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Social History in Norway: Evolution and professionalization

The rise of the new social history from around 1970 was more of an evolution than a revolution, because the social aspect of history writing had been important for decades. What was new, however, was the conscious application of new terms, theories, and methods, partly borrowed from the social sciences, and the introduction of “social history” as a rallying point. The article tries to show that professionalization, and especially its specialization aspect, was at the core of the new social history.

In a lecture in 1964 the prominent Norwegian historian Andreas Holmsen (1906-1989) commented on the state of the country’s historiography. Holmsen was a historian of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, known for his structural approach dealing with economic and settlement history, not unlike what was published in the *Annales*. In the lecture, he compared his way of doing history with that of another prominent historian, his contemporary and adversary Jens Arup Seip (1905-1992). Seip was trained as a historian of the Middle Ages, but later turned to studying the 19th century. Previously favorable to the social sciences, he had turned against it (at least as an inspiration to history)¹, and now favored studying political history and the struggle for power. In the 1960s, Holmsen thought Seip to be by far the most influential of the two, or indeed compared to anyone, in the Norwegian history discipline. Political history was dominant. Seip had won, Holmsen wrote, and he had lost.²

Only a few years later, however, one may safely conclude that Holmsen had won. From the early 1970s social history (or the new social history, or simply the new history)³ was on

¹ Jens Arup Seip, *Problemer og metode i historieforskningen* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1983). See also Jan Eivind Myhre, ‘Historikeren og sosiologen: en nærvøs romanse’, *Nytt norsk tidsskrift* 4/1999.

² Holmsen’s lecture was printed in 1966. Andreas Holmsen, ‘Menneske, mønster og masse i historien’, *Historisk tidsskrift* 1966, 330-339. All translations from the Norwegian by J. E. M.

³ This new kind of history, characterized by topics as well as methods, has many names. One may e.g. speak of the “new economic history”. See e.g. Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives in Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Jan Eivind Myhre ‘Unification in the Age of Fragmentation’, Jan Eivind Myhre (ed.),

nearly everybody's lips, and books, articles and not least ph.d. and master's theses poured out, many declaring explicitly their genre as "social history", which was the favored term in Norway. Interestingly, the chronological center of attention was the century of Seip's research, the 19th, with its far-reaching social changes. Perhaps equally interesting was Seip's own reaction. He found much of the new work on social history fruitful, and even incorporated some of it in his masterly overview of Norwegian history 1851-1884, published in 1981.⁴

All in all, the surge of new social history was rather well received in Norway, by the younger as well as the older generation of historians. The reaction may be contrasted to its reception in other countries, like the United States, Britain or Germany where adherents to the "old" history certainly put up a fight.⁵ The young Norwegian historians did not "defer to the elders of the tribe", as one of Tony Becher's informers told him often was the case⁶, nor did the Norwegian elders show a condescending attitude. To explain the Norwegian case, one ought to compare it with that of other countries. The impetus to a Norwegian new social history came from both within and from outside; one therefore one should to contrast the domestic prerequisites to foreign inspiration, for example from the US, Britain, Germany, France or the rest of Scandinavia. What was the new social history about? Was history inundated with methods and theories from the burgeoning social sciences? Was the new social history most of all a political project where the oppressed in history were given a voice as well as ammunition for creating a better future? Or was it an epistemic revolution, a fundamentally new concept of what history is all about? All three explanations most likely played a part.

The new social history in Norway: Three generations

There are good arguments in favor of the thesis that the new social history, whose introduction in Norway we may date to about 1970, in this country came about as an evolution rather than a

Boundaries of History (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2015), 25-54. I will throughout use the term "the new social history" to characterize the new tendencies from around 1960 onwards (there was an older social history).

⁴ Jens Arup Seip, *Utsikt over Norges historie, vol II 1851-1884* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1981).

⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, Mass, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1987); Jan Eivind Myhre, 'Social history', William H. Hubbard, Jan Eivind Myhre, Trond Nordby, and Sølvi Sogner (eds), *Making a Historical Culture. Historiography in Norway* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995).

⁶ Becher studied Britain and the USA. Tony Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories. Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines* (Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1989), 60.

revolution. The new social history met with little resistance because there was an inheritance to build on. It was, in fact, never referred to as the “new” social history.

There were, to begin with, the grandfathers of social history, *avant la lettre*. The writings Halvdan Koht (1873-1965) and Edvard Bull the elder (1881-1932) paved the way with a broad conception of what history was about. There was a tradition from the interwar years onwards of doing agricultural history and settlement history with the peasant/farmer as a pivotal figure. Asgaut Steinnes, Sigvald Hasund, Arne Odd Johnsen and Andreas Holmsen were crucial names. Johan Schreiner and Wilhelm Keilhau widened the field to other areas. The towering figure, the great narrator in Norwegian historiography, was Sverre Steen (1898-1983), with his sweeping description of Norwegian society as a whole from the 16th to the 20th centuries. His book on pre-industrial Norwegian society in the first half of the 19th century (*Det gamle samfunn*, The old society or The old regime) became required reading for later social historians.⁷ The reasons for this interest in the wider societal history are not hard to find. While national identity in many countries (like Sweden) rested with kings and warriors, in Norway it rested with its people, since the country for many centuries was ruled by foreign masters. The continuity in Norwegian history lay with peasants, not dynasties.⁸

