

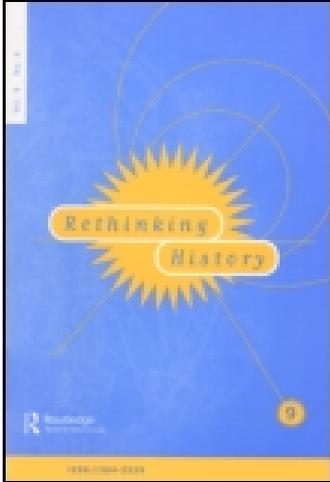
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Discourses in Local History

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Discourses in Local History

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Introduction

It is nearly half a century since **H.P.R. Finberg (1952)** set out what we would now call his 'mission statement' for the then recently established Department of English Local History at University College, Leicester:

The primary aim of the department, then, will be to foster, in our own minds and in the minds of any who look to us for guidance, a reasoned conception of local history, such as will set a standard of performance by which our own work and the work of others may be judged.

(Finberg 1952: 18)

The statement marked a potentially important change of direction for local history, because a 'reasoned conception of local history' demanded some **theoretical thinking about the nature and methods of the subject, something which Finberg** felt had been lacking in the work of earlier generations. **The purpose of this article is to review the developments of the past fifty years in British local history, to discuss the extent to which local historians have engaged in such reasoning about what Finberg called their 'modus operandi' and to outline the direction we think local history ought now to be taking in the light of much recent debate about the nature and practice of history.**

In the decades that followed Finberg's statement, local history has attracted **interest from all directions. But, as Jenkins (1991) has observed, historians generally have shown a marked reluctance to enquire into their own procedures, compared with colleagues working in neighbouring disciplines. It is our contention that this is especially true of local historians, who largely remain unreflexive about their subject. In addition, on the occasions when they do address theoretical issues, local historians have not usually engaged with meta-theory. In trying to answer their key question – 'What is local history?' – most continue to operate within seemingly self-evident parameters, failing to recognize that these are self-imposed academic constructions.**

In contrast, it is our intention here to show how local history has been studied by different groups of historians, and what this reveals about the epistemological and ideological bases from which they operate. In doing this, we will be looking both at those historians who explicitly address the

theoretical issues relating to their subject, and at those whose theoretical and **meta-theoretical** orientations remain implicit in their work but, nevertheless, inform and guide it. Instead of asking ‘What is local history?’, our question is: ‘How are local historians thinking, and why?’ Our question is phrased like this, because we contend that local historians, like all historians, construct rather than discover history. Therefore, we will begin by exploring through a process of **sceptical** historiographical analysis the various ways in which postwar generations of local historians have approached local history – how they have constructed the ‘stories’ they write, what motivates them and how they justify themselves.

Postwar trends in local history

In order to make some sense of what is happening in the vast field that we today call local history we will analyse the taken-for-granted categories into which similar groupings of local historians have been placed: academic, county and popular local historians – categories which, we contend, are linked to issues of theorization and professionalization.

Local historians who have chosen to engage with theory, have concentrated on three main areas of debate. First, the history of the subject itself, since it occupies the peculiar ground of both a discipline and a popular pursuit, shows it to be the province of both the academic and the amateur. The task of making it a respectable academic discipline whilst still encouraging its study as a pastime has created a number of tensions and contradictions, and is a central theme running through their analysis. Second, postwar academic local historians have wrestled with the definition of their *unit* of study, and its relationship to larger units like national history; and more recently with smaller ones like family history. Third, the relationship to other disciplines and newly created fields of study has been a major area of theoretical enquiry. Our analysis, therefore, begins with an examination of the academic and professional strands of local history-writing which have self-consciously addressed some of these issues.

Academiclocalhistory

The Leicester School and local history as a discipline

Academic local history is still dominated by the perspective developed by the Leicester School during the 1950s. The first university department of local history was established in 1947 at Leicester and the designation ‘Leicester

School' was popularized by **Asa Briggs** (1958). University of Leicester local historians were critical of what they called traditional local history, exemplified by dull parochial chronicles. What they identified as the characteristics and limitations of old-style local history are well-documented by both **Finberg** (1952) and his colleague **W.G. Hoskins** (1959).

Between them, these two historians provided us with an important historiographical critique of the work of previous local historians, which highlighted a number of issues. Ideologically, **Finberg** and **Hoskins** were opposed to the elitist conservative approach which underpinned much traditional local history – that is, they criticized the emphasis on the fortunes of armigerous families and the neglect of the common man. Methodologically, they objected to the antiquarian, fact-collecting tradition, the lack of order and method, and the overdependence on documentary sources. Philosophically, they criticized the lack of 'a central unifying theme', which would serve to distinguish local history as a discipline – 'local history per se', as **Finberg** called it.

