
From the Outside Looking In: The *Annales* School, the Non-Western World, and *Social Science History*

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During the 40 years since its founding, the Social Science History Association (SSHA) and its journal have attracted many scholars to the field of social science history, stimulating many new lines of research, but it has only had limited success in developing some of the more prominent new trends in the history field. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's early presence in the journal Social Science History did not stimulate much further work on the longue durée. In environmental history, transnational history, and studies of the non-Western world, the SSHA has not led the way. The article calls on members of the SSHA to think about creative responses to these new directions of inquiry.

Introduction

For this 40th-year anniversary issue of *Social Science History* I have been asked to reflect on the influence of the French *Annales* School on the practice of American social science history. I offer here only some personal comments, which are far from definitive, but they come from a sympathetically engaged participant at the margins of the social science history field, and a regular attendee of Social Science History Association (SSHA) meetings almost from its founding. I have so far discovered a few troubling phenomena, which have rather ominous implications for the future of the SSHA and its journal. By contrast, I also point to opportunities that may yet emerge from those phenomena for new paths of research.

First, let me congratulate the association and its journal for surviving for 40 years. The oldest scholarly associations encompass disciplines, such as the American Historical Association (founded in 1884) or the American Sociological Association (founded in 1905), or regions of study, such as the Association for Asian Studies (founded in 1956). Most of the associations that are neither disciplinary nor regional began in the 1970s and early 1980s. (The Economic History Association, founded in 1940, precedes them, but it could also count as a separate discipline as it is indeed in other national contexts.) We could mention, for example, the Berkshire conference on the history of women (1973), or the American Society for Environmental History (1982). When it comes to thematic journals, only a few surpass the 40-year history of *Social Science History*: the venerable *Past and Present* (1952), *Comparative Studies in Society in History* (1958), and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1969). So it ranks among the longest lasting and larger of this important group of scholarly associations. That alone is testimony to its vitality.

Long-term survival alone, however, is not a virtue in itself. It may only indicate the onset of a comfortable middle age, bringing complacency and a certain narrowing of ambitions. Most people who stay in the academic field get tenure by age 40;

many professors never publish another significant work beyond the one that got them tenure. It would be a shame for the SSHA to lose its vitality or to merely reiterate its most successful approaches without responding to newer developments in the fields of history and social science. The late Charles Tilly, one of our founders, who constantly explored new dimensions in his work, would be disappointed if we simply rested on our laurels. I fear that, despite our best intentions, we may have begun to do just that.

In this essay, I shall provide a few details about my own engagement with social science history, which began in 1976 in Ann Arbor. Also, I will briefly outline the career of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1929–), the leading living representative of one branch of the *Annales* School. Then I turn to an analysis of articles in the journal *Social Science History* and presentations at SSHA meetings to evaluate the influence of Le Roy Ladurie and his French colleagues on the field. I was discouraged to find that their influence was so small. I also note that other recent trends in the history profession, such as the rise of transnational history, environmental history, the impact of the rise of Asia, and digital history, have also not found very strong reflection in the SSHA. This makes me wonder whether the SSHA, for all its vigorous activity, has reached a rather complacent middle age, while newer and younger groups charge forward with greater energy. I conclude with a small call to arms to stimulate new developments in the SSHA to meet these methodological challenges.

At the Founding

I was almost present at the founding of SSHA, as I spent the year 1976 as a graduate student at the University of Michigan with Charles Tilly and his students, who set up their laboratory for the study of collective action in the famous Perry School. At that time, Tilly's group was compiling the data on collective action events in France and England that served as the basis for Tilly's later works, *The Contentious French* and *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834*. During that year, we also discussed the first draft of the manuscript that became his grand work on *Coercion, Capital, and European States, 990–1992* (Tilly 1986, 1990, 1995).