Then there were an aunt and some uncles. Ingrid Semmingsen’s two volumes about the emigration to America, Knut Mykland’s history of the city of Trondheim in the 19th century, Dagfinn Mannsåker’s thesis on the recruitment to the Norwegian clergy, and the writings of the methodologist and historiographer Ottar Dahl in the 1940s and 1950s were some of the hallmarks. Mannsåker and (especially) Dahl were also theoretically well informed. They were also the first to employ the term “social history”, Mannsåker in the subtitle of his book, Dahl in the title of his review of the book. Dahl’s theoretical article “Noen teoretiske problemer i sosialhistorien” (Some theoretical problems in social history) from 1955 became a starting point for future social historians. Social history, he states, “will attempt to treat all relevant aspect of

⁷ Sverre Steen, *Det gamle samfunn* (Oslo: Cappelen, 1957). See also Myhre, *Social History*.

⁸ From an independent kingdom during the Middle Ages, Norway went into union with Denmark, in a clearly subordinate position, lasting until 1814. In the personal union with Sweden 1814-1905, Norway had its own institutions, while the king was Swedish.

human social life in context, and especially the way it manifests itself in larger units or ‘social groups’ and in their mutual relationship.”⁹

Political history, however, may still be considered a backbone of Norwegian historiography during the early post-war years, even strengthening its position in the 1960s. The influence of Seip was strongly felt. His students Alf Kaartvedt and Rolf Danielsen, then professors at the University of Bergen, wrote the history of the Norwegian parliament for its 150th anniversary in 1964. Of Sverre Steen’s seven volumes of Norwegian history in the decades following (semi-)independence, six dealt mainly with political history. Also the two historians below proclaimed as the fathers of the new social history, Edvard Bull the younger (1914-1986) and Sivert Langholm (b 1927) kept quiet about social history in the sixties. Bull’s book from 1958 on industrial workers during the industrial breakthrough received modest attention until the 1970s, when it was reprinted twice.¹⁰ In an anthology from 1970 commemorating the first hundred years of *Historisk tidsskrift*, Steen and Semmingsen were represented by articles on political history.¹¹ After having published a book on the creation of the Norwegian industrial working class in 1958 (another starting point for the young new social historians) Bull turned to African history, and Langholm wrote a thesis within political history with Seip as his supervisor. This was the background for Holmsen’s lament: “It is political history – the history of political thoughts and actions – which is the subject of historians harbouring full self-respect”.¹² A change, however, was on its way.

In 1970 a conference was held celebrating The Norwegian historical association’s hundredth anniversary, featuring keynote talks by Seip, Bull and Langholm on the future of the history discipline.¹³ Seip pleaded for political history as the central element in the discipline, on a later occasion with the argument that politics was the key to the wider historical experience, and that laws, adopted by politicians, governed the society as a whole. Tellingly, his label on Norwegian society during most of the 19th century was *embetsmannsstaten*, the civil servant state, named after its ruling class. Bull, in his contribution to Seip’s *Festschrift*, characterized

⁹ Dagfinn Mannsåker, *Det norske presteskapet i det 19. hundreåret* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1954); Ottar Dahl, ‘Noen teoretiske problemer i sosialhistorien’, *Historisk tidsskrift* 1955, 185-203.

¹⁰ Edvard Bull, *Arbeidermiljø under det industrielle gjennombrudd* (Oslo: Tiden, 1958)

¹¹ *Hundre års historisk forskning* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1970).

¹² Holmsen, ‘Menneske, mønster og masse’, 331, 337.

¹³ *Historisk tidsskrift* 1970. Seip’s contribution was written already in 1967.

Norwegian 19th-century history with the phase “From a society of peasants and crofters to one of organized capitalism”.¹⁴

Bull and Langholm went in other directions, with aims and projects befitting the sobriquets fathers of the new social history.¹⁵ Bull taught at the University of Trondheim (present-day Norwegian University of Science and Technology), basing much of the research for him and his students on the large collection of worker’s memories, collected by him and collaborators at the Norwegian Folk Museum in Oslo in the 1950s. While Bull was somewhat skeptical towards the uses of social science in history, his colleague in Oslo, Sivert Langholm, was certainly not. His article “The historian and the sociologist – and the third man” stated that his ideal was the latter, not the historian or sociologist only, but both at the same time.¹⁶ With Dahl, and aided by Semmingsen, Langholm in the early 1970s launched a large research project – The Development of Norwegian Society c. 1860-1900 – mobilizing dozens of graduate students for more than a decade.¹⁷ “Social history” became a clarion call for the students, the term figuring in numerous dissertation subtitles.¹⁸ This applies to all four universities and the numerous colleges established in the 1970s, whose lecturers were mainly recruited from the first generation of new social historians. The number of social history dissertations (*hovedfag*) rose from about five annually to almost thirty in the peak years 1974-1983, making up about 40 per cent of all dissertations in the early eighties. Between 1976 and 1979 the publisher Cappelen produced a 15-volume general history of Norway under the editorship of Knut Mykland. The task at hand was “writing history as a history of society in the widest sense of the word”, with population, social structure and culture figuring prominently¹⁹, a solid manifestation of the tendencies of the seventies.

