

# The “New” Social History, Local History, and Community Empowerment

*THE mounting fascination with the many facets of local history gave rise last spring to a conference entitled “A Flood of History.” Held on May 6, 7, and 8 at the Humboldt High School on St. Paul’s West Side, the gathering of residents, teachers, students, historians, and many others examined ethnic and labor history, methodology, and the social and cultural components that make up neighborhoods. Professor Clarke A. Chambers of the department of history and American studies at the University of Minnesota was one of the keynote speakers. A third-generation Minnesotan, he is the founder and director of the Social Welfare History Archives, the major United States center for records dealing with the history of social work, human services, and social reform. The following essay is adapted from his address to the West Side Conference on Local History entitled “Community Empowerment through Neighborhood History.”*

THE REVITALIZATION of community studies and local history has been one lively manifestation of the development, in recent decades, of a widespread engagement in “public history.” Professional historians have joined with concerned citizens in seeking out a relevant and usable past, rooted in all those primary social institutions that have been most proximate and immediate to human experience — family, church, workplace, and neighborhood. Genealogy persisted for many generations as an enterprise conducted by self-conscious custodians of family lore; that curiosity about ancestral lines and family tradition found urgent expression at an accelerated pace beginning in the 1960s, in the popular search for “roots.” The quest after family history, in turn, quickly broadened out to embrace those topics that composed the subject matter of what was soon identified in academia as a “new” social history — the history of blacks, immigrants, women, workers, and farmers. Here were studies compelled by a profound personal need to understand ties of family, gender, religion, ethnic group and race, and community, which led to a growing awareness that without such appreciation citizens were cut adrift and made vulnerable, made creatures of whim and caprice, made victims of forces beyond their comprehen-

sion and, therefore, beyond their control. The process of self-discovery constituted a first step toward self-identification and, by that act, toward self-determination. If persons were to shape their own lives, gain control over their own communities, make significant impact on the formulation of public policies, they had first to determine for themselves who they were and where they had come from. Culturally, psychologically, socially, citizens turned to their own diverse pasts for nourishment and courage. They found themselves through the telling of stories.<sup>1</sup>

The Central European novelist, Milan Kundera, has one of his characters declare, by way of justifying his passion for studying the past, that “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” In that sense, neighborhood history — the consciousness of experiences embedded in a particular place — may become a source of community empowerment.<sup>2</sup>

HISTORIANS of my generation — those who received their professional education in the years immediately following the (Second) Great War, many of whom were

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<sup>1</sup> The excitement engendered by the “new” social history is manifest in the proliferation of historiographic articles and critical essays provoked by these developments. Among the more useful summaries are: James A. Henretta, “Social History as Lived and Written,” in *American Historical Review*, 84:1293–1322 (December, 1979); Samuel P. Hays, “A Systematic Social History,” in George A. Billias and Gerald N. Grob, eds., *American History: Retrospect and Prospect*, 315–366 (New York, 1971); Eric J. Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society,” in *Daedalus*, 100:20–45 (Winter, 1971); articles in vol. 10, Winter, 1976, *Journal of Social History*; Allan J. Lichtman, “Introduction,” in Lichtman and Joan R. Challinor, eds., *Kin and Communities: Families in America*, 23–39 (Washington, D.C., 1979); Michael Kammen, “The Historian’s Vocation and the State of the Discipline,” and Peter N. Stearns, “Toward a Wider Vision: Trends in Social History,” in Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, 19–46, 205–230 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980); James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams, eds., *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History* (Nashville, Tenn., 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 3 (New York, 1981).

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subsidized by the G. I. bill — were trained up to accept, not uncritically to be sure, traditional interpretations of the American past. Progressive historiography held sway. Not all was right with the world; we had, after all, gone through the Great Depression, witnessed the emergence of totalitarian systems, engaged ourselves with others in efforts to bring down demonic imperialisms. We learned of genocide; we suffered through the anxieties engendered by atomic diplomacy and cold war; as apprentice scholars and teachers we responded to the pressures of McCarthyism and to the imposition of loyalty oaths. But most of us implicitly still believed that in America, at least, history had been benign. A free, open, liberal society, together with advancing standards of living and health, offered the best hope for human progress. The American past, so read, gave proof (and promise to come) of problems surmounted, tensions resolved, divisions reconciled. The histories we read, and began ourselves to write, were not naive, but they did tend to address traditional issues and to affirm the basic liberal values of the American story.

