The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments

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LAWRENCE STONE BELIEVES THAT THERE IS A REVIVAL OF "NARRATIVE history" because there has been a decline in the history devoted to asking "the big why questions", the generalizing "scientific history". This in turn he thinks is due to disillusionment with the essentially economic determinist models of historical explanation, Marxist or otherwise, which have tended to dominate in the post-war years; to the declining ideological commitment of western intellectuals; contemporary experience which has reminded us that political action and decision can shape history; and the failure of "quantitative history" (another claimant to "scientific" status) to deliver the goods.¹ Two questions are involved in this argument, which I have brutally oversimplified: what has been happening in historiography, and how are these developments to be explained? Since it is common ground that in history "the facts" are always selected, shaped and perhaps distorted by the historian who observes them, there is an element of parti pris, not to say intellectual autobiography, in Stone's treatment of both questions, as in my comments on it.

I think we may accept that the twenty years following the Second World War saw a sharp decline in political and religious history, in the use of "ideas" as an explanation of history, and a remarkable turn to socio-economic history and to historical explanation in terms of "social forces", as Momigliano noted as early as 1954.² Whether or not we call them "economic-determinist", these currents of historiography became influential, in some cases dominant, in the main western centres of historiography, not to mention, for other reasons, the eastern ones. We may also accept that in recent years there has been considerable diversification, and a marked revival of interest in themes which were rather more marginal to the main concerns of the historical outsiders who in those years became historical insiders, though such themes were never neglected. After all, Braudel wrote about Philip II as well as the Mediterranean, and Le Roy Ladurie's monograph on Le carnaval de Romans of 1580 is anticipated by a much briefer, but most perceptive, account of the same episode in his Les paysans du Languedoc.³ If Marxist historians of the 1970s write

entire books on the role of radical-national myths, such as the Welsh Madoc legend, Christopher Hill at least wrote a seminal article on the myth of the Norman Yoke in the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{4} Still, there probably has been a change.

Whether this amounts to a revival of “narrative history” as defined by Stone (basically chronological ordering of the material in “a single coherent story, albeit with sub-plots” and a concentration “on man not circumstances”) is difficult to determine, since Stone deliberately eschews a quantitative survey and concentrates on “a very tiny, but disproportionately prominent, section of the historical profession as a whole”\textsuperscript{5}. Nevertheless there is evidence that the old historical avant-garde no longer rejects, despises and combats the old-fashioned “history of events” or even biographical history, as some of it used to. Fernand Braudel himself has given unstinted praise to a notably traditional exercise in popular narrative history, Claude Manceron’s attempt to present the origins of the French Revolution through a series of overlapping biographies of contemporaries, great and small.\textsuperscript{6} On the other hand the historical minority whose supposedly changed interests Stone surveys, has not in fact changed over to practising narrative history. If we leave aside deliberate historiographical conservatives or neo-conservatives such as the British “antiquarian empiricists”, there is very little simple narrative history among the works Stone cites or refers to. For almost all of them the event, the individual, even the recapture of some mood or way of thinking of the past, are not ends in themselves, but the means of illuminating some wider question, which goes far beyond the particular story and its characters.

In short those historians who continue to believe in the possibility of generalizing about human societies and their development, continue to be interested in “the big why questions”, though they may sometimes focus on different ones from those on which they concentrated twenty or thirty years ago. There is really no evidence that such historians — the ones Stone is mainly concerned with — have abandoned “the attempt to produce a coherent . . . explanation of change in the past”.\textsuperscript{7} Whether they (or we) also regard their attempt as “scientific” will no doubt depend on our definition of “science”, but we need not enter this dispute about labels. Moreover I very much doubt whether such historians feel that they are “forced back upon the


\textsuperscript{5} Stone, op. cit., pp. 3, 4.


\textsuperscript{7} Stone, op. cit., p. 19.
principle of indeterminacy"; any more than Marx felt his writings about Louis Napoleon to be incompatible with the materialist conception of history.