¹⁴ Edvard Bull, ‘Fra bøndernes og husmennesenes samfunn til den organiserte kapitalisme’, Ottar Dahl et al (eds), *Makt og motiv. Et festskrift til Jens Arup Seip* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1975).

¹⁵ This designation is the author’s, in the firm belief that most Norwegian historians would agree.

¹⁶ Sivert Langholm, ‘The Historian, the Sociologist – and the Third Man’, *Historisk tidskrift* (Sweden) 4/1972, 474-489.

¹⁷ Sivert Langholm, ‘Historie på individnivå. Omkring Ullensaker-undersøkelsen – et mikrohistorisk eksperiment’, *Historisk tidsskrift* 3/1974, 243-272; Sivert Langholm, ‘On the Scope of Micro-history’, *Scandinavian journal of History* 1/1976, 1-24. The project also went under the name of the Ullensaker and Christiania projects, named after the localities studied.

¹⁸ We are talking about “hovedfag” theses, a degree best translated as Master’s degrees, but then resembling small ph.d. theses, some even printed as books.

¹⁹ Knut Mykland, ‘Om å skrive norges historie’, Knut Mykland (general ed.), *Norges historie*, vol 1 (Oslo: Cappelen, 1976), 5-10.

What kind of social history?

The new social history in Norway was in many ways a journey into the unexplored, with the aim of covering white spots on the historiographical map. In spite of what had been done by their older relatives in the discipline, there was much land to discover and unveil. Not least, the young historians (they were mainly young) had new theories and methods at their disposal. In addition, the political climate in the late sixties and seventies were favorable for historians who wanted to look at history with new eyes. You may say that the new social historians explored the domestic past with maps and compasses largely borrowed from abroad.

Social history- *sosialhistorie* – in Norway is a term covering a variety of periods, themes, approaches, theories and methods. Yet it is possible to single out common traits, some of them imported, some more domestic. First of all, graduates and post-graduates wanted to study social groups, following Dahl's definition above, meaning an emphasis on social structure. This was not the age of prominent individuals or the writing of biographies. The theses (and books and articles) covered groups (sometimes collectives) like manufacture workers, craftsmen, servants, prostitutes, emigrants, crofters, industrial entrepreneurs, demographic cohorts, telegraphers and prison inmates.

This was clearly, with some exceptions, history *d'an bas*, from below.²⁰ Bull pleaded for a history of people without power. Even though sexual behavior was seldom a theme (that came later), with a slip of the pen one student named the tendency as "history with the bottom up". The new role attached to gender was visible, though, through the emphasis on female telegraphers, workers, prostitutes, servants, crofters and peasants/farmers. While the men in agriculture and fishing were away as fishermen, lumberjacks or construction workers, the women were the true farmers, especially along the coast.

Some of the work concentrated on collectives or organizations like the early socialist organization attached to the name of its leader, Marcus Thrane (c. 1850), the early workers' societies (*Christiania Arbeidersamfund*) or the female servant's union. The social history aspects in this work consisted of its emphasis on social recruitment to these collectives and the mutual connection between their members. These organizations were, however, also political actors, and

²⁰ The *Festschrift* to Bull on his 70th birthday in 1984 was aptly titled *Historie nedenfra*, history from below. Per Fuglum and Jarle Simensen, *Historie nedenfra. Festschrift til Edvard Bull på 70-årsdagen* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984). A collection of Bull's articles was named *Retten til en fortid*, The Right to a Past, subtitled Essays on social history. Edvard Bull, *Retten til en fortid. Sosialhistoriske artikler* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1981).

the new social historians saw no reason to put up a barrier between the social and the political. Seip remarked about Tore Pryser's book on a local branch of the Thrane movement, a social historical flagship containing tremendous collective biography of all its 173 members, that it was really a work about political behavior.²¹ Langholm's launching of a social historical thrust around 1970 was not so much directed against political history as such, but against the one-sidedness of Norwegian historiography at the time.²²

The overarching theme for the new social historians of the 1970s was the great social transformation of the 19th century connected to such processes as industrialization, urbanization and emigration, but was not solely an affair of the 1800s. Historical demographers stuck mainly to the 18th and early 19th centuries, and some work was done on the early 20th century. Social history, as a matter of fact, cut across traditional periodization of history, as social and economic processes did not coincide well with political ones. This is especially true for the many studies of "the big change" (*det store hamskiftet*), the important technological and social changes in agriculture making peasants into farmers.