To such assured positions the tumultuous events of the 1960s and '70s were altogether upsetting. The civil rights movement, with its vision of an integrated society and its hope that decent persons and democratic, constitutional forces would overcome deeply ingrained habits of prejudice and discrimination, gave way to strategic separation and black power. Emerging women's movements told us that sexism and patriarchy were as ancient and as oppressive as racism. From ethnic groups that

came to take pride in the hyphen we learned that the pot had not melted us all into a blended citizenry. American Indians reminded us of ancient wrongs. During the "War on Poverty" we were confronted by the persistence of economic and racial injustices (the color of poverty was so often black) and were made to look at structural faults that divided society along jagged lines of class and culture. The counterculture, evidenced in the lives of our daughters and sons and students, called into question a whole range of genteel, bourgeois virtues — work, thrift, prudence, tidiness, respectability, temperance, self-control, privacy, and ambition. Suddenly we had also to recognize a planet plundered by heedless exploitation. The war in Southeast Asia provoked an anti-war coalition that cast doubt on assumptions about America's mission and the whole course of United States policy abroad. The Beatles broke upon the American scene in the winter of 1964, and their rock beat set a rhythm for the decade.

Even in the days of consensus we knew that each generation must rewrite its history. In the 1960s we began to attack that task: to address new issues, seek out new evidence, assay new interpretations. The enterprise proved both painful and exhilarating.<sup>3</sup>

WHAT came by the mid-1960s to be identified as a *new* labor history, a *new* urban history, a *new* local history, in short, a *new* social history, shared many assumptions and perceptions. Whatever the special subdivisions of attention and theme — blacks, women, immigrants, workers, families, youths, and children — all grew out of contemporary concerns and issues that were immediate and pressing. With special urgency, black history and women's history related to powerful social movements for liberation, generated high levels of energy and controversy, and provoked both loving and angry emotions. The involvement of the total person, *l'historien engagé* (there is no English equivalent as forceful as the French term), led to an intensity of academic enterprise that was enthusiastic precisely because it was compelled by these social movements. Scholars sought to tell the story of groups presumed to be inarticulate, outside the mainstream of American society and culture, oppressed and

<sup>3</sup> That major parts of the "new" social history represented responses to these events we take as a truism (by which term we also mean that they were fundamentally and vitally true). Space will not permit extensive modification of this simple observation, but Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., has argued persuasively that the consensus historians of the 1940s and 1950s and the conflict school of history that followed related *both* to contemporary conditions and to scholarly traditions internal to historical inquiry. Changing concepts of culture and modes of cultural analysis, he elaborates, made as crucial a difference in how we perceived the past as the events of that remarkable era. Berkhofer, "Clio and the Culture Concept: Some Impressions of a Changing Relationship in American Historiography," in *Social Science Quarterly*, 53:297-320 (September, 1972).

## *We knew that each generation must rewrite its history.*

dispossessed. As we proclaimed, it was to be history "from the bottom up."<sup>4</sup>

More significantly, perhaps, the new social history intentionally sought to set forth the roots, the temper, the tissue of group consciousness. Lawrence W. Levine expressed his mission frankly and explicitly in the first sentence of his book on black culture: "It is time for historians to expand their own consciousness by examining the consciousness of those they have hitherto ignored or neglected." And so his study focused on processes through which black men and women sustained systems of "self-pride and group cohesion" even under conditions of slavery. "Upon the hard rock of racial, social, and economic exploitation and injustice, black Americans forged and nurtured a culture; they formed and maintained kinship networks, made love, raised and socialized children, built a religion, and created a rich expressive culture."<sup>5</sup>

Is the focus on "consciousness" not also a chief distinguishing characteristic of much of the best historical writing on women, immigrants, and workers? One finds it in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's insistence that women in 19th-century America "did not form an isolated and oppressed subcategory in male society. Their letters and diaries indicate that women's sphere had an essential integrity and dignity that grew out of women's shared experiences and mutual affection." Thus also in Herbert G. Gutman's essays one finds affirmations of the complex ways in which historical consciousness, rooted in family, community, ethnic group, and in the shared experience of the workplace, made it possible for workers to shape cultural strategies for resisting the weight of industrialism and urbanism. "Suffering and plain poverty cut deeply into these ethnic working-class worlds," he admits. "In reconstructing their everyday texture there is no reason to neglect or idealize such suffering, but it is time to discard the notion that the large-scale uprooting and exploitative processes that accompanied industrialization caused little more than cultural breakdown and social anomie. Family, class and ethnic ties did not dissolve easily." In his analysis of the black family, Gutman affirms its "adaptive capacities" not simply to respond to an oppressive cultural environment but to create strong affective relationships that gave cohesion to extended kinship systems and ultimately to the creation of communities founded on shared experiences, cultural resiliency, the pride that consciousness can provide.<sup>6</sup>