In his 1952 lecture, **Finberg** charted the growth of 'professional' local historical studies in some universities, an uphill struggle which had begun in the early years of the century. Keen to forge a new and respectable academic discipline, **Finberg** proposed an immediate remedy for the inadequacies he had identified in traditional local history:

The business of the local historian, then, as I see it, is to re-enact in his own mind, and to portray for his readers, the Origin, **Growth**, Decline and Fall of a Local Community.

(**Finberg** 1952: 9)

For their focus of study, the Leicester School historians identified **pre-industrial** rural communities. These they characterized unproblematically as **self-evident** socio-geographical groupings of people with a high level of 'local consciousness', sadly, they thought, in decline in the modern industrial world.

Finberg hoped to enhance the status of local history by identifying it as a distinctive discipline. This, he thought, could partly be done by defining it as the study of a particular size of relatively self-contained socio-geographical unit, smaller than that studied by national historians. In the early days, **Finberg** and **Hoskins** were not too concerned about the question of defining the exact unit. For them, local communities, ranging in size from small parishes to counties, had a self-evident existence, and required only a cursory definition of boundary before one got on to the central task of charting their rise and fall. This view remains prevalent, if redefined, as we shall see later. More recently, however, the successor of **Finberg** and **Hoskins** at Leicester, **Phythian-Adams** (1987), has considered that the search for an analytical unit of optimum relative autonomy, somewhere between the family and the nation, is the *central* theoretical problem in local history today. His view is

that it should in most cases be the shire county, which he sees as usually having clearly defined geographical, administrative, familial and even human biological 'edges'.

Nonetheless, in defining the discipline of local history, **Finberg** had hedged his bets: local history was both the study of local communities 'per se' and 'national history **localised**'. In this latter conception of local history, **Finberg** argued that the professional local historian had to be well grounded in national history and its implications for local history. This was what chiefly distinguished him from the amateur and prevented an antiquarian approach (**Finberg** 1952: 10). The essential problem was to uncover the natural units of historical study and clarify their relationship with each other. There were obviously, he argued, national trends and themes. The definition of the unit of study here – the nation state – was considered to be self-evident, even though the existence of local and international influences was admitted. But then a problem remained: did local history simply illustrate what was going on nationally? Or, if local developments sometimes buck national trends, did this mean that national history was merely an aggregated total? This began to pose problems in relation to the definition of the discipline, to which we will return.

Thus, the Leicester School historians have consciously reflected on the nature of their activity. However, the central argument has concerned the definition of the subject in relation to the scope of investigations on the ground. This empirical orientation in matters seemingly theoretical is clearly apparent in a further strand in the skein of arguments about the definition of the discipline, when, for instance, **Hoskins** (1959) laid heavy emphasis on the importance of the distinctive research methods which would characterize the new discipline. He advocated especially the reading of clues in the landscape and urged students to get their feet wet doing fieldwork, rather than relying solely on historical documents.

Finally there was the question of the relationship with adjacent disciplines. While they were keen to establish local history as a discrete discipline, **Leicester School** emphasis on landscape, physical structures and spatial boundaries suggested to them natural interdisciplinary links with archaeology and geography. The emphasis was always on the relationship between man and environment. Indeed **Hoskins** went so far as to say:

I believe . . . that local history properly conceived and **practised** by professionally trained workers is . . . a science of Human Ecology.

(Hoskins, quoted in Phythian-Adams 1987: 3)

Thus developed the characteristic approach of the Leicester School: dogged empirical research and fieldwork, a concentration on the pre-industrial period, the celebration of the common man and the concept of community.

It remains dominant today and continues to inspire introductory books written for the popular and academic markets alike – Tiller (1992) is a recent example.

But **Finberg, Hoskins** and their successors in the Leicester School have not applied the same reflexive analysis to what they themselves do, as they had applied it in their historiographical account of traditional local historians and their work. **Finberg** and **Hoskins** had identified the ideological bias of traditional local history, but the effect of their new ‘unifying theme’ was merely to replace elite local history with what they considered to be a more acceptable democratic version which attempted to make ordinary people visible in an idealized vision of harmonious community life. Furthermore, this was, according to them, a dying way of life, and part of the role of the local historian was to chart and mourn its decline as society moved into a period of soulless industrialization. This essentially conservative ideological stance still underpins Leicester School empirical research, and is part of the explanation of its predominantly pre-industrial focus.

For the Leicester School, however, the attempt to create a discipline of local history based on a unit of study – the community – supported the conservative ideology of community itself. It was the one concept they dared not question. Hence, for example, we see the dismissive attitude used by Phythian-Adams (1991: xiv): ‘It matters not . . . whether such societies may be described in precise sociological terms as “communities”.’ To question this concept would be to question the very basis of Leicester School.

