

FORUM: MODERN AMERICAN HISTORY

## The Social-Ethnography Tradition

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It is general examination season as I write. Graduate students in U.S. history everywhere are making an impassioned sprint through the last of the books on their lists, like marathon runners hoping for a second, saving wind. Their sense of the mammoth scope of their task is not misplaced. Over the years, I have watched those lists grow longer and longer, fill up with vitally important new fields of American history, with an astonishingly broad and fast-moving stream of new monographs, and with interpretive emphases fertile enough to keep hundreds of historiographical essays in constant bloom. Each year there is more U.S. history to read; the coverage is thicker and more intense; the level of scholarship extremely high. All that is a good thing.

And yet as the lists grow ever longer, I worry about the costs of these historiographical marathons. I have thought to myself, more than once, that U.S. historians know much more than they should about U.S. history. This not because there is, in the abstract, any limit on what it might be compelling to know, but because our hyperintense focus on U.S. history and historiography comes at the expense of so many other things American historians should know if they are to write and teach as well as they might.

American historians would be better historians of the United States if they read much more deeply and seriously in the histories of other cultures, times, and places than most of us read now. They need to know more languages and be able to use them with more fluency than most U.S. historians currently do. They need to be Americanists plus. Otherwise the turn to global and transnational history—both in their big, synthetic, and comparative forms and in their close-up studies of networks and relationships—will be done largely by others whose training is less insular than ours.

Students preparing to run the general examination marathon should be encouraged to think much harder about how they hope to teach all that they will have learned. There should be more ample room in their general lists for history's primary sources than is conventionally the case, both for the sake of their grasp of the historical problems that interest them but, equally, because these are the sources that will catch hold of students' imaginations in their own classrooms and make the world of the monographs, historiographical debates, and syntheses come alive.

And they, and we, need to read more seriously in the social sciences than most working historians of the United States imagine they have time for. Different historians will have different understandings of what recontextualizing history within its neighbor disciplines might mean. It might mean a serious grounding in law or in demography; in urban or environmental studies; in economics or political sociology; in studies of cultural transfer or the behavior of institutions; in theories of domination, power, and persuasion; in the social psychology of identity formation or the dynamics of social groups. Even to begin to write this abbreviated list is to realize how extensive it could be and how much it might deepen the histories we write.

In many graduate training programs across the country, much of this is being done. In many universities and colleges, historians routinely team up with others outside their discipline in both research and teaching. Cross-disciplinarily informed histories of capitalism are catching on. Collaborative work on race, ethnicity, and gender is taking hold. Interdisciplinary courses on the causes and aftermath of war, on inequality, and on the structural and cultural crises of democracy flourish in our hard times. Students are more than spectators to these movements.

Undergraduates are being taught to collaborate beyond their majors, to conduct oral history projects, to construct historically informed briefs for current law cases, to write historical plays and historical fiction. These are the ways in which disciplines evolve. Some of the occupants of the house of history are working hard to fill it up with more, and still better crafted, furniture. Others are trying to burst open the walls. Given the pressures of hyperprofessionalization bearing down on the discipline in our current moment, my sympathies are with those trying to keep the walls from pressing in still more tightly.

In my own work and teaching, it has been the writings in what we might call the social-ethnography tradition that have left a particularly vital imprint. “Social ethnography” is an imprecise name for a movement that was, itself, a loosely organized attempt to move the lens of scholarship much closer to “real” life. Part of its impetus came from the impatience of dissident sociologists and anthropologists with the grand social-evolutionary theories that had absorbed their disciplines in the nineteenth century. They shelved the study of “civilization” to ask much more close-grained questions about how cities, neighborhoods, families, peer groups, delinquent gangs, workplaces, systems of racial domination, and ethnic group conflicts actually worked. To this was joined the intense interest in the “real” that was ventilating journalism, art, and literature at the end of the nineteenth century. Some of those drawn into these projects of up-close social investigation were sociologists by training: W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), and the Chicago school of urban sociologists with Robert Park and Louis Wirth at its center or, in later generations, Herbert Gans and Arlene Stein. Some were anthropologists, like Oscar Lewis, Allison Davis, and Carol Stack. Some were social psychologists, like David Riesman and John Dollard, or psychiatrists, like Robert Coles. Some came to ethnography through religious studies, like Robert Orsi or Randall Balmer. Others were folklorists or journalists.