My own work focused on modern Chinese history, leading toward a dissertation topic on long-term agrarian change in the central Chinese province of Hunan from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. I came to this topic inspired by the French language, the methods of the *Annales* School, and Chairman Mao. In the 1970s, at the height of the Cultural Revolution in China, certain sects of the antiwar movement on the campus of Harvard and other places waved Mao's "Little Red Book" as a guide to revolutionary practice. These Maoist sects waged war, as, they thought, the chairman did, against those revisionist tendencies in the antiwar coalition led by Students for a Democratic Society, which supported negotiation with university authorities. After hearing ad nauseam the recitation of vague inspirational slogans such as "dare to struggle, dare to win," I thought that these cryptic maxims might make more sense in Chinese. So I decided to study the roots of the peasant movement in Mao Zedong's home province of Hunan.

Mao, in his famous essay written in 1927 on the rise of the peasant movement in Hunan, had predicted:

In a very short time, several hundred million peasants in China's central, southern, and northern provinces will rise like a tornado or a tempest—a force so extraordinarily swift and violent that no power, however, great, will be able to suppress it.

The peasants, of course, did not rise in Hunan in 1927, but ultimately, in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party took power claiming to lead a coalition of workers and peasants under the guidance of the chairman. It seemed worthwhile to investigate the deeper roots of the Hunan peasant movement, combining the *Annales longue durée* approach with the collective action perspectives of Tilly's group. My project ended up extending backward in time, as I followed the documentary trail through local gazetteers back to the sixteenth century, writing a *longue durée* history of agrarian change in Hunan Province. In the final analysis I never made it back to the twentieth century.

R. Bin Wong and I worked together at that time, with a common interest in social science history, collective action, and agrarian change. What attracted us to Tilly's group was the collective approach to gathering data about mass movements, the systematic use of sociological argument, and the bold ambition to write a kind of history that would not only inform but also provide guidance to the radical mass movements of the day.

Having read Braudel's *Méditerranée* intensively in French during an exhilarating summer, and having read many of the large French *thèse à lettres*, including those by Le Roy Ladurie, Goubert, and others, I set out to apply the French approach to the study of Chinese agrarian history (Braudel 1966; Goubert 1968; Le Roy Ladurie 1966). After spending the transformative year of 1976 with Tilly and his group, I have been inspired by the Perry School team and the "think, then drink" seminars at the home of Charles and Louise Tilly ever since.

Tilly's project on collective action was, of course, only one of several streams that flowed into the founding of the SSHA. It was, however, the one I knew best. But what has happened to social science history and the SSHA in the 40 years since that time? Of course, no one's youthful dreams ever turn out exactly as planned. I did complete my dissertation on agrarian Hunan, which became a book in 1987, but never did address the roots of Maoism or peasant movements (Perdue 1987). Others, like Elizabeth Perry, also inspired by the Tilly approach at University of Michigan, did that analysis very ably for a different region (Perry 1980). As I realized, the *Annales* School focus on the *longue durée* was valuable, but its efforts to kick the state out of the story of historical change failed when applied to China: We have now realized that we can never ignore the power of the Chinese bureaucracy (Kuhn 2002). And the Tilly school's powerful paradigm, based on quantitative data on individual events of collective action, although it produced many fascinating studies, never really took off in China, and later lost traction and interest in European history. The late Tony

Judt's vitriolic diatribe against the Tilly school, directed at just about all quantitative American social science history, portrayed it as a dangerous juggernaut that would drive out literate, narrative, political, and intellectual history (Judt 1979). But now, political and intellectual history still thrive, while quantitative studies of collective action seem to have declined.

The (Non)-History of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in *Social Science History*

The English translation of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's inaugural address at the Collège de France, originally delivered in 1973, was published in the second issue of *Social Science History* in 1977 (Le Roy Ladurie 1977). In that address he announced his methodology: "[T]he first analysis should be of economic movements and structures, of social relationships and more profoundly still of biological facts." And he described *ancien régime* France as "a practically motorless traditional society, or at least an extremely slow moving one" (ibid.: 116–17). From this base in the fundamental tenets of the *Annales* tradition, Le Roy Ladurie in his later work expanded over an astonishing variety of fields, including regional history, microhistory, political, and intellectual history, and he also pioneered the early history of climate (Le Roy Ladurie 1966, 1971, 1978, 1979). Now, at the age of 87, Le Roy Ladurie is still alive and well. He completed the third volume of his massive study of climatic history in 2004 (Le Roy Ladurie 2004). These three brilliant volumes investigate in extraordinary detail the precise interactions of climatic change, weather, population, economy, politics, and culture, decade by decade, from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries. As yet, none of these volumes, the most extraordinary contribution to environmental history of the modern era, have been translated into English. The only recent comparable work is Geoffrey Parker's synthesis of the crisis of the seventeenth century (Parker 2013).