No doubt there are historians who have abandoned such attempts, and certainly there are some who combat them, perhaps with a zeal increased by ideological commitment. (Whether or not Marxism has declined intellectually, it is hard to detect much muting of ideological controversy among western historians, though the participants and the specific issues may not be the same as twenty years ago.) Probably neo-conservative history has gained ground, at any rate in Britain, both in the form of the "young antiquarian empiricists" who "write detailed political narratives which implicitly deny that there is any deep-seated meaning to history except the accidental whims of fortune and personality", and in the form of works like Theodore Zeldin's (and Richard Cobb's) remarkable plunges into those strata of the past, to which "almost every aspect of traditionalist history" is irrelevant, including the answering of questions. So, probably, has what might be called anti-intellectual leftist history. But this, except very tangentially, is not what Stone is concerned with.

How then are we to account for the shifts in historical subject-matter and interests, in so far as they have occurred or are occurring?

One element in them, it may be suggested, reflects the remarkable widening of the field of history in the past twenty years, typified by the rise of "social history", that shapeless container for everything from changes in human physique to symbol and ritual, and above all for the lives of all people from beggars to emperors. As Braudel has observed, this "histoire obscure de tout le monde" is "the history towards which, in different ways, all historiography tends at present". This is not the place to speculate on the reasons for this vast extension of the field, which certainly does not necessarily conflict with the attempt to produce a coherent explanation of the past. It does, however, increase the technical difficulty of writing history. How are these complexities to be presented? It is not surprising that historians experiment with different forms of such presentation, including notably those that borrow from the ancient techniques of literature (which has made its own stabs at displaying la comédie humaine), and also from the modern audio-visual media, in which all but the oldest of us are saturated. What Stone calls the pointilliste techniques are, at least in part, attempts to solve such technical problems of presentation.

Such experiments are particularly necessary for that part of history

8 Ibid., p. 13.
9 Ibid., p. 20.
which cannot be subsumed under "analysis" (or the rejection of analysis) and which Stone rather neglects, namely synthesis. The problem of fitting together the various manifestations of human thought and action at a specific period is neither new nor unrecognized. No history of Jacobean England is satisfactory which omits Bacon or treats him exclusively as a lawyer, a politician, or a figure in the history of science or of literature. Moreover even the most conventional historians recognize it, even when their solutions (a chapter or two on science, literature, education or whatnot appended to the main body of politico-institutional text) is unsatisfactory. Yet the wider the range of human activities which is accepted as the legitimate concern of the historian, the more clearly understood the necessity of establishing systematic connections between them, the greater the difficulty of achieving a synthesis. This is, naturally, far more than a technical problem of presentation, yet it is that also. Even those who continue to be guided in their analysis by something like the "three-tiered hierarchical" model of base and superstructures which Stone rejects,12 may find it an inadequate guide to presentation, though probably a less inadequate guide than straight chronological narrative.

Leaving aside the problems of presentation and synthesis, two more substantial reasons for a change may also be suggested. The first is the very success of the "new historians" in the post-war decades. This was achieved by a deliberate methodological simplification, the concentration on what were seen as the socio-economic base and determinants of history, at the expense of — sometimes, as in the French battle against the "history of events", in direct confrontation with — traditional narrative history. While there were some extreme economic reductionists, and others who dismissed people and events as negligible ripples on the longue durée of structure and conjoncture, such extremism was not universally shared either in Annales, or among the Marxists who — especially in Britain — never lost interest in events or culture, nor regarded "superstructure" as always and entirely dependent on "base". Yet the very triumph of works like those of Braudel, Goubert and Le Roy Ladurie, which Stone underlines, not only left "new" historians free to concentrate on those aspects of history hitherto deliberately set aside, but advanced their place on the "new historians" agenda. As an eminent Annalist, Le Goff, pointed out several years ago, "political history was gradually to return in force by borrowing the methods, spirit and theoretical approach of the very social sciences which had pushed it into the background".13 The new history of men and minds, ideas and events may be seen as com-