As for works of immigrant history that began to proliferate in the mid-1960s, they did not necessarily take their cue from the polemical works of Michael Novak, but with varying degrees of intensity they reflected many of the assumptions that he brought together so boldly — the differences of national experiences evidenced less in "ideas" and "words" than in "affections and imaginations and historical experiences: in those concrete networks in which ideas and words are given concrete reverberation, rootage, and meaning." "*The new ethnicity*," he wrote in italics so that even the most cool and distant of Anglo-Americans would not miss the point, "is a form of historical consciousness."<sup>7</sup> To those politicians and ideologues who proclaimed the unique virtue of what they called "*The American Way of Life*," there was posed a counterview of a pluralistic America in which many different national cultures had special and continuing force. It was not simply a matter of special

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<sup>4</sup> The Winter, 1976, tenth anniversary issue of *Journal of Social History* was devoted to method, motive, philosophy, and historiography — and also had an advertisement for a T-shirt proclaiming "From the Bottom Up" that depicted in a few curved strokes the lower backside of what must be taken as a female torso. The new social history, among its other characteristics, could be irreverent (and sexist!). Although Jesse Lemisch is usually credited with inventing the designation of history "from the bottom up," the approach was a recurring theme in historical writing, of course, and the dean of Norwegian immigration history, Theodore C. Blegen, had earlier credited frontier historians with the idea of "studying American history from the bottom up rather than from the top down." Many of the characteristics of the nonquantitative new social history were evidenced in Blegen's work — the focus on the "usual" rather than the "uncommon"; the concern with the texture, structure, and style of culture; the exploitation of "near-at-hand" themes of family and migration and folkways; and the search for a past that would inform and move the present. Blegen, *Grass Roots History* (Minneapolis, 1947); the quoted material is on pages 172, vii, 5, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, ix, xi (New York, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in 19th Century America," in *Signs*, 1:1–29 (Autumn, 1975), especially page 9; Gutman, *Work Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History*, 41 (New York, 1977) and *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies*, xv, xviii (New York, 1971).

foods and recipes, of traditional dress and music and dances, although the polka, the schottische, and the waltz did indeed reflect different folk customs. More importantly, it was a matter of family structure, the value placed on kinship, traditions of mutual assistance manifested through ethnic fraternal and benevolent societies and through church sodalities, the diverse ways and styles that were reflected in worship, in the ways different ethnic groups related to God, to eternity, and to one's fellow women and men.

What Gerda Lerner observed of women's history might stand with equal poignancy and passion for scholars engaged in other branches of the new social history: "The recognition that we had been denied our history came . . . as a staggering flash of insight, which altered our consciousness irretrievably."<sup>8</sup>

Present need and perception were inextricably mingled with historical consciousness. The recognition that human beings are effectively controlled by systems of

self-perception they are led to take as real meant that the new consciousness constituted the first essential step to personal and group liberation.<sup>9</sup>

TO PUT IT another way: the new social history reflected *existential* concerns. It recognized, on the one hand, the weight of social power in setting severe limits to the range of choices open to oppressed groups and classes; on the other hand, it stressed the diverse strategies through which such groups were able to achieve larger measures of control over their daily lives and actively to shape customs, traditions, and institutions that enlarged the sphere within which individuals and groups could move toward self-determination. The new social history affirmed the significance of struggle, of decisions made, consequences accepted. The "powerless," the dispossessed, it was seen, were not entirely passive objects or the victims of circumstances imposed upon them; especially when group consciousness ran strong, they could exert countermeasures of resistance and could, responsibly, create instruments through which countercultural values and systems might prevail, even under extreme conditions of coercion, domination, and denial.

The implicit existential theme that coursed through much of the literature ran counter to the pragmatism that informed traditional liberal histories, which measured social movements programmatically and judged their significance by goals achieved. This is also to suggest that the new social history, as sound historical writing always had, had to address issues of social power, class structure, prevailing ideologies, and norms but could do so in a dialectic framework with appropriate notice of the "movers and shakers" and of the great mass of others, whose existence and authority traditional history had largely ignored.<sup>10</sup>

A major part of the new social history, whether implicit or explicit, covert or up front, proposed interpretations and evaluations that constituted essentially radical criticisms of the American past. What Rudolph Vecoli has written of ethnic history might apply with equal force to other divisions: "Once American history and society are viewed from a pluralistic perspective, inequities, abuses, and repressions spring into focus. The new ethnicity," he concluded, "is not simply a form of therapy to soothe bruised ethnic egos. Rather the formation of a new historical consciousness, as in the case of Black Americans, is the very basis for concerted

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<sup>8</sup> Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges," in *Feminist Studies*, 2:13 (Fall, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> There is an intriguing parallel to the emergence of a new historical consciousness in the 1960s in the initiation of "sociological consciousness" that arose "when the commonly accepted or authoritatively stated interpretations of society became shaky." In 19th-century France, for example, the rise of sociological systems of thought related to "the rapid transformations of modern society, the collapse of facades, the deflation of old creeds and the upsurge of frightening new forces on the social scene." Although the story was somewhat different in Germany and America, a common theme was the need to make sense of new forces and systems "against a background of rapid and profound social change." Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, 42 (Garden City, N.Y., 1963).