But the view that local history is a distinct discipline has been questioned by the work of other historians. For them local history might certainly offer different and distinctive opportunities for research, but it shares many of the same characteristics, and relationship to adjacent disciplines as other branches of history, and is thus a field of study rather than a discipline in its own right.

First, as **Asa Briggs** (1958) has noted, the Leicester School interest in rural communities and ‘loss of community’ resulted in a disengagement from much nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. This ground has largely been taken over by urban and other historians operating outside the Leicester School, as well as geographers and sociologists, who have used local history case studies for their several different purposes.

Second, other developments were taking place in different disciplines. Some early examples questioned taken-for-granted concepts such as community. In a socio-geographical context Glass’s (1948) and Smailes’s (1953) observations on Middlesbrough and community, might be seen as a pioneering study, along with Hillery’s (1955) examination of the definitions of community in rural sociology.

Some groups or individuals have politicized the study of local history, giving it an ideological and theoretical thrust quite alien to the Leicester

School. They are not the conservative national historians with whom **Finberg, Hoskins** and Phythian-Adams wrestled when trying to disentangle national and local history, but they pose equally difficult questions for the Leicester School approach. For example, Foster's (1974) Marxist analysis of **Oldham**, Northampton and South Shields to illustrate the rise of nineteenth-century capitalism and the development of class consciousness, seems almost diametrically opposed to the Leicester School. Or there is Jill Liddington's (1994) feminist historiographical account of successive representations of Anne Lister of Halifax, a nineteenth-century heiress to a small country estate and keeper of an extensive diary in which she also detailed her lesbian love affairs. Liddington's work does not fit at all with the conventional conservative conception of local or national history nor with conventional biography.

One problem raised by such studies is that their authors might well not regard themselves as engaged in local history at all, but as academic historians with a larger end in view. In other words, *local* in these examples operates at the level of the *case study* intended to point up some greater, and in the examples cited, radical lesson.

For most local historians, however, this has simply re-awakened Finberg's debate about the relationship between local and national history. Such local researches provide hypotheses and evidence for much national historical work, particularly in social and economic history. **Schurer** (1991) uses **Postan's** distinction between 'microcosmic' and 'microscopic' studies in an attempt to clarify the distinction. Microscopic studies are those confined to issues of local significance, while microcosmic studies consist of intensive analysis of a small area, but within a larger context. A.E. Wrigley's population studies are cited as a good example of such an approach (see Wrigley and Schofield 1981). Detailed longitudinal study of families in the village of Colyton, Devon, using the technique of family reconstitution, has provided insights into population change which may possibly be generalized for the whole country. This approach is now usually referred to as 'micro-history' (Skipp 1981) in an attempt to distinguish it from the traditional concerns of local historians.

However, local studies do not always enable the historian to generalize about national trends. Sometimes local studies highlight differences and contribute to what some historians are now conceptualizing as a national mosaic when aggregated. Hudson, for example, has argued that computer technology can make local and regional records more accessible to the national historian, and sees local history in the role of handmaiden:

Together these developments amount to a maturing of regional and local history so that it becomes an important source of new data and new analytical ideas

when considering major questions about social and economic change. And the status and importance of enquiry at these **disaggregated** levels can only **increase** alongside future innovation, and extension, of computer use.

(Hudson 1995: 220)

This has led to a reconceptualization of local history in some quarters. It has been suggested by some local historians that if local history is both illustrative of national historical trends, and a formative or modifying element of them, it can hardly exist as a discrete discipline, but is, rather, a field of study. Representative of the view that local history is not a special discipline in its own right is Victor Skipp. He addressed the relationship between local, national and international history and concluded that these concepts are misleading:

In the last resort, the boundaries of local history – or any other kind of history for that matter – are artificial. All history is one – like existence itself, a seamless garment.

(Skipp 1981: 328)

Community history

In recent years the work of the Local Population Studies Society and the Open University has led to the development of what Drake (1995) has called the discipline of community history. Acknowledging the popular interest in family history, academic community historians have attempted to integrate this popular interest with the disciplines of history and the social sciences. They have tried to introduce academic **rigour** by laying emphasis on the need to employ the scientific methods of clearly identifying aims, hypothesizing and using theoretical models against which the findings of local research might be set.

Apparent in this approach is the Open University's commitment to recognizing and valuing the students' knowledge and experience, its outreach mission and its concern with maintaining standards. The result is a subject which is deliberately constructed to be accessible to students. It has an interdisciplinary approach, but with its roots in demography: a 'people subject' which deals exclusively with communities however defined. Mills (1995) has contrasted this approach with what he sees as the more trivial or elitist concerns of traditional local historians.