Langholm called his vision of social history "micro history"²³, not to be confused with the continental (or Italian) brand, a myopic study of social phenomena.²⁴ It was rather a methodological device, whose main point was to combine properties in the individual, among other things to avoid ecological fallacies. It does not suffice to explain e.g. emigration by referring to general social or economic circumstances; one has to investigate, on the individual level, the property of those who actually emigrated. The method, then, was collective biography (or prosopography, as Lawrence Stone called it), bringing many individuals back into this otherwise rather structural kind of history, and thus being not far from the Italian version after all.

Doing history from below, dealing with gender history (or women's history as it was called in the seventies) or even investigating the actions of industrial entrepreneurs, clearly had a political side to it, in addition to the methodological and epistemic ones. With the possible exception of gender/women's history, the element of identity politics was not very strong, unlike

²¹ Tore Pryser, *Klassebevegelse eller folkebevegelse? En sosialhistorisk undersøkelse av thranittene i Ullensaker* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977).

²² Knut Kjeldstadli and Jan Eivind Myhre, 'En bundet lidenskap. Samtale med Sivert Langholm om historiefaget', Knut Kjeldstadli, Jan Eivind Myhre, and Tore Pryser (eds), *Valg og vitenskap. Festskrift til Sivert Langholm* (Oslo: Den Norske Historiske Forening, 1997), 9-36.

²³ Langholm, *Historie på individnivå*; Langholm, *On the Scope of Micro-History*.

²⁴ Giovanni Levi, 'On Microhistory', Burke, *New Perspectives*, 93-113. 1991.

e.g. in the US. The main argument in favor of women's history, on par with a number of other groups in society, was making visible hitherto scarcely noticeable groups and underlining their contribution to history.²⁵ Norway had indeed its new left, and many young aspiring historians were part of it, being quite absorbed in their studies.²⁶ At a much later date, Tor Egil Førland claimed that politics had the better of the 1970s generation (or 68ers, as they are sometimes called), devaluating their research as partisan and too politicized.²⁷ While their choice of topic was obviously made by political (I would prefer social) considerations, their conduct of research was clearly not, as it was guided by rather strict methodological rules, overseen by Bull, Langholm, Dahl and others. And aren't all choices of topic by historians to some extent value decisions?

Although the main label for the new history in the seventies was social history, other sub-disciplines was part of the larger picture, sometimes subsuming themselves under the social history umbrella. Women's history was one such sub-discipline, historical demography another. Economic history and business history were half-sisters of social history. Local history (including urban history), a time-honored branch of history, also within Academia, got a social-historical bent in the 1970s. The sub-disciplines often had their own conferences or workshops, although in a small country like Norway they did not create their own specialized journals. The exception was local history and its journal *Heimen*, founded already in 1922.

Inspiration

Although the new social history in Norway had its domestic predecessors, much of its inspiration came from abroad. Bull and Koht looked to Leipzig and Karl Lamprecht's wide cultural history, and Bull wrote Lamprecht's obituary in 1915.²⁸ The Institute of Comparative Cultural History in Oslo invited Marc Bloch and Alfons Dopsch in the late 1920s, and Bloch's work which later

²⁵ The history of the indigenous minority in the north, the Sami, as well as other ethnic minorities, came somewhat later.

²⁶ Sivert Langholm, 'Forord', Jan Eivind Myhre and Jan Sigurd Østberg (eds), *Mennesker i Kristiania. Sosialhistorisk søkelys på 1800-tallet* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1979), 7-10.

²⁷ Tor Egil Førland, 'Deltaker og medløper. Venstresiden, sovjetunionen og objektivismens fall', *Historisk tidsskrift* 4/2010, 521-546.

²⁸ Edvard Bull the elder, 'Professor Karl Lamprecht', *Historie og politikk* (ed. By Johan Schreiner)(Oslo: xxx, 1933).

became *French rural history*, began there.²⁹ Some of Holmsen's work resembled *Annales* history, although he denied direct influence. Mykland's city history from the fifties was devoid of explicit international references, but he later admitted that the Lynds' Middletown studies had been an inspiration. Mannsåker and Dahl, however, were updated on sociological theory.

So were, indeed, the new social historians from 1970 onwards. While as late as the mid-sixties, social science and history were miles apart, in the seventies it had become commonplace for history students to study social science, and, to some degree, vice versa.³⁰ The students were well versed in social scientific theory and methods. Much of the inspiration came from sociology, some also from political science, human geography, ethnology and economics (social anthropology came later, literature later still. Psychology was never important). Marxian influence was quite strong, but seldom in a dogmatic fashion, rather in a materialistic version. The German tradition was felt, too (Weber, Tönnies and others), a body of theory especially fitted to the Norwegian historians' main goal, to describe and analyze industrializing society. The influence of the German *Bielefelder* School was to some degree present, as its notion of *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* fitted the Norwegians well. Then there was the importance of American sociology, which was particularly strongly felt in the first decades after World War II. The similarities between the US and Norway were perhaps greater than first meets the eye. Both countries lack a feudal past and there was no nobility. The independent peasant/farmer was for a long time the backbone of society in both countries, and the Norwegian constitution of 1814 was based on the American one. Both countries had frontiers in the 19th century.

