

BOOK REVIEWS

GENERAL

Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History. Edited by OLIVIER ZUNZ. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985. Figure. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 334. Cloth. \$29.00. Paper. \$9.95.

The primary aim of the present set of chapters by five scholars working in different cultural-geographical macroregions is to give a worldwide assessment of the social history movement so prominent in recent writings and, if possible, to make recommendations which would lend it coherence and direction. At the heart of the volume is the chapter by sociologist-historian Charles Tilly on the European field, which not only goes further than the other contributions in putting a finger on crucial methodological issues, but makes a general prescription that the mission of social historians is to tie their newly discovered patterns and realities to the rise of capitalism and the nation-state. The basic idea of the volume seems to be that the other authors will use this (in my opinion, misguided) program as the framework for discussion of scholarship in their respective areas. In fact, however, some of the contributors resist the scheme strongly and successfully. David Cohen, the Africanist, correctly says that social history has not been a separate endeavor in African historical studies and instead analyzes (as he should) trends in the field generally; he also expresses dissatisfaction with the imposition of a myriad of European concepts on African history. The North Americanist, Olivier Zunz, also follows his own path, to a large extent, delivering along the way the resoundingly apt statement that historians should now free themselves of the theories of other scholars and begin generating their own theories. To me, the highlight of the book is the chapter on modern Chinese history by William Rowe, who demurs for his field from social history as a distinct enterprise; takes joy in showing the progressive weakening rather than strengthening of the state in China; politely but mercilessly attacks the hopeless European ideas that have been thrown in China's direction from "modernization" to "hydraulic civilization" to Eric Wolf's "closed corporate communities," which apparently have no more reality in China than they ever did in Latin America; and finishes by denying the appropriateness of capitalism as an analytical framework.

Of most direct topical interest here is the Latin Americanist contribution, "Between Global Process and Local Knowledge: An Inquiry into Early Latin American Social History, 1500–1900," by William Taylor. Taylor has adopted a

very different procedure than the other contributors. He declines to survey the field, concentrating instead on Tilly's program of capitalism and the state. Much of Taylor's essay is devoted to raking the dependency school over the coals once more, and to advocating greater concentration on the role of the state and formal institutions, which leads to prolonged discussion of his present research projects on parish priests and popular religion. I am delighted to see the *dependentistas* get what they generally deserve, and am equally glad to hear of the promising ongoing research of a scholar whose work I have long admired (although it is disconcerting to see a developed and sophisticated field, the colonial period, lumped together with a neglected, nascent one based on different sources, the nineteenth century).

The problem is that the reader of the entire volume is left with the impression that very little social history has been done on early Latin America and, moreover, to judge by some brief remarks Taylor makes, that what has been done is mainly descriptive and not connected with larger issues. Actually, variants of social history have been dominant in the international scholarship on Latin America in the colonial period for 20 years, and the studies in this vein have thrown light on a great many large and long-term issues (e.g., the question of a seventeenth-century depression), including political matters (e.g., *encomienda* legislation, the substance of sixteenth-century politics). As to such studies being descriptive, that word has become little more than a label for work whose significance one is not prepared to concede.

For a true characterization of mainline work in early Latin American social history, a brief discussion of method is needed. As a whole, the Zunz volume drastically neglects methodology and sources, without which the variation in the regional fields is incomprehensible. For the most part, the authors understandably presume knowledge of the nature of their particular sources. As mentioned above, the one contributor who does have telling things to say on method is Tilly. He has absolutely hit the nail on the head by pointing out that the insights of a given scholarly investigation are a function of how many cases are inspected in how much detail. Peak utility combines many cases with much detail, but it also involves peak difficulty. What Tilly does not make clear is that European history has concentrated on fleshed-out portrayals of individual cases and skeletal, aggregate statistics of numerous cases, while rarely adopting the procedure of looking at a moderate number of cases in as much detail as possible. For reasons that doubtless have more to do with the nature of the sources than anything else, recent historians of early Latin America have standardly done precisely what the Europeanists have not: practicing career-pattern history and close organizational history, changing the very categories of analysis, reconstructing unsuspected processes, and contradicting the public pronouncements of contemporary officials and interested parties. Such work is the opposite of "descriptive" in the sense of mechanically detailing the component parts of a readily visible aggregation; it not only changes

the general picture for Latin America, offering results as inherently generalizable as, for example, linguistic research, but it provides a model not fully realized in other fields and one which European historians might well (and eventually must) emulate, even though their records do not lead in that direction as clearly as Spanish American documentation.

Taylor is right that Latin American social history was not an offshoot of European social history, but not at all right that the conclusion should be to follow the lead of the Europeanists. European, North American, and Latin American history converged on something recognizable as “social history” at about the same time primarily because they began as fully professional enterprises at about the same time and gradually worked through records which, though greatly varying, were within a single broader tradition. Each field is quasiautonomous; each should be inspected by the others for sources of enlightenment, but no one of them should be simply subjected to another. One thing that emerges from the present volume is the peculiar disadvantage under which North American history has labored, that of being practiced almost exclusively by natives, who, in one way or another, are all wrapped up in the American dream; European history has more perspective, being done by many nationals concerning many nations, yet after all mainly by Europeans. Latin American history has the advantage of being written by a truly balanced set of inhabitants of three continents.

Ultimately, my response to the volume’s attempt to prescribe for social historians is to reply that the category “social history” is no longer generally valid. In certain subfields, the term still has much meaning on the level of conversational usage. Thus, in early Latin American history it means specifically work which features fleshed out portraits of actual individuals and organizations (a genre totally ignored in Taylor’s chapter), and stands in contradistinction to demography; but the sense of the expression varies from field to field. The designation was originally justified in that widespread dissatisfaction with political/administrative/elitist/military/diplomatic history took the form of an urgent feeling that more people, indeed the entire population, should be included. Far more important, however, was the need to go beyond celebrating events as such and accepting the actors’ conscious rationale for their actions. The pursuit of a deeper truth has by now led scholars in a vast number of directions, investigating all the concerns of the humanities and the social sciences in time depth. To try to prescribe for such a groundswell is illusory. That the true or analytical historians should at some point seek to articulate the broader meaning of their work is not only necessary, it is inevitable, and it is already coming to pass. But to confine the process within the framework of nineteenth-century historical clichés such as the “nation-state” and “capitalism” is neither feasible nor desirable.

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