Unlike Leicester School historians, community historians are prepared to explore the concept of community, yet, paradoxically, this leads them to a similar problem. Their project is to create another distinctive discipline, and thus they have to consider the concepts of community and community history

in order to set themselves apart, especially from academic local history of the Leicester School type. Finnegan and Pryce (1994), for example, have discussed the concept of community in detail and noted the different senses in which the term may be applied to different situations by differently motivated groups or individuals. However, at the end of their **deconstruction** no one usage is taken up. Instead, the various concepts of community act as an academic starting point in their skills-based approach to the subject, and they advise students to conduct small-scale research by testing out facets of the different definitions of the concept. Nonetheless, underlying this approach, an implicit and rather vague essentialist definition of community is still sometimes discernible, as when Drake (1995: 3) talks about ‘the essence of community’. We can, perhaps, see at work here a left-of-centre egalitarianism that wishes to encourage people who lack academic qualifications to participate in and acquire academic skills through a non-elitist process. Somehow they have to combine academic rigour with popular interest and their students’ various community identities. Further analysis of the phenomenological perspective on community is sidelined in favour of hands-on quantitative empirical research.

In short: to define their subject too closely, or explore it too critically, would be to alienate potential students and lose their constituency. Thus, academic community historians may see some of the problems, but do not engage with them at a meta-theoretical level.

County history

County history represents a strand with a longer pedigree than university local history. The term needs clarification. Two distinct groups can be identified: long-established history societies and the Victoria History of the Counties of England project.

County history societies began life in the nineteenth century as an antiquarian and scholarly response to growing interest in local history. They were not exclusively concerned with county history; some focused on the early history of the districts around industrializing towns and conurbations, and for this reason often added the new discipline of archaeology to their title also. They include societies such as the Essex Society for History and Archaeology, or the Halifax Antiquarian Society. Others were named after local worthies such as the Cheshire-based Chetham Society. Their *modus operandi* was to meet, to read papers and to publish articles in society magazines. Such articles usually took an antiquarian approach to local history, but reports of archaeological finds and excavations were often included as well. Most of these societies also saw their role as promoting scholarship by the publication

of archival material largely from the medieval and early modern periods either in their magazines or in a specially created series often called a 'record series'. One or two societies were formed for precisely this purpose – the Surtees Society of County Durham, for example, which published a great range of medieval and early modern material from monastic day books to early wills relating to the north of England.

Several of these societies remain in existence and continue to publish magazines. While their *modus operandi* may remain the same, the content of their magazines has changed a good deal in recent years. One can still find antiquarian local history between their covers, but one is as likely to find articles concerned with economic, political, archaeological or architectural history, relating to a particular region. This interest-led approach to local history among such societies provides a variety of perspectives on a region and resonates with the definition of local history given in the 1979 Blake Report (see below). But with an important proviso: that the work submitted is of a good, at times scholarly, academic standard which is both validated by and in turn strengthens the bloodline of a society descended from the previous century.

The Victoria County History (VCH) project, on the other hand, began life in 1899 in an attempt to produce 160 volumes in six years which would narrate the history of England county by county. Its aims were to produce 'a scholarly and comprehensive **encyclopaedia** of English local history in all periods, a repository of essential information' (quoted in Hey 1996: 473). Needless to say the initial target was not hit, and financial problems led to the project's being placed under the aegis of the Institute of Historical Research at London University in 1933. The VCH is ongoing in some parts of England, and if early volumes still contained a hint of antiquarianism, recent ones do not. Indeed, the concern now would seem to present a thoroughly professionalized image of local history.

To open a volume of the VCH produced since the Second World War is to be confronted by a considerable mustering of academic talent. What characterizes these more recent volumes (although it always has to some extent) is the use of a panel of experts, usually drawn from English universities, each with their own specialism – medieval history, Tudor history, **nineteenth-century** history and so on. In addition to this, experts from **neighbouring** disciplines such as archaeology and architectural history are co-opted to comment where appropriate. However, a truly interdisciplinary approach where the boundaries between the subject disciplines are dissolved is never adopted, and a no-nonsense traditionalism pervades the text. The narrative is rooted in rigorous professional research from sources awkward for the layman to use, either because they remain in national archive collections, often in London, or rely on works more readily accessible to the university academic. Even the annotation is in an outmoded academic form which

requires some prior knowledge of works on the part of the reader in order to understand or follow-up a source. Although since the 1960s matters have eased a little in this area, obscurantism still haunts the footnotes of the pages of the VCH, despite a stated aim of the original project being that these volumes would act as a source or starting point. This is not user-friendly local history, but by these means the VCH seeks to establish itself as the 'official summary of a county's history, with the Institute of Historical Research as the validating body.

Popular local history

In the postwar years there has also been a growing popular interest in local history. Local history societies and adult education classes, followed by oral history groups and memories groups – all, along with dedicated individuals, have contributed numerous representations of aspects of their past. Their concerns are quite different from those of academics who need to establish the respectability of their subject, or county historians with their concern for professionalism and standards. Neither do they tend to worry about how local history is defined. They just get on and do it.

