
A Social History of the Social Science History Association during Its Early Years

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Social historians formed an important part of the Social Science History Association from its early days, and they widened its intellectual space beyond initial emphases on political history and quantitative methods. Lee Benson and other faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as Charles and Louise Tilly, were particularly influential in attracting a broad mix of scholars to the group. The openness of the association and its interdisciplinarity appealed to younger scholars, and those interested in the “new urban history” were early recruits. A growing number of women, many of whom were social historians, participated in the first conventions and newly organized networks.

The official story of the early years of the Social Science History Association (SSHA) has been told before in the pages of the *Social Science History*, and it does not need to be repeated. Yet that narrative of (and by) male quantifiers leaves out key parts of the social history of the SSHA and the contributions of social historians, many of them female, to its early development. Rather than an appendage consciously recruited to expand the group’s reach and appeal, social historians formed an important part of SSHA from its beginnings, one that widened its intellectual space beyond the political history of the United States and its methodological focus on quantification. Although the influence of social historians certainly grew during the SSHA’s first decade, it was built into the association and into *Social Science History* from its early days, even if not widely recognized by their organizers. Background stories can be as important as those in the forefront of a scene.

Allan Bogue, president of the SSHA in 1977–78, tied the founding of the SSHA to enthusiasm for the quantitative study of US politics (Abbot 1991; Bogue 1987). He and Lee Benson, who had met at Cornell graduate school, became part of the American Historical Association’s (AHA’s) Ad Hoc Committee on the Collection of the Quantitative Data of American Political History, which was formed to retrieve and preserve American electoral records. They teamed up with Warren Miller and, later, Jerry Clubb from the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research, which had taken on the job of storing and disseminating social science data sets, initially those related to national elections. In Bogue’s eyes, the early impetus for the SSHA stemmed from fears that the AHA was losing its interest in record collection, leading him and his friends to begin planning a new association that would share their passion for interdisciplinary work and statistical methods, providing a new space for the encouragement of quantitative historical research.

A slightly different story was told by Lee Benson, professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, after he helped to launch the SSHA in the mid-1970s. Lee Benson’s status in the profession derived from his study of voting behavior and the makeup of political parties in New York State during the early nineteenth century.

Like Bogue, Benson does not seem to have worried much about social history when planning the new professional group. Benson was much more interested in social theory and in the social sciences broadly conceived, and quantitative methods were for him tools rather than goals. Lee was a visionary who wanted to remake the world for the better, and he turned to social science history almost as a crusade after he moved away from his earlier radical political commitments. From his perspective, the SSHA was to be “a beachhead for social science theorists wedded to using historical data to build better theories and to effect social change.”¹ Historians, whatever their special interests, had to be central to the disciplinary reorganization that he thought necessary. When Benson gave his presidential address at the 1977 SSHA conference in Ann Arbor, he pushed the association to lead the way in building a genuine social scientific community in the United States by overcoming the “hardened boundaries” among fields. Collaborating across disciplines and retreating from sterile battles over turf would permit the development of “credible empirical theories about human behavior” useful for producing a better world (Benson 1978: 430). In his remarks, Benson invoked a European intellectual tradition of social thought and investigation exemplified by Francis Bacon, the Marquis de Condorcet, and Karl Marx, rather than the ideas of social historians such as Edward Thompson or Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie whose work currently excited scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. Exactly how these contradictory sets of ideas were to be grafted onto quantitative studies of US politics was not clear at the time, but Lee’s boundless enthusiasm for that double enterprise formed part of the intellectual legacy of the SSHA. For him, this was a radical, rebellious project tied to his zeal for social change in the United States.