On the level of individual scholars, however, some British historians stood out as particularly influential. Eric Hobsbawm was an obvious choice as a model, not least his article "From social history to the history of society". A Norwegian comment on this was titled "From the history of society to social history", referring to the older social history tradition and the new social history from around 1970.³¹ Another model was E. P. Thompson because of the many

²⁹ Jon Røyne Kyllingstad, 'Nationalist internationalism: Danish and Norwegian historical research in the aftermath of the First World War', Pertti Haapala, Marja Jalava, and Simon Larsson (eds), *Making Nordic Historiography* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017), 173-176.

³⁰ Students had to study three subjects for their undergraduate degree. See Jan Eivind Myhre, 'Historikeren og sosiologen: en nervøs romanse?', *Nytt norsk tidsskrift* 4/1999, 321-335.

³¹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'From social history to the history of society', Felix Gilbert and Stephen Graubard (eds), *Historical Studies Today* (New York: Norton, 1972), 1-26 ; Jan Eivind Myhre, 'From the history of society to social history', *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 1/1996, 259-278.

attempts at delineating the rise of the Norwegian working class. The Norwegian, however, did not, like the English Marxists, discern a fall in the living standards during the first phase of industrialization. The historical demographers of the Cambridge school were certainly important to their (relatively) few Norwegian colleagues, but the French demographers, inventing the discipline, were just as influential. The *Annales* influence came only in the eighties, in the shape of *méntalité* history. In the Oslo milieu in particular, Harold Perkin was held in high esteem through his articles defining the field of social history and his overview of English 19th history.³² His concepts of “estate society” and “class society” became household names among younger Norwegian social historians (*standssamfunn* and *klassemfunn*).

From the early 20th century Nordic historians have met regularly for history conferences, between 1965 and 1989 even special conferences on method were organized.³³ Nordic (or Scandinavian) history journals were founded.³⁴ Although the older Swedish history tradition was mainly one of kings, wars and politics, a major social historical thrust took place from around 1970, no doubt influenced by the rise of the welfare state. In any case, Nordic historians, not least social historians, learned a lot from each other. Norwegian social historians, as well as other historians, reached further out from the seventies onwards, participating in European and American conferences, staying as guest researchers abroad and publishing in international journals and books. But even without this participation, international influence was highly visible in all kind of publications (in the text, footnotes and literature list), also when the publications were about Norwegian history, as was usually the case.

The critique of social history

As will be clear from what I said above, social history was not met by any fierce resistance within the Norwegian history community, mainly due to the time-honored tradition of writing the people’s history. Social history’s left-wing tendency caused little stir, as the history profession was rather left-leaning in the first place. The Marxist-Leninists (*m-l-erne*, the m-ls, in Norwegian

³² Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London: Routledge, 1969). Some of Perkin’s essays, among them the influential ‘What is social history’, are collected in *The Structured Crowd. Essays in English Social History* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1981).

³³ Jarle Simensen, ‘The Nordic Historians’ Conferences on Historical Method, 1965-1989’, Jarle Simensen *Internasjonalisering i historiefaget. Global historie og norsk historie i transnasjonalt perspektiv* (Oslo: Unipub, 2008), 49-64.

³⁴ *Scandia* (1928), *Scandinavian Economic History Review* (1954) and *Journal of Scandinavian History* (1976).

usage) preferred political history. Some critics appeared quite late (in the 1990s), voicing not against social history as such, but against what they saw as its dominance, reversing the situation from a generation earlier.³⁵

In 1984, Per Maurseth (1932-2013), a historian of political history, accused social historians of striving for autonomy for its discipline, and to isolate social history – or the “social” in history – regarding the topic and in terms of explanation.³⁶ The critique had some substance, but was mainly misplaced. Francis Sejersted’s (1936-2016) objection was more on target. Social history failed to give history meaning, he claimed, because it concentrated too much on unplanned consequences of uncoordinated mass behavior and treated people too much as victims. Sejersted recommended placing renewed emphasis on institutions, particularly political ones, in my view overlooking that there is a wide variety of social institutions created by people to provide their lives and society as a whole with meaning. I younger historian, May-Brith Ohman Nielsen (b. 1962) got wary of social historians’ preoccupation with the “unopened boxes”, like penitentiaries, barns and factory halls, and craved for some larger problems and themes.³⁷ Erik Opsahl (b. 1960) reacted against what he saw as a one-sided emphasis on the lower classes, wanting to investigate the social characteristics of the nobility in the later Middle Ages.³⁸

Why social history? The question of professionalization

Although the advent of social history obviously had its background in political and societal matters, in looking for further explanation I want to look more closely into another theme, that of professionalization. What kind of professionalization did the historians during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s claim to bring with them, and how can it contribute to explain the rise of social history? I will talk about professionalization in several steps, moving from the societal level to historians and finally to social history.

³⁵ This appears to be a bit exaggerated.

³⁶ Per Maurseth, ‘Mellom Seip og Bull. Tilbakeblikk på en jubileumsdebatt, Fuglum and Simensen, *Historie nedenfra*, 138-149.