Clearly identifiable is a liberal-minded tradition which sees local history as a vehicle for public education. This is apparent in the range of courses provided by local education authorities, colleges of further education, the **WEA** and similar organizations. This is combined with a desire, among interested bodies, to promote the subject itself. Such motivation underlay the establishment in 1948 of the National Standing Conference for Local History. One of their main contributions to the debate about local history came in the form of the Blake Report (1979), with the following remit:

To make an assessment of the pattern of interest, activity and of study, in local history in England and Wales; and to make recommendations for meeting any needs revealed by amateur and professional local historians for support and services.

(Blake Report 1979: 451)

The Blake Committee suggested that the distinctive character of English local history resulted from the tradition of the gentleman-amateur. The report emphasized the popular tradition and appeal of the subject, and its usefulness as a leisure pursuit, in a predicted future of shorter working hours and increasing leisure.

Acknowledging that there was no one acceptable definition of local history, the report simply proposed its own:

the study of man's past in relation to his locality; locality being determined by an individual's interests and experience.

(Blake Report 1979: 451)

This pragmatic definition suggested that the key concept – locality – could be arbitrarily defined by the researcher (the ‘individual’ referred to) in the field, displaying a tolerance of subjectivity and eclecticism which befitted their popularizing mission. By 1982 the Standing Conference had metamorphosed into the British Association for Local History (BALH): ‘Its purpose is to promote the advancement of public education through the study of local history’ and ‘to provide a range of services for local historians for the complementary purposes of academic study and leisure activity’ (BALH Annual Report for 1996). The BAHL publishes *The Local Historian* and *Local History News*.

There are strong links between BALH and Leicester School conceptualizations of the subject. Like the Leicester School, BALH champions the distinctive character and discipline of local history. The author of a recent article in *Local History News* (Crosby 1997), for example, has somewhat sarcastically pointed out that certain courses being offered by the universities are really local history, but dressed in more fashionable attire.

The affective role of local history is also frequently stressed, both by those who advocate the study of local history, and by those engaged in it. For example, as well as commenting on the opportunities which local history afforded for the development of research and analytical skills, the Blake Report emphasized the importance of the affective function of the subject in providing a sense of identity for people. Indeed, the key theme running through the report was that, since local history fulfilled people's social and psychological need for roots, it should, therefore, be encouraged as a popular activity.

However, although the immediate purpose of much popular local history may seem to be simply affective – excitement and interest about the past; imagination and nostalgia – we need, nevertheless, to look more closely at what lies behind this. Different interpretations of the past are inevitably the product of their writers' ideologies and political attitudes, and can create, or resonate with, emotions and attitudes in their readers, ranging from conservative to radical; they may be feelings of rootedness and continuity, or sadness and disillusion, bitterness and frustration, or determination to change things. Nostalgia, after all, can be a political attitude (see Hewison 1987, *The Heritage Industry*).

This brings us therefore to the third function of popular local history: the implicit or explicit political agenda. The more conservative and nostalgic versions of popular local history have many implicit links with the Leicester School. Liberal groups hope to foster a sense of active community involvement and ameliorating measures. However, the work of some other groups

has a more radical ideological underpinning. These groups have been designed by the tutors who led them and/or the organization in which they operated, for the political empowerment of the group. More radical groups use local history as a platform for Marxist or feminist re-interpretations of the past, to raise class, gender or ethnic consciousness and encourage a variety of political activities. As with academic local history, they also raise awkward questions about the relationship between oral history, working-class history, black history and so on, with local history. (See, for example, the oral history work of the Race Today Collective (1983) in *The Struggle of Asian Workers in Britain*.) Once again, they challenge conceptualizations of local history as a discipline.

Some issues for academic local history today

The above analysis of some of the various discourses which come under the umbrella of local history is not exhaustive, but it covers enough of the principal areas of development in postwar local history to enable us to embark upon an assessment of the key theoretical issues we need to face today. A distinction must be made at this point between academic local history and the pursuit of local history for leisure purposes – the family historians, memories groups or members of evening classes who want no more out of the subject than a greater knowledge of the places in which they live. Although all such parties may – however tangentially – contribute something to academic local history, their focus is the retailing of ‘facts’ and not a concern with the epistemological aspects of their chosen field of study. For the academic local historian matters are different. In this section of the paper we therefore move from critical analysis to a positional statement about where we think academic local history ought to be going, in terms of theoretical concerns.