Because of the publication of Le Roy Ladurie's address, and the clear compatibility between his outlook and that of social science history, I expected to find fairly frequent reference to him in *Social Science History*. But my hopes were dashed. There are only six citations to him in the journal, and most of them are to his most popular book, *Montaillou*. Citations to other studies by *Annales* School historians in *Social Science History* are also quite rare.

We certainly need more definitive analysis, but on a first pass, it seems that the actual influence of *Annales* School history on American social science history has been extremely small. The two schools seem to share many common orientations: They both call for systematic theorization and narrative about long-term trends in the human past; invoke larger structural explanations and longer temporal frameworks; rely extensively on quantitative evidence; and engage with related disciplines of economics, anthropology, and sociology. More traditional historians, such as Bernard Bailyn and Jack Hexter, fairly or unfairly, have attacked the *Annales* approach for excessive pretentiousness, the disregard of narrative, and the absence of human beings, but we might expect at least some sympathetic reference from social science historians

(Hexter 1972). It appears, however, that the *Annales* School is often honored without being read. Richard Steckel and those scholars collecting data on anthropometry, following an early study by Le Roy Ladurie, stand out as one exception (Steckel 2007). Almost the only historians who cite these authors' works are those who specialize in French history, and they are a small percentage of the total. As I will discuss in the following text, when it comes to Chinese history, or non-Western history in general, the story is even less encouraging.

Environmental, Non-Western and Transnational History in *Social Science History*

If the surprising absence of the European *Annales* School were not enough to indicate the narrowness of focus of social science historians, the lack of attention to the non-Western world is even more revealing. To be sure, I and other non-Western historians did not go to SSHA meetings to learn more about our region: We had the regional associations like the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) for that purpose. But we did hope for more interchange between us and the predominantly European- and American-oriented scholars, committed as we were to the idea that knowledge of Asia should transform inherited theories derived from the West, just as Western theories shaped our understandings of Asia.

Let me also mention two recent developments in the history field in which I have a particular interest: transnational and environmental history. Most scholars would agree that these two subfields represent important areas of research that have attracted large numbers of historians from all around the world. The series on environmental history published by Cambridge University Press now contains about 40 books, of which six discuss China. The American Society for Environmental History, founded in 1977, has held conferences regularly since 1982, and publishes the journal *Environmental History*.

Like non-Western history, environmental history holds the promise of expanding our conceptual worlds. Because nature knows no human boundaries, environmental history by its very nature aims to broaden the historian's horizons beyond a single nation-state (White 1999). Richard White has correctly launched a critique of the parochialism of American environmental historians, and at least some efforts to transcend national boundaries have occurred in recent years. David Armitage and Jo Guldi, in their recently published *History Manifesto*, have argued that a strong focus on environmental history will lead historians beyond the nation-state and toward the revival of the *longue durée* (Guldi and Armitage 2014). These new directions, they argue, will enhance the popularity of history and make it more relevant to contemporary issues.