³⁷ May-Brith Ohman Nielsen 1994, ‘Framtid for den faglige frimodigheten’, *HiFo-nytt* 3/1995: Jan Eivind Myhre, ‘Unification in the Age of Fragmentation. The Aims of the New History’, Jan Eivind Myhre (ed.), *Boundaries of History* (Oslo: Scandinavia Academic Press, 2015), 25-54.

³⁸ Erik Opsahl, ‘Historiens mangfold’, Anne Kristine Børresen, Jan Eivind Myhre, and Ola Svein Stugu (eds), *Historikerne som historie* (Trondheim: Historisk institutt, 1996), 147-155.

The first meaning of “professional” is in the sense that sociologists and others speak of “professionalization of society”, “professional occupations” and the like. The common criteria used are the interrelated factors higher (theory-based) education, expert knowledge³⁹, a certain control of the educational requirements by the practitioners themselves (including the gatekeeper function regarding the entering to the profession and attempts at monopolizing the profession), public certification (authorization) of the professionals, competition within and between professions in fields of operation, extensive specialization within the professions, and (usually strong) organizations to advance the aims above. One might also add an element of vocation, stemming partly from the professionals’ vow to science or scholarship, partly from their role as civil servants, aiming at serving society at large (a more European than American trait, perhaps), and partly as a keen interest in bringing history to the public at large, being public historians.

Taking *historians* as our example, the tendencies towards monopolizing is weak; scholars in disciplines like archeology, economics, sociology, anthropology or philology are “permitted” to do professional (in the meaning of expert) history. The same applies to writers of historical works lacking formal qualifications like a PhD, as long as they live up to what are considered professional standards. There is no public certification in the same sense as medicine or law, although a ph.d. in practice serves as one. Historians have no “clients” or “patients”, although they have a readership and students. They have employers in a special sense (universities etc), but employers only in a more common sense of the word when doing commissioned history, which in the US partly comes under the heading “public history”.⁴⁰ The bodies organizing historians are hardly strong (this varies from one country to another), at least when it comes to the bodies’ role as (trade) unions. The historians are, however, a very specialized bunch. As for the vocation element, professors of history in many countries are public servants, having an assignment from, and a duty towards, the public at large. German history professors in the 19th century have been described as a “priesthood”.⁴¹ “We cannot be satisfied with dry professional

³⁹ Abbott defines the system of profession as “expert division of knowledge”, *The System of Professions. An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁴⁰ James M. Banner, *Being a Historian. An Introduction to the Professional World of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Wolfgang Weber, *Priester der Klio. Historisch-sozialwissenschaftliche Studien zur Herkunft und Karriere deutscher Historiker und zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft 1800-1870* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1985).

science”, the prominent Norwegian historian Halvdan Koht wrote, we need a political spirit to keep history alive”.⁴²

The professionalization of society has been portrayed as one of the characterizing features of modern societies (by Perkin⁴³ and others), even as the most important. There are, however, limiting forces and critical arguments towards professionalization and professionals, partly inherent in the professions themselves, partly stemming from the outside world.⁴⁴ First there is *populism*; there is no specialist knowledge here, it’s all common sense, an argument undermining the claim to expert knowledge. Applied to history: The past is for everybody to study, and history for everybody to write.⁴⁵ One may only think of the debates surrounding public history that have been, and still are, taking place in the US and elsewhere.⁴⁶ There are amateur historians but no amateur nuclear physicists or hobby surgeons. Then there is *personalism*; professional work is dependent on the individual, there is no inter-personal guarantee of quality in job execution. Applied to history: when are you guaranteed to get a high quality product? To be true, from a person known as a professional historian, a professor or a PhD, one might expect a text of certain quality, as one would expect from an officially chartered accountant. But then you have famous historians, but not famous accountants.

The third limitation to professionalization is *innovatism*; the professional norms change so quickly that it is difficult to be up to date, which also undermines the trust in expertise. Applied to history: The constant outpouring of historical works makes it increasingly difficult to be up-to-date, even in restricted fields or sub-specialties of history. At this point historians may turn to historiography; in trying to cover a field one increasingly relies on historiographical surveys. Last, there is *specialism*; a strategy to overcome innovatism which becomes a problem in itself, by threatening the unity of the professional field. The history version: All historians have met outsiders expecting in vain that one could answer all sorts of historical questions. Historians, like professional practitioners in other academic fields, inevitably become specialized.

⁴² Quoted from Jan Eivind Myhre, “A strong common professional identity. Professionalization and the creation of a discipline in Norwegian historical scholarship in the 20th century, Frank Meyer and Jan Eivind Myhre (eds), *Nordic Historiography in the 20th century* (Oslo: Department of History, University of Oslo, 2000), 193.

⁴³ Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society. England since 1880* (Lodon: Routledge 1989).

⁴⁴ Ulf Torgersen, *Profesjonssosiologi* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1972).

⁴⁵ Myhre, ‘Historikeren og sosiologen’.