<sup>10</sup> English historian E. P. Thompson suggests that movements should not be judged alone by their apparent success or failure. He seeks to save obscure, deluded, defeated persons "from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties. Our only criterion of judgement should not be whether or not a man's actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves." *The Making of the English Working Class*, 12 (New York, 1966).



## *The new social history preferred pluralism to homogeneity.*

group action to correct traditional neglects and injuries.”<sup>11</sup>

The new social history preferred pluralism to homogeneity, conflict to consensus. If events of the 1960s and 1970s gave just and profound cause to question the wisdom and the objectivity of the “best and the brightest” (who gave us Vietnam and Watergate and essentially botched the “War on Poverty”), the new social history was understandably skeptical of established elites, of bureaucratization and centralization in the nation’s economic, political, and cultural life. Understandably, social historians often turned to local and regional history and to community studies as an appropriate locus for analysis, and in the process came increasingly to employ concepts and modes of inquiry borrowed from their sister disciplines of anthropology, demography, human geography, and urban studies.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly the affirmation of community and local history in the 1960s and 1970s derived from many of the same forces that compelled social history generally. It coincided with the emergence of what has been identified as “public” history — historical studies initiated by and for the citizenry generally. The revival also coincided with the 1966 passage of the National Historic Preservation Act and with the creation of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which reached out to the grassroots of America through its state-based programs. In Minnesota, especially, the engagement of lay and professional historians in public conferences and workshops focused on neighborhood, community, and regional history has been a notable expression of this renewed excitement. This has occurred simultaneously with accelerated and expanded efforts by county and state historical societies and museums to stimulate community history. The expansion of the programs of the Minnesota Historical Society, in times of general retrenchment, bears dramatic testimony to the vitality of these forces and to the imaginative and assertive leadership that the society has provided.

Neighborhood and community history, as part of this new social history, emphasized communal life as it was expressed in direct person-to-person, group-to-group relationships. It focused on the primacy of personal and intimate relations in the family and in local institutions. It examined (and celebrated) the diverse strategies

through which neighborhood groups were able to achieve larger measures of control over the quality and shape of their daily lives. Especially when these enterprises engaged the attention of citizens in the communities — high school and community college teachers and their students; pastors, priests, and rabbis; leaders of civic groups and community organizations; retired persons, whose memories of earlier days could be tapped; persons of all sorts and conditions — did local history offer strength, coherence, and continuity to other related efforts toward neighborhood empowerment.

Working together, neighbors learned that from combined efforts came strength to accomplish community goals — the preservation of a neighborhood school, the rerouting of a proposed new freeway so that a neighborhood would remain physically of a piece, the founding of a neighborhood consumer co-operative, or the location of halfway houses to serve the authentic needs of local citizens without cultural disruption. An essential part of community action was a widespread appreciation of the historical traditions and shared experiences that had defined and moved a particular neighborhood in earlier eras. In that sense historical consciousness became one source of empowerment. The struggle against power proved indeed to be a struggle of memory against forgetting.

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<sup>11</sup> Vecoli, “Louis Adamic and the Contemporary Search for Roots,” in *Ethnic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, p. 29–35 (Monash University, Clayton Victoria, Australia, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Of course, there was an ever-present risk of reading the present back into the past, of imposing present concerns on persons long dead, of refighting old battles. E. J. Hobsbawm, noting the polemical flaws of some labor history being written in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States in the 1960s, warned against a “leftwing version of antiquarianism.” See “Labor History and Ideology,” in *Journal of Social History*, 7:371–381 (Summer, 1974).

A definitive list of references bearing on recent developments in local, state, and regional history and in community studies would run longer than this entire essay; among those I have found most useful are: David A. Gerber, “Local and Community History: Some Cautionary Remarks on an Idea Whose Time Has Returned,” in *History Teacher*, 13:7–30 (November, 1979), and Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Community Studies, Urban History, and American Local History,” in Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us*, 270–291. I have also drawn from Harry C. Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Philadelphia, 1980).



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