Despite the clear agendas of its founders, the association took pains to emphasize its openness to scholars throughout the social sciences. The constitution of the SSHA pledged itself to “encourage and disseminate high quality social science history devoted to substantive research and methodological concerns” (Social Science History Association 1976a: iii). It played no favorites among the many varieties of history popular at the time, and it left its members free to organize their own networks around any “topic of interest.” It is clear that from its earliest days, large numbers of young social historians flocked to the group’s conferences and published in its journal, and the election of Louise Tilly as president in 1981 sent a clear signal that social historians were now helping to shape the association. A quick look at early issues of *Social Science History* shows the extent to which interests other than US political history were built into the group’s initial intellectual agenda. Its first editorial board included the anthropologists Hildred Geertz, Peggy Sanday, and G. William Skinner, as well as the geographer David Ward. Demographers, Tony Wrigley from the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structure and Etienne van de Walle from the Population Studies Group at Penn, were important participants as was Philip Curtin, pioneer in the field of world history (Social Science History Association 1976b). Significantly, several members of the editorial board had research interests outside the United States and worked on periods before 1800. In the second issue of the

1 Michael Zuckerman (pers. comm., December 16, 2015).

journal, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie contributed an essay on “Motionless History,” built around the theories of the *Annales* School and Fernand Braudel’s innovative concepts of historical time and causality (Le Roy Ladurie 1977).

The SSHA appeared at an opportune time for a particular variety of social historian, those who had heard the siren call of interdisciplinarity and who had begun to study sociology, demography, and economics but at that point had no common space to meet like-minded researchers. They were drawn into the SSHA through a particular set of social and professional networks, which had been developing since the early 1960s particularly in the fields of urban sociology and urban history. As he moved from Harvard to Toronto to the University of Michigan, Chuck Tilly multiplied the number of young scholars who were attracted to his style of historical sociology and who were accustomed to broad discussion of research problems and methods. They in turn enlisted their colleagues, particularly those working with quantitative data, into collaborative projects. Harvard, the University of Toronto, and the University of Michigan became central places for the networking of young scholars who would be drawn into the new social science history, as were Yale and the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1968, Richard Sennett and Stephan Thernstrom helped to organize the Yale Conference on the Nineteenth-Century Industrial City, which was funded by the Ford Foundation and Yale’s Office of Urban Studies. Sennett, who had recently moved from Harvard to the Yale sociology department, and Thernstrom, who had recently moved from Harvard to Brandeis, shared Tilly’s interest in the social dimensions of urbanization, and all of them wanted to broaden urban studies by linking sociological theory to investigations of cities in the past. Chuck Tilly attended, of course, as did Herb Gutman, Joan Scott, and Sam Bass Warner Jr., whose different approaches to social history enlivened conversations. I remember the meetings as a heady moment when about three dozen historians, sociologists, and city planners discovered that we could talk and learn from one another. Papers dealt not only with US cities, but also with European and Latin American ones, and they foregrounded issues of social and geographical mobility, immigration, family life, residential patterns, and urban social structure (Thernstrom and Sennett 1969). Many of us worked with nineteenth-century census manuscript schedules, which had just recently been opened to scholars, but others studied social groups and social change using nonquantitative sources. The group, filled with enthusiasm and energy, decided that it represented the “new urban history” that would shed light into unknown corners of urban life and the experience of ordinary citizens. No longer would the study of historical cities be focused primarily on elites and political events, but they could be studied as sites in which social processes evolved over time. When it was launched in 1974, the SSHA offered an easy space for this group to share data and explore collaborations.

Urban history was an important part of the intellectual mix present at the first SSHA conference. Theodore Hershberg had recently launched at Penn the Philadelphia Social History Project (PSHP), a pioneering effort to computerize nineteenth-century manuscript census schedules so that they could then be used by anyone studying the population of Philadelphia. The PSHP drew together scholars from multiple

institutions around the theme of urban history and the use of quantitative methods to work collaboratively on the analysis of one city during the nineteenth century. Seven of its research associates and directors (Stuart Blumin, Michael Frisch, Larry Glasco, Clyde Griffen, Theodore Hershberg, Michael Katz, and Lynn Lees) had attended the Yale conference on nineteenth-century cities. Several of this group became SSHA activists and later contributed articles to *Social Science History*. Indeed, Ted Hershberg and Clyde Griffen cochaired the Social Structure and Social Mobility network.