⁴⁶ Ian Tyrell, *Historians in Public. The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

What was new about the new social history in this picture? Specialization was not new to history in the 1960s or 1970s. Even in a small country like Norway, there was economic history, local history, settlement history and rural history. Except for the first, the specialties were seldom named. This was the case also with the time-honored people's history. Specialization took a new turn around 1970, however. A number of new sub-disciplines arose, some with conferences and seminars of their own. Norwegian historians would call themselves historical demographers, labor historians, gender historians, business historians, urban historians etc. – and social historians, sometimes as an overreaching label. With specialization came specialized terms (like Coale's index for demography), theories (class formation in social history) and methods (advanced quantification for economic history). This was surely a kind of professionalization, mainly inspired by the social sciences (and later from anthropology and linguistics). The new social history was specialized and innovative; that is what made it professional. Its advanced theories and techniques made it inaccessible to some, another professional trait. But this of course made it vulnerable to a populist critique. Perhaps (only perhaps) the acquisition of methods by many social historians made it less susceptible to the personalism critique.

The demands and norms

The norms for doing history changed. We shall look at a theory about norms in historical scholarship, expounded by the Swedish historian Rolf Torstendahl (b. 1936), and on numerous occasions presented to Norwegian and international audiences.⁴⁷ Torstendahl's makes a distinction between what he calls "minimum demands" and "optimum norms" as characteristics of scholarly history. The *minimum demands*, well-known from the heyday of source criticism from late 19th-century onwards (visible in methodological textbooks like Bernheim's in Germany, Langlois and Seignobos' in France and Erslev's in Scandinavia), comprise such factors as logical consistency, empirical reliability, internal coherence, objectivity. They rely heavily on factual accuracy and are definitely empirically oriented. The minimum demands might be named "old professionalism" (my term), but they are long-term demands on historical scholarship still with us, surviving the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s (although hardly postmodernism, which will not concern us here).

⁴⁷ Rolf Torstendahl, *The Rise and Propagation of Historical Professionalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015). Torstendahl's many articles on professionalism are referred to in the book.

The *optimum norms* emphasize elements such as the research being “important”, “fruitful”, “promising”, “theoretically sophisticated”, “relevant”, “rich in perspectives”, “pioneering” or “original”, referring to the norms of the wider community of scholars.⁴⁸ I have called this “the new professionalism” not only because the norms are different from the older version, but also because they to a large degree emanate from the surrounding world rather than from the guild of historians, the tradition of source criticism being developed within the historical profession. The concept of relevance was crucial to the historians of the 1960s and 1970s, the two sets of values/norms may perhaps, and a bit exaggerated, correspond to the concepts of what is right and what is good, respectively. However, the newness of these optimum demands should not be exaggerated, thinking for example of the American tradition of progressive history, the French *Annales* history and the Norwegian tradition of writing people’s history. Clearly new, however, were complicated techniques and methods and subtle theories, making some history writing less accessible to outsiders and even historians in other sub-fields.

It is not always easy to decide which histories are “good” or “excellent” with optimum norms as our starting point. What does “fruitful” or “pioneering” really mean? Torstendahl has likened the differences between minimum demands and optimum norms to a ball game such as soccer.⁴⁹ The fundamental rules are written down, and the referee decides whether they are followed (minimum demands). A good or excellent performance by a player or a team does not mean just playing according to the rules, but is something much more. Not easy to define accurately, an outstanding player moves gracefully, has a good overview of the situation, knows where his team member are moving, has perfect control of the ball, passes and shoots precisely, works indefatigably etc. (optimum norms). The analogy with historical scholarship is by no means perfect, but conveys an idea of what is at stake. In reading historians about historians’ works, it can be hard to pin down exactly what is commendable or deplorable about them. But we know it when we see it.

Did practitioners of the new social history comply with the standards of optimum norms, as outlined above? Their writings were often “theoretically sophisticated” in terms of methods and theory. Some were “pioneering” and “original” in that they asked new questions and employed new sources. This may also have made their research “rich in perspectives”. Were they

⁴⁸ Some of these characterizations are mine.

⁴⁹ Torstendahl, *Rise and Propagation*.

also “important” and “relevant”? The new social historians certainly wanted to be both because they wished to render history to social groups that had been overlooked in history. On the other hand did technical jargon and intricate methods sometimes their writings difficult to understand. This was part of the call to return to narrative frequently heard from the 1980s onwards.⁵⁰

The values of the protagonists of the new history were surely contested, for many reasons and with many arguments. First, some historians held that they were at odds with older professional values, the ones mentioned as minimum demands above. Second, the new history was accused of being heavily (left-wing) politicized. This trait seemed to be more marked in the United States than elsewhere, perhaps because American politics and society were more conservative than in West European countries. Novick writes that left-wing historians in the US, because of their Marxist leanings, were just replacing one definition of objectivity with another.⁵¹ Third, the new history, with its social science leanings and frequent use of quantitative methods, was criticized for making history dry and sterile. Fourth, the new history, with its breadth of approaches, topics and methods, was charged with fragmenting the discipline, its pluralism furthering relativism, a possible result of the numerous demands and norms placed upon the shoulders of historians. Perhaps needless to say, all accusations could not be directed at one historian or a group of historians at the same time. The two main tendencies in U.S. new history, the critical left and the social science oriented history, were quite different when it came to both topics and methods.⁵²