First, although there is still continued anxiety among university local historians about how to achieve academic status as a discipline, they are largely failing to engage in the very debates which might lead to the enhanced status they seek. For example, the debate about the discipline of local history has been conducted with little reference to any philosophy of history, or the insights now available from the philosophy and sociology of knowledge. None of the protagonists has seriously examined the defining characteristics of disciplines. Instead, the argument has proceeded simply by cursorily identifying the supposed characteristics of local history and then asserting that these do or do not make the subject a discipline.

Second, they must recognize the extent to which meta-theoretical issues – in the sense of understanding their intellectual situation, and the genesis of the concepts employed – exist in their work. Such issues are an inevitable part

of our research, our interpretations and our construction of whatever is local history. Although there has been some engagement with theory, as we have outlined in the first section above, the real problem facing academic local historians today is not one of how the material may be interrogated, nor how the parameters by which one recovers communities are defined, nor even the definition of units of study. The central problem they need to face is the complete absence of a **meta-theoretical** approach, which would create an awareness of the paradigm within which all these problems are located. Our analysis of the various local history movements clearly reveals how each is situated within an ideological framework, ranging from unconscious conservatism to proactive radicalism. Yet discussion of situatedness does not form an integral part of the discipline as it exists on a professional level.

Below we outline what we consider to be three related philosophical issues which could form useful starting points for rethinking academic local history.

The positivist bias and its inadequacies

While **Finberg** and **Hoskins** were a seminal influence in establishing the academic respectability of local history, their *modus operandi* imposed limitations. One of their beliefs was that a discipline could somehow emerge from a unit of study, and another was that this unit was directly observable. These two tenets still continue to be uncritically accepted by many academic local historians. Nowhere is this more strikingly illustrated than in the work of Rogers:

the units of local history are not artificial ones, created by the scholar; rather they are organic units. . . . Whenever an identifiable community can be isolated, possessing a coherence and identity of its own, that community is a subject worthy of the attention of the historian. It is a 'significant unit'.

(Rogers 1977: 2)

Implicit in this positivist outlook is the view that there is a past – the history of any locale – which can be uncovered if only we apply the correct rules, go about logging it down in the right way, assembling sufficient data. Similarly when Phythian-Adams tried to rethink local history, by arguing for larger units of analysis, the same positivist approach remained evident: 'between the current rural and urban objects of the local historical pursuit, there surely lurk many other levels of regional societal reality that should be recoverable' (1987: 49). This outlook also explains their heavy emphasis on the range of sources available, and the techniques needed to decode them.

Although the above criticisms are directed at Leicester historians, community historians have a similarly positivist approach. Having selected

certain indicators of community-however defined – they then set about their investigations using a series of quantitative techniques. The emphasis, once again, is on sources and methods of uncovering the past.

However, our analysis of Finberg's project and our discussion of the emergence of competing approaches to local history begins to expose the inadequacies of the positivist position. It confirms what many philosophers of history are increasingly arguing: all historians – and local historians are no exception – are busy constructing the kind of history they want.

The challenge of relativism

In 1961 E.H. Carr, building on an emerging tradition of relativist thinking about history, argued that historians inevitably impose their own definitions and categories on what they observe, and that all history is in reality nothing more than successive interpretations by various historians, rather than the gradual uncovering of the past. However, although he acknowledged the possibility of different historical interpretations, Carr argued that his own view had some special validity, and therefore superiority over other history, since it was based on a Marxist-structuralist analysis of society, which could penetrate the false ideology of other versions of history. But, despite this limitation, his stress on history as interpretation crystallized and publicized a relativist view which has subsequently gained much ground.

In local history, **Finberg** and **Hoskins**, by their rejection of antiquarianism, have enabled *us* to see how local historians, like all historians, have been in the business of creating stories about the past. Their stories can be **deconstructed** by looking at the socio-historical context in which they were being told and at the motivations of the story-writers. But **Finberg** and his colleagues failed to acknowledge that such an approach did not just apply to the historians writing before them. It applies as much to the Leicester School and to all those local historians who have been working over the past fifty years. In other words, local historians must examine *themselves* and their *own* activities in this light. This necessitates a critical examination not only of the historical accounts which local historians write, but also of their definitions of what the subject of local history is itself about – discipline or not. In other words it demands a more theoretical and relativist turn of mind.

There are some elements of relativism apparent in the work of certain recent local historians, when they consider the nature of their subject. In defining local history, Skipp's (1981) ostensive model provides us with one of the nearest examples of a relativist analysis of the subject, in contrast to the positivist analysis of writers like Phythian-Adams (1987). To construct his model Skipp simply takes the material which appears on library shelves under

the heading of local history, and considers the range it encompasses. In other words, local history is whatever local historians, librarians and library users say it is. It may range from village to regional histories, from topographical description to political history, from antiquarianism to the rigorous analysis of micro-history and comparative studies. He does not, however, choose to go further into the processes which lead to the categorization of material as local history.