The University of Pennsylvania's history department opened another pathway into the SSHA. In 1964, Lee Benson moved to Penn from Wayne State University to join a department that would become filled with social historians. By the early 1970s, Richard Dunn, chair of the history department, had published his pioneering study, *Sugar and Slaves*, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg had been hired to teach US women's history. When I arrived at Penn in January 1974, my colleagues were deep into the study of social groups, and my own work on Irish migrants in London fit right in. Al Rieber analyzed the Russian bureaucracy, and Nancy Farriss examined the Maya during the period of the Spanish conquest. Mike Zuckerman's study of New England towns in the eighteenth century, *Peaceable Kingdoms*, had recently appeared, and the American civilization department, which blended social and cultural history with the history of ideas, had an active faculty and lively set of graduate students well linked to the history department. The study of folklore, religion, and music was part of the terrain that they had marked out for study as part of the American identity. When planning the inaugural conference of the SSHA, Benson drew this group of colleagues and students into organizing the meeting. He had such confidence in his own ideas and approaches that he assumed all were eager and ready to help, and he would not take no for an answer. Many of us remember late evening or Saturday phone calls that summoned us to making greater efforts. Lee Cassanelli, an African historian from the University of Wisconsin known for his innovative work on Somali nomads, was appointed as cochair of the conference's program committee along with Robert Hartwell, a historian of China famous for creating a database of Tang era and Sung era biographies and genealogies. Graduate students were drafted to work on local arrangements and to help at the meetings.

The Penn history department in the 1970s brought together a set of scholars with broad professional interests who helped to run the networks that became fundamental to the SSHA as it grew during those years. Interdisciplinarity rather than tight boundaries ruled the day. Bruce Kuklick, historian of American philosophy and editor of the *American Quarterly*, organized one of the first of the SSHA subgroups, the History and Epistemology of the Sciences of Man. He brought to the first SSHA conference Quentin Skinner from Oxford, Mihailo Markovic from the University of Belgrade (and Penn), and Ernest Nagel from Columbia to discuss in a packed auditorium the "Prospects of a Scientific Social Science."² Demographers, some based in the Penn history department and others affiliated with population studies, had relatively high profiles and brought to the association not only a particular set of methods,

2 Bruce Kuklick (pers. comm., December 7, 2015).

but also questions that linked social structures, neighborhood organization, migration patterns, and kinship linkages. Robert Hartwell and Etienne van de Walle cochaired the Historical Demography and Economic History Network, while Tamara Hareven, soon to be based in Philadelphia, ran the Family History and Demography section. Anthropologists joined Lee Cassanelli's ethnohistory group.

Whatever the initial interests of the SSHA's founding fathers, a more general look around the association in the late 1970s shows a rather different picture in terms of both academic discipline and gender. Social historians were thick on the ground in the networks and on the programs, particularly active in the study of migration, community processes, labor movements, cities, family history, and demography. Moreover, women joined the group in significant numbers, and several headed networks or served on the editorial board. Sessions usually had women in the audience and, often, at the podium. At least in my memory, the atmosphere was one of gender neutrality, unlike that of AHA meetings at the time. SSHA conferences brought together an eclectic mix of graduate students and mostly younger academics, who relished the thought that they were escaping the iron fetters of their respective disciplines and working toward exciting intellectual syntheses of social science theory and historical methods. Louise Tilly and several of Chuck Tilly's students from Ann Arbor were an important part of the mix, active in sessions on French social structures, work and families, and comparative urban history. For those of us who only recently had moved from immersion in a PhD thesis into the classroom, the conference offered a rich smorgasbord of unfamiliar fare: famine in China, kinship in Eastern Europe, slave manumissions in Brazil, and a host of sessions on newish methods and important-sounding concepts. Andrew Abbott sees these years as a time of "disciplinary anarchy," and that term certainly fits my experience and those of my cohort who were actively working to broaden their own work (Abbott 1999). The informality of the early conferences encouraged the sampling approach, not only in research designs but also audience behavior. The meetings were small enough that anyone could hop between sessions and easily continue conversations over coffee with major scholars as well as aspiring youngsters.