As we can see, the optimum demands of Torstendahl span much wider than the specialization within Norwegian historiography I just mentioned. Surely, the new (social) history in Norway was met with some critical remarks about political one-sidedness. More important was the threat of fragmentation of the whole history discipline into smaller units, a specialization which I prefer to call professionalization due to its increasing reliance on expert terms, theories, and methods.⁵³ This was, at least partly, the background for Sejersted’s and Ohman-Nielsen’s call for a renewed focus on political history, although in a wider meaning than before. Another

⁵⁰ First introduced by Lawrence Stone in his ‘The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history’, *Past and Present* (1979), 3-24.

⁵¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chapter 13.

⁵² Ellen Fitzpatrick, *History’s Memory. Writing America’s Past, 1880-1980* (Cambridge, Mass. And London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁵³ Myhre, Unification in the Age of Fragmentation.

challenge to social history came from (the new) cultural history. In some ways, cultural history seemed to increase the fragmentation of the discipline, but its emphasis on meaning in history (rather than the structure of social historians) aimed at pulling history together.

Although the various sub-disciplines and their peculiarities have come to stay, it is interesting to note that what some regard as the excesses in methods, concepts, and theories seemed to have disappeared since the 1990s, bringing more historians into what we may call mainstream history. As the historical demographer Sølvi Sogner (1932-2017) noted in 1985: “Clio when attired in her purely demographic draperies is no attractive lady to anyone but her most ardent admirers, who see her hidden charms in spite of an unprepossessing exterior”.⁵⁴

The question of unity and fragmentation

Does increased specialization and professionalization in history mean that historians are a disparate lot, each working on his own turf (or digging one’s own tunnel), with no coherence, with little or no united purpose, having little or no sense of community, and therefore cannot be considered a profession in the sociological sense? Does it at all make any sense to speak of historians this way? If history is not a profession, why speak about the limitations which reduce the professional elements? I actually think it is worthwhile, because what I have called the sociological view of professions is linked to the other meaning of the term presented below.

It is of course not uncommon to speak of the “history profession”, not referring to some sociological meaning of the term, but by highlighting the expert knowledge which historians possess, the relatively identical training they have gone through, and that they often experience being in a community of historians, having the same occupation (“profession”). Historians in various countries have often referred to their occupation as a “guild”, and still do (German “Zunft”, Norwegian “laug”, Swedish “skrå”), and their work as a “craft” (French “metier”⁵⁵, Norwegian and Danish “håndverk”, Swedish “handverk”, German “Handwerk”). The affiliated terms employed are “apprentice”, “journeyman” and, more seldom, “master”.⁵⁶ Of the

⁵⁴ Sølvi Sogner in a talk to the IUSSP 1985, according to Jan Eivind Myhre, ‘I historiens hus er det mange rom. Noen hovedtrekk ved norsk historieforskning’, Jan Eivind Myhre, *Mange veier til historien. Om historiefagets og historikernes historie* (Oslo: Unipub, 2009), 82.

⁵⁵ See Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954).

⁵⁶ Thomas Eitzmüller, ‘How to Make a Historian. Problems in Writing Biographies of Historians’, *Storia della Storiografia* 2008, 46-57.

numerous academic disciplines Becher studied in Britain and the USA, historians were the ones most likely to see themselves as belonging to the same fraternity, referring to the community of scholars.⁵⁷

The distinction between the old and the new professionalism ought not to be stretched too far. As I stated, old professional norms still live with us. As for the new ones, the ideas of relevance and associated norms were not new in the 60s, though they gained new currency with a more pluralistic history. Also, although the catchword relevance may have come from outside the profession, this and similar values soon became norms internal to it, at least to some extent, varying from country to country.

From a professionalization point of view, a common factor between the two would normally be that the norms are decided within the community (or part of it) of history scholars, internal to the history profession, so to speak. Both norm-sets, minimum demands and optimum norms, serve to keep the community together or simply to create the community itself. For a historian to obtain recognition from the community, at least some of the norms have to be followed. The norms of the community may assist in delimiting historians from other scholarly disciplines, but also to mark a boundary between themselves and historical amateurs, referring to the debate on public history.

It is concerning the question of the existence of a community of historians that the two meanings of professionalism meet. The challenges facing history as a profession in the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st, concerns the variety of optimum norms employed. Examples of this are the Marxist approach to history (focusing on social groups and class struggle), the comprehensive approach of a Braudel (distinguishing between three different time levels), historical demography, social history in its many new versions (taking inspiration from the social sciences, like the German *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* “school”). All of them, and more, were part of the Norwegian movement of social history from 1970 onwards. But, as it turned out, they did not threaten the coherence of the academic Norwegian history community.

⁵⁷ Becher, *Academic Tribes*, 156. Tony Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories. Intellectual enquiry and the culture of disciplines* (Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1989), 60.