Again, **Schurer (1991)**, in 'The future for local history: boom or recession?', begins his paper with a brief but useful review of postwar theoretical debate about the discipline. However, this more relativist and reflexive discussion soon changes when he dismisses the increasing emphasis in local history on 'structure and society'. He then goes on to plead the cause of geographically-based theory to inform work in local history.

More recently postmodernist approaches to history in general have emerged, which take relativism much further. **In** particular, the philosophy of history propounded by Hayden White is being steadily popularized in England by writers like Jenkins (1991, 1995), and postmodern historians are more aware of the values, beliefs and attitudes which always exist in the work of all historians, including their own. For such postmodernists the *central* task of the historian to understand how the different discourses of historians arise and are maintained, and to compare and explain representations of the past.

Such a **sceptical** postmodernist approach to local history is clearly possible, as we have seen from the first part of this paper, and provides useful new insights about the limitations and potentialities of what we are doing. It is also obvious from the robust critique of modernism by relativists, that even the most sophisticated modernist empiricism is no longer a satisfactory option. But for some writers, ourselves included, historiographical analysis is not enough.

Most historians, especially those studying local history, are both committed to a particular viewpoint, and hope to engage with the past through the direct study of its traces. The textualism and relativism of postmodernists has been heavily criticized by modernist historians like Laurence Stone (1992) as arid philosophizing, far removed from 'real history'. But it is not only modernists like Stone who reject postmodernism. The enquiring local historian might turn instead to the new realist alternative.

The new realist alternative and its limitations

A philosophical base for local history, which would **fulfil** our desire to engage in 'real' history might, it could be argued, be found in the new realism which has emerged in both the sciences and social sciences (see, for example, Keat

and Urry 1982). Realists argue that both positivists and relativists are mistaken about the nature of the scientific enterprise, and that a realist approach can take account of the problems of objective knowledge, and the interpreting investigator. Compared with the natural sciences, of course, historians also face the additional problem of attempting to study the internal and therefore unobservable meanings and motivations of historical actors. This means that they cannot follow the positivist injunction to study only the observable. But, according to realists, it is also the case that natural science studies the unobservable. Historians therefore do not need to turn to the humanistic and relativist art of empathetic understanding, or be limited to the deconstructions of the postmodernists. And furthermore, in common with natural scientists, realist historians should be able to understand historical events in terms of underlying historical social structures, mechanisms and processes, which are also unobservable. This is because they can be posited from their effects.

One of the most publicized and initially compelling versions of realism in history is that provided by the work of Appleby *et al.* (1994) in the United States. Their aim is to replace the naive realism of the modernist with a practical realist approach to history, informed by the relativist critique of positivism. They draw on two strands of realist thinking. First, they argue that scientific realism can be used to counter the postmodernist view that historical texts, like literary texts, are arbitrary constructions. Scientific realism enables them to have confidence that the traces which come down to us are from a real past, and constrain the range of interpretations we can make. Second, they draw on the social realist tradition which asserts that invisible social forces and structures both hold together and circumscribe social interaction. They then proceed to argue that it is possible on this basis for historians to reconstruct an account of what really went on in the past. This can be achieved by integrating those perspectives and interpretations which are not mutually exclusive, provided they are underpinned by democratic values, creating a provisional workable truth communicable within an improvable society. Given the impossibility of the laboratory method, truth claims would be based on open research, and subjected to peer review, a process they characterize as democratic history.

However, a number of problems with realism soon begin to emerge. One issue that practical realism tries to address is the existence of the external historical world and its relationship with the interpreter. Now, of course, we can all agree that *traces* of the past objectively exist; one would have to be a solipsist to believe otherwise. Indeed, it is a common misinterpretation of the relativist position to assert that relativists believe that nothing has a real existence. (In other words, while you may never be able to get into the mind of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, you can fall to your death from the ruins of his castle at Middleham, North Yorkshire.) However, in order to render

history susceptible to scientific realist analysis, **Appleby** et al. argue that a new definition of historical objectivity is required: it is to be ‘an interactive relationship between an enquiring subject and an external object’ (p. 261). External objects in this context can range from a physical object like a building to the written or taped comments of an observer of events. They further recognize that historical truths cannot rely on ‘external validation’ (p. 259), but will depend on coherently argued interpretations of the internal dispositions of historical actors, supported by whatever evidence is available and validated by a community of critical practitioners.

However, in adopting a scientific model of enquiry, **Appleby et al.’s** use of the term ‘external object’ collapses what we consider to be important distinctions between passive physical trace, active contemporary witness/interpreter and enquiring historians. What **Appleby et al.** are actually dealing with is *our understanding* of some past ‘reality’, both as it was experienced by various historical actors, and as we, as expert historians, interpret it. Whilst any historical trace serves as a text for the analysis of meanings and interpretations which people in the past held, a crude subject-object distinction masks both the different orders of source and the nature of the interplay between researcher and source. The simplistic categorization of enquiring subject and external object fails to reflect the interpretative hall of mirrors that the historian enters when embarking on research. Furthermore, it then leads **Appleby et al.** to argue that it is possible to have a longstanding definitive version of events.