At that time, social history SSHA-style meant not only gravitation toward statistical analyses of quantitative data but an interdisciplinary promiscuity and, to be fair, relative disregard for issues of compatibility and consistency. Individuals could (and did) hop among demographic calculations, ethnohistorical investigations, and quasi-Marxist analyses with a sense of excitement. The stress was on the topic rather than the method. From the vantage point of social history, families and neighborhoods, for example, were more than the sum of their parts. Therefore, imaginative and disciplinary leaps had to be made in order to work through the implications of different questions. One common denominator, however, was an enthusiasm for structures, which can be seen in titles of sessions and papers at the 1976 conference. Speakers talked about social classes, kinship structures, and family economies. Migration had "patterns" and bureaucracies had "forms." Ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic structures molded voting behavior. The analysis of processes and actions often took place within a grid formed by static categories that described a particular group or unit. Despite

the reductionism implied, qualitative and narrative explanations often leavened the linear accounts produced by the relatively simple quantitative methods then in use. Yet anthropologists and labor historians contributed some skepticism to discussions as did social historians' respect for the multiplicity of local experiences and communal differences. Moreover, possibilities embedded in topics discussed—particularly adolescence, life course, consumption, and urbanization—quickly expanded beyond the answers provided by simple distributions and correlations. Social historians at the SSHA not only listened to relatively narrow research reports but also they constantly engaged in debates. How ought we understand Herbert Gutman's arguments in "The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom" (SSH Editors 1979)? "Does the family have a history" (Tilly and Cohen 1982)? How should historians explain workers' protests (Hanagan and Stephenson 1980)? What is the role of gender in social science history? The pages of *Social Science History* during its first decade are filled with think-pieces about not only the best methods to be used but also questions about definitions and interconnections.

Although they championed interdisciplinarity and multiple research foci, the early presidents remained, in practice, resolutely focused on US political history. Nevertheless, from its first years, the SSHA membership expanded beyond and even outflanked the interests of its founders. The introduction of European and Asian examples, which permitted comparative analyses, came through social historians, demographers, and historical sociologists, particularly those who had studied with Chuck Tilly. The first years of *Social Science History* presented research on crime in imperial Germany, migration in Sweden, the Belgian population registers, and peasant stem families in Austria, to give only selected examples (Åkerman 1977; Gutmann and van de Walle 1978; McHale and Johnson 1976; Rebel 1978). Within a few years, an international crew of demographers interested in social history made an annual pilgrimage to the SSHA to measure their results against those studying different communities. Historians of migration did the same, making the SSHA the place to be if one wanted a quick update on the most recent results. The regular participation of British, Scandinavian, Dutch, Belgian, and French social scientists leavened the heavily US-centered focus of the meetings. The international flavor of the SSHA opened doors for those of us who later responded to the siren call of world history and broadly comparative research projects.

The strong interest in the international dimension of interdisciplinary social science gave rise in 1996 to the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC), organized by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, where several scholars active in the SSHA were based. Its internationalism has grown exponentially along with the size of its parent group, producing a trans-Atlantic flow of American scholars to its biannual meetings. Unlike the SSHA, the roots of the ESSHC in social history were obvious and acknowledged, and it has provided an additional space for scholars interested in social science history, particularly of a comparative sort, which has remained more popular in Europe than it has in the United States. The group might well have syphoned away from the SSHA some of its international participants, although there continues to be a healthy group of scholars who attend both meetings.

What began in rebellion against the rigidities of older styles of historical analysis has long since become part of a broad academic commitment in the United States to interdisciplinary work. The social sciences at the University of Pennsylvania, as at many other schools, developed a strong attachment to topical seminars and programs that cross disciplinary lines, some of which were organized and run by veterans of the early SSHA meetings. Over the years, the SSHA has broadened its original definition of interdisciplinarity through an acknowledgment of cultural studies, as well as the linguistic turn. But its early history continues to shape the association as does the influence of social historians. Indeed, its recent past presidents include several social historians who had strong ties to Chuck Tilly and the University of Michigan or to the Penn history department and Population Studies Group, people who have been active in the SSHA since the 1970s and early 1980s. Even if the SSHA's founders were not particularly interested in social history, its practitioners quickly infiltrated the group and moved into its center.

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