Transnational history stresses the analysis of flows of people, cultures, and goods between different nation-states. It is a more specific research focus than the fields of "world" or "global" history, which can refer to almost anything. In terms of major recent works of transnational history we have the massive history of the nineteenth

TABLE 1. *Articles in Social Science History by region mentioned in title*

| Years | Volumes | US/Canada | Europe | Most | Method/Theory | Total |
|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------|------------|---------------|-------|
| 1976–86 | 1–10 | 97 (51.1%) | 57 (30.0%) | 15 (7.9%) | 21 (11.1%) | 190 |
| 1986–96 | 11–20 | 135.5 (58.2%) | 46.5 (20.0%) | 22 (9.4%) | 29 (12.4%) | 233 |
| 1996–2006 | 21–30 | 140.5 (18.1%) | 43.5 (18.1%) | 28 (11.7%) | 28 (11.7%) | 240 |

century by Jürgen Osterhammel; the planned six-volume series from Harvard University Press, edited by Akira Iriye and Jürgen Osterhammel, of which three volumes have been published; the Palgrave dictionary of transnational history; and important methodological discussions by Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier (Iriye 2013, 2014; Iriye and Saunier 2009; Osterhammel 2014; Perdue 2011; Reinhard 2015; Saunier 2013). Akira Iriye also edits a book series on this theme.

In the SSHA, the migration and the macrohistorical dynamics networks come closest to the spirit of transnational history. Migration is by definition a transnational subject, of course, and in the magisterial work of Dirk Hoerder, for example, it has become a central part of world history. By contrast, the predominant focus of these historians on flows of people from the developing world to the Euro-American world means that they only cover one small part of the transnational field (Hoerder 2011, 2012; Rosenberg 2012). And transnational history includes the flows of commodities, creatures, diseases, and ideas, as well as humans. The sponsors of the macrohistorical dynamics network have also organized panels embracing global historical change, ranging over Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

These new directions respond to growing uncertainty about how to write acceptable history in the coming years. It may well be, as Lynn Hunt argues, that the very concept of the “social” has lost its meaning in an era of globalization and environmental crisis: “If society is defined, as it was in the *International Encyclopedia of Social Science* in 1968, as ‘a relatively independent or self-sufficient population characterized by internal organization, territoriality, cultural distinctiveness and sexual recruitment,’ then globalization either erases society or at least points to the need for a new understanding of how it works” (Hunt 2014: 89). In that case, we no longer have a well-defined object for our study, and the theories that inspired us in the 1960s and 1970s no longer have much validity. At the very least, these issues deserve discussion, but one will find very little analysis of these trends in *Social Science History* or in the SSHA meetings.

In sum, in these key areas of new historical scholarship—the *longue durée*, environmental, and transnational history—the SSHA has not led the way. At best, it has followed with somewhat limited references after a lag of a number of years.

Table 1 confirms the overwhelming dominance of American and European topics in the titles of articles in *Social Science History*. I simply counted the nations mentioned in these titles as a rough guide to their regional focus. (At Yale, we have tried to replace the demeaning term *rest of world*, which described all of us non-Western historians,

TABLE 2. *Non-Western panels and papers at SSHA meetings*

| Year | Networks | Total Panels | Total Papers | % Non-West (panels/papers) |
|------|----------|--------------|--------------|-------------------------------|
| 2004 | 16 | 181 | 633 | 7.7/11 |
| 2014 | 18 | 249 | 872–996 | 6/13–15 |

with *most of world*, or Latin America Africa Asia [LAAA]. Europe includes Russia; *most* includes Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.) In fact, many of the titles with generic references, classified here as “method/theory,” when examined more closely, refer only to Euro-American sources. Let us challenge the all-too-common assumption that a theory based only on American sources has universal validity! When non-Western peoples constitute 85 percent of the world’s population, and 10 percent of the top 20 economies, social scientists who focus only on the Euro-American world exclude crucial data, and thereby risk invalidating any theory based on a limited sample size.

The table shows that 75 to 80 percent of articles in *Social Science History* cover only American and European topics. Historians of Europe and America make up two-thirds of all US history departments, so SSHA is even more Eurocentric (see Hunt 2014: 4). Table 2 shows that presentations at two sample SSHA meetings have an even worse bias. Over 10 years, the number of networks has increased, and so has the number of papers, but the percentage of non-Western topics remains at best around 10 to 15 percent, and it has not increased at all. Over the past 40 years, in the SSHA, I reluctantly conclude, there has been no trend toward internationalization of research as reflected in titles of presentations or subject matter. The SSHA, from its founding to the present day, still remains overwhelmingly American and European, both in its theories and its regions of study.