This definitive version of events is seen as some sort of superior, albeit provisional, truth revealed as historical research proceeds, which has a direct correspondence with external reality. Their justification for this position is that it is rooted in pragmatism:

an epistemological position **that claims that people’s perceptions have some correspondence with that world, and that standards, even though they are historical products, can be made to discriminate between valid and invalid assertions** [p. 283].

The first problem here is with the idea of truth. If they mean to suggest that historical accounts can have a correspondence with the real world, then they are wrong. Such statements are not verifiable. First, it is not possible to get back to the past; second, there is too much going on for anyone to do more than selectively interpret; and third, the past consists of situations and events which leave traces, but historical accounts are always accounts (see Jenkins 1991: 11). Moreover, the verification of truth claims through the democratic process of peer review is no guarantor of superiority or correctness, but rather an appeal to authority. An historical expert’s interpretation is still just that: an interpretation. Historiography has been cruel to us in revealing past

generations' intellectual predilections. Neither are the interpretations of the historical experts of our own age any more privileged, despite the assertions of the practical realists. Just as there are always only ever different and partial interpretations of the present, so there must similarly only ever be different and partial interpretations of the past.

Practical realists not only 'seek to understand the internal dispositions of historical actors' (p. 259), but also aim to 'recreate social structures in order to interpret the human activity described in the records' (p. 306). The final limitation of the practical realist argument that we wish to discuss relates to the possibility that we can create models of social structure that correspond with the real external historical world, and are not merely hermeneutic devices, in the same way that scientific realists believe that their theoretical models correspond with the physical world (see Lakatos and Musgrave 1970). This is a debate that continues to exercise many minds in the social sciences. For practical realist historians to assume that the issue is resolved, and that the definitive historical social structure of any period can be 'recreated', is not only a premature conclusion, but, unless we are very careful, will take us back to the realm of modernist empiricism.

To our minds then, practical realism presents, as yet, too many problems to provide us with any firm foundations for scientific historical truth claims which would satisfy the needs of those studying local history.

Conclusion: a plea for reflexive and situated local history

In order to identify the above issues, we have made use of modes of analysis which are now increasingly accepted in the social sciences, and have been available to mainstream historians for upwards of a generation, although not widely employed by them, and not employed at all by local historians. However, it has not been our purpose to engage at any great length in the debate between modernists, relativists, postmodernists and new realists. We have merely tried to clear some ground and open up the view, so that we can see more clearly the key academic problems which face local history today.

Having said that one might well ask, 'What problems?', for in one sense local history does not seem to be suffering from the perceived crisis besetting mainstream history (see Cannadine 1987). Indeed, at a popular level, the subject is one of the largest growth areas of historical endeavour. The nature of local history is not contested by most practitioners; and philosophizing, if considered at all, seems an irrelevance when there is so much else to be getting on **with**. It is perhaps this very popularity and groundswell of success that has led to the lack of a critical and unproblematized approach to the subject: a fixation with units of study seems to be the only theoretical debate. Come

to that, what are the great debates in local history? – a further indication of a lack of self-examination.

But this ‘heads down, hands on’ attitude simply will not do, for there are some knotty epistemological problems which need to be confronted. Pre-eminent amongst them is the need to understand that the debates current in the new history concern local history just as much. In other words, local history, however defined, is not a special and separate kind of discipline with its own rules which set it aside from mainstream history, but an activity whereby generations of historians have and continue to construct narratives about the past. Thus, as we have written above, Hoskins and Finberg were able to uncover the antiquarian basis of much nineteenth-century local history; they themselves, we have suggested, placed a liberal/romantic perspective on the pre-industrial past which they constructed in their works and which continues to inspire the works of Leicester School; the community history project seeks to impart research skills through the ‘reconstruction’ of loosely defined conceptions of community; and so on. What all these representations of the past have in common is the construction of narratives which deal with a relatively small geographical area. What makes them different from one another, however, is not their identification with a certain size of unit of study, but their location in an ideology: they are situated.

It is the recognition of this situatedness which is the most pressing problem in academic local history today. Pressing because upon it is predicated the whole meta-theoretical process which is absent from all local history. At this stage we can therefore do no more than argue for more active engagement with the new history, and a greater willingness to examine meta-theoretical issues. Thus, *reflexive* situatedness becomes essential for any real development in the study of other theoretical aspects of local history. It is not enough to have muddy boots from standing in a field: local historians need to realize that they also stand somewhere intellectually.

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