12 Stone, op. cit., pp. 7-8.
plementing rather than as supplanting the analysis of socio-economic structures and trends.

But once historians turn to such items on their agenda, they may prefer to approach their "coherent explanation of change in the past" as it were ecologically rather than as geologists. They may prefer to start with the study of a "situation" which embodies and exemplifies the stratified structure of a society but concentrates the mind on the complexities and interconnections of real history, rather than with the study of the structure itself, especially if for this they can rely partly on earlier work. This, as Stone recognizes, lies at the root of some historians' admiration for works like Clifford Geertz's "close reading" of a Balinese cock-fight. It implies no necessary choice between monocausality and multicausality, and certainly no conflict between a model in which some historical determinants are seen as more powerful than others, and the recognition of interconnections, both vertical and horizontal. A "situation" may be a convenient point of departure, as in Ginzburg's study of popular ideology through the case of a single village atheist in the sixteenth century or a single group of Friulian peasants accused of witchcraft. These topics could also be approached in other ways. It may be a necessary point of departure in other cases, as in Agulhon's beautiful study of how, at a particular time and place, French villagers converted from Catholic traditionalism to militant republicanism. At all events, for certain purposes historians are likely to choose it as a starting-point.

There is thus no necessary contradiction between Le Roy Ladurie's Les paysans du Languedoc and his Montaillou, any more than between Duby's general works on feudal society and his monograph on the battle of Bouvines, or between E. P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class and his Whigs and Hunters. There is nothing new in choosing to see the world via a microscope rather than a telescope. So long as we accept that we are studying the same cosmos, the choice between microcosm and macrocosm is a matter of selecting the appropriate technique. It is significant that more historians find the microscope useful at present, but this does not necessarily mean that they reject telescopes as out of date. Even the historians of

15 Carlo Ginzburg, Il formaggio e i vermi (Turin, 1976); Carlo Ginzburg, I benandanti: ricerche sulla stregoneria e sui culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento (Turin, 1966).
mentalité, that vague catch-all term which Stone, perhaps wisely, does not try to clarify, do not exclusively or predominantly avoid the broad view. This at least is a lesson they have learned from the anthropologists.

Do these observations account for Stone’s “broad cluster of changes in the nature of historical discourse”? Perhaps not. However, they demonstrate that it is possible to explain much of what he surveys as the continuation of past historical enterprises by other means, instead of as proofs of their bankruptcy. One would not wish to deny that some historians regard them as bankrupt or undesirable and wish to change their discourse in consequence, for various reasons, some of them intellectually dubious, some to be taken seriously. Clearly some historians have shifted from “circumstances” to “men” (including women), or have discovered that a simple base/superstructure model and economic history are not enough, or — since the pay-off from such approaches has been very substantial — are no longer enough. Some may well have convinced themselves that there is an incompatibility between their “scientific” and “literary” functions. But it is not necessary to analyse the present fashions in history entirely as a rejection of the past, and in so far as they cannot be entirely analysed in such terms, it will not do.

We are all anxious to discover where historians are going. Stone’s essay is to be welcomed as an attempt to do so. Nevertheless it is not satisfactory. In spite of his disclaimer the essay does combine the charting of “observed changes in historical fashion” with “value judgements about what are good, and what are less good, modes of historical writing”, especially about the latter. I think this is a pity, not because I happen to disagree with him about “the principle of indeterminacy” and historical generalization, but because, if the argument is wrong, a diagnosis of the “changes in historical discourse” made in terms of this argument must also be inadequate. One is tempted, like the mythical Irishman, asked by the traveller for the way to Ballynahinch, to stop, ponder, and reply: “If I were you, I wouldn’t start from here at all”.

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18 Stone, op. cit., p. 23.  
19 Ibid., p. 4.