeton and eventually Yale professor, the textbook of the era.... (quote?) translating Lefebvre. In many fields, I think, Marxism was actually the orthodoxy as the profession entered the 1960s.

So my generation's relation to Marxism was partly conflictual, maybe even Oedipal: we were interested in taking apart the very broad conceptual terms that Palmer

and others used. We wanted to show that social relations and motives were more complicated than those guys thought. So the emergence of the new social history tended to go with a burst of revisionism, most dramatically about the social interpretation of the French revolution, as in the work of Alfred Cobban and François Furet.

The second complication is that this social history was a relatively new enterprise, and for that reason, it's not really accurate to speak of us working within a paradigm; we were very much feeling our way, in an atmosphere of improvisation and bricolage. No paradigm, then, but a couple of basic shared ideas: 1) that talk is cheap and that real values show themselves in actions, rather than in language; hence 2), that ideologies and political choices ought not to be understood at face value, but rather as expressions of other realities in people's lives.

These presumptions attracted us to a wide range of social theories that suggested how doing and thinking interacted. Marx, with his idea that how people live shapes how they think, to be sure; but also Freud, Max Weber, contemporary American sociology. All of these suggested ways of linking talk and action, for instance, in what happened to people in rapidly-modernizing societies, or in familial relations, or in looking at status anxieties. The best social history from that era seems to me to have that mixed-theory quality, in ways that might be thought contradictory.

This emphasis on doing had also consequences for method: the belief that one got at the core of people via their actions pointed to a statistical approach. The classic example: to understand family emotions, the starting point is demography, that is, counting up hundreds or thousands of family actions and seeing the basic trends in them.

So can say that this was a historical practice that was suspicious of individual cases and of purely cultural or purely political approaches.

But this leads to the third complication I want to stress, the rapid transformations of methods, assumptions, and even political values in those years. The rethinking of quantification was especially dramatic. 1971 a crucial date in this process: appearance of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz's "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in the journal *Daedalus*; soon after appeared in Geertz's essay collection The Interpretation of Cultures. It had a huge and immediate effect on historians, part of which was to refocus attention on narratives, incidents, individual moments. The historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie very characteristic of that era: in 1968, "the historian will be a programmer or nothing;" in 1975, the very narrative Montaillou. He also was a Communist Party member until 1956, then moved steadily to the right, like most French academics.

So it's at this point, sometime in the mid-1970s, that one can see the working assumptions I described coming apart, Typicality faded as a concern, but so also did ideas about the relation between action and words; words started to matter much more than they had to social historians; the assumption that they disguised reality disappeared, replaced by the idea that they expressed deeper cultural maps.

One could call this the death of historians' Marxism, but it ought to be seen as something more basic: a turn away from all the social theories that had posited a deep reality, only dimly visible beneath the surface manifestations of social life. So Freudianism and modernization theories became less influential about the same time as Marxism. And yet-- I want to finish by suggesting that just as Marxism's paradigmatic influence back in the 1970s can be exaggerated, so also we sometimes exaggerate its

death in the years since. Specific Marxist-influenced histories—like E. P. Thompson's—retain enormous power. Marxist memories, as it were, seem to supply the moral force in a lot of historical writing, like Natalie Davis's and a lot of the new global history. Attention to social conflict and contradiction seems to me basic to good historical writing; so also the idea—often lost sight of in recent scholarship—that there are real losers and winners in history, real oppressions even beneath comfortable cultural overlays. Part of our job as a profession—not the job of every individual but a kind of collective duty—is to deepen the understanding of those facts.