There are a few exceptions. The Eurasia project on Population and Family History, led by James Z. Lee and his colleagues, stands out as the foremost example of systematic cross-cultural comparison covering the Eurasian continent. Although the group has met annually at the SSHA, it has not actually published many of its results in *Social Science History*. It has directed its publications toward book monographs and demography journals (Bengtsson et al. 2004; Campbell 1997; Campbell and Lee 2008).

On a more optimistic note, in recent years things have begun to change slightly. A larger number of scholars from Asia have begun to present their work at SSHA. One of the most attractive features of the SSHA organization, the use of networks, does provide for innovation within the larger structure in a way that individual panel presentations do not. The macrohistorical dynamics network, codirected by myself, Dan Little, and James Z. Lee, has aimed to address topics of popular and academic interest, holding panel discussions of major books by Eiko Ikegami, Victor Lieberman,

Ian Morris, Thomas Piketty, and Joachim Radkau, among others. The papers for the Radkau and Lieberman panels were later published in *Social Science History* (Ikegami 2005; Lieberman 2003; Morris 2013; Piketty 2014; Radkau 2008).

The network on rural history changed its name to Rural, Agricultural, and Environmental in 2009, and since that time has begun to introduce more environmental panels. The Historical Geography network has also taken up some of the spirit of the *Annales* School and introduced newer digital techniques of geographic information system mapping. But these three networks are among the smaller ones in the association, and one wonders if they have had much impact on the association as a whole.

SSHA should also lead the way in guiding the new enthusiasm for the so-called Digital Humanities. I personally object to this term because it implies that a field can be organized simply around a methodology (computer analysis of texts), and it creates an artificial division between the humanities and social science. But it has aroused so much enthusiasm among university administrators that we may be stuck with it. We need to emphasize that social science historians have extensive experience with the use of computers from the earliest days, and many of the debates in the digital humanities replicate with uncanny precision the controversies of the early days of social history. However, only the Historical Geography network and a few other panels have addressed these issues. One early article in *Social Science History* used citation analysis, and Andrew Abbott's recent work on concordances is a welcome exception (Abbott 2013).

I do not mean these comments as an indictment of the well-intentioned membership of the SSHA. As we should know, institutions socialize their members, and institutional change is difficult. There is a Catch-22 phenomenon at work, in which scholars don't organize panels and write articles for institutions that do not promise an audience, while audiences go to the meetings and journals where they find what they already expect. Andrew Abbott has described this as a common phenomenon of fractal splitting in disciplines: new trends generate new journals and new groups often are not connected to older groups (Abbott 2001). Most of us focus our efforts on three types of meetings: the disciplinary association, regional studies associations, and one or more topical, methodological meetings. But these three sections of our academic brains often do not overlap very much. In one of these associations, non-Western historians dominate, in the other two they are a small minority.

Our network structure does offer a chance to link together related panels and to encourage thematic connections. The American Comparative Literature Association has taken this further, by creating separate seminar streams within the larger conference. Participants are expected to attend a series of seminars together in one thematic stream, under the supervision of directors of each theme. We do have many cosponsored panels and cross-linked panels under different networks. But the sluggish response of SSHA to new historical trends threatens to isolate us from larger movements in the historical profession. Self-defined social science historians are already a rather small minority within the field; we must do what we can to avoid reducing our impact even further.

As a modest proposal, I suggest that future program committees encourage at least one non-Western paper be included in every panel, and streams of panels be created

to guarantee continuous attendance by a designated group that registers for them in advance. One or two networks could create a regional or thematic focus, with a core group of participants, inviting others to attend. The Eurasia project has set the model for this kind of organization.

Therefore, I challenge all of us who support the SSHA and its mission to think more broadly, more globally, and more creatively; pay serious attention to scholars from the non-Western world and scholars working on non-Western topics; and respond to the rise of new historical trends with alacrity. Middle age does not have to be a time of rest; instead we can gather strength for greater leaps forward.

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