The ethnographic method was only one of the tools writers like these employed. Maps, surveys, and census data analyses proliferated in the community-based studies. But participant observation, fieldwork, and the long-form interview were their preferred means to get as close as possible to the social experiences around them. I can still recall the impact on my own *Work Ethic* of the early twentieth-century women sociologists who plunged into work as waitresses, woolen mill operatives, department store clerks, and housemaids; Walter Wyckoff’s travels across 1890s America as a casual laborer; the extraordinary panorama of the Pittsburgh Survey; and the diverse, immensely articulate voices of Studs Terkel’s *Working*.<sup>1</sup> An essay on the traditions of Southern sociology for C. Vann Woodward’s festschrift drew me into the richness of John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), Allison Davis’s *Deep South* (1941), and St. Clair Drake’s and Horace R. Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* (1945).<sup>2</sup> For years, B. A. Botkin’s Federal Writers’ Project-sponsored oral history of slavery, *Lay My Burden Down* (1945), anchored the reading assignments in my pre-1876 survey course. *Middletown* (1929) did the same in the later period. David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Studs Terkel’s *American Dreams, Lost and Found* (1980) had long-running places in my American cultural history courses. I could barely have conceived my undergraduate seminars on the history of poverty without the powerful underpinnings of the social-ethnography tradition: Oscar Lewis’s *La Vida* (1966), Robert Coles’s *Children of Crisis* (1967), Elliot Liebow’s

<sup>1</sup>Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (1978; Chicago, 2014). See also Annie M. MacLean, “Two Weeks in Department Stores,” *American Journal of Sociology* 4 (1899): 721–41; Amy E. Tanner, “Glimpses at the Mind of a Waitress,” *American Journal of Sociology* 13 (1907): 48–55; Jessie Davis, pseud., “My Vacation in a Woolen Mill,” *Survey* 40 (1918): 538–41; Cornelia S. Parker, *Working with the Working Woman* (New York, 1921); Walter A. Wyckoff, *The Workers: An Experiment in Reality*, 2 vols. (New York, 1897–1898); Paul U. Kellogg, ed., *The Pittsburgh Survey*, 6 vols. (New York, 1909–1914); Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York, 1974).

<sup>2</sup>Daniel T. Rodgers, “Regionalism and the Burdens of Progress,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, eds. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York, 1982), 3–26.



**Figure 1.** Lewis W. Hine takes photographs for Edward F. Brown's investigation of newspaper vendors in Philadelphia in 1910. It took careful ethnographic skills to decode newsboys' curious world of work and play. Photograph from the records of the National Child Labor Committee, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

*Tally's Corner* (1967), Mitchell Duneier's *Slim's Table* (1992) and *Sidewalk* (1999), Katherine Newman's *No Shame in My Game* (1999), Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), and many more.

Much of the work in this tradition, we might now say, was both under- and over-theorized. Terkel would not have been caught dead with a theory of any sort. The acuteness of David Riesman's mid-range reflections on his college student interviewees' stories of their lives and ambitions hold up better than his more ambitious theoretical attempt to pin changes in personality structure to large-scale demographic trends. A strain of functionalism ran through much of this tradition, not always to its benefit. But the best of it was no naïve attempt at social mirroring. *Aperçus* were a critically important analytic in this tradition: mid-range, brilliantly offered observations that often turned the familiar on its head. The point was not simply to describe but, still more, to ensure that one never saw a crowd of street corner men in the same way again—or textile workers making a rush for the exits at the end of their work day, or women pressing their lips to a favored shrine, or the ordered chaos of a dance floor, or

the efforts of men and women to make themselves up as respectable in a society that systematically denied their social worth.

Concern that these ventures in social ethnography were not sufficiently “scientific” has eclipsed their status in many contemporary sociology departments. A concern to make the study of human behavior quantitative and verifiable has, paradoxically, drawn more and more sociologists out of society and into the sociological laboratory, where small samples of persons respond to surveys, answer questions before and after stories are read to them, or submit to measurements of where their eyeballs dart when images are presented to them. The data of studies like these are made for PowerPoint graphics and statistical tests of significance in a way that the Chicago School work never could be.

But the old traditions still survive, as Matthew Desmond’s tour de force of up-close ethnography, *Evicted*, and Arlie Hochschild’s extraordinary encounters with contemporary Americans in white, working-class Louisiana have recently shown. Even had the 2016 election not turned in Donald Trump’s favor, Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land*, the most haunting book of our political season, would remain a powerful record of the ways the world looked to those who felt society had left them behind—recorded with a combination of sensitivity and distance from her subjects that historians would give almost anything to be able to match.<sup>3</sup>

What moves me most in the social-ethnography tradition is not only its reminder of the radically diverse social landscapes of modernity but, still more, its record of people working with terrific seriousness to make sense of themselves and their experiences. I had come to graduate school after a year’s stint in what was then the Great Society’s new anti-poverty program, where scores of front-stoop theorists had worked hard to drive that same point home to me. They had read none of the works in the social-ethnography tradition. But they knew that the struggle to frame social experience into ideas mattered. For them, it was a realm of power, contest, and consequences.

Ideas are everywhere, as Sarah Igo has recently reminded us in her acute and evocative case for “free range” intellectual history.<sup>4</sup> What makes the social-ethnography tradition most vital for me is the way that the best of it models how one might try, even within the limits of the past’s incomplete records, to capture the force and drama of people talking, dreaming, arguing, and imagining their lives and circumstances. It reminds us of the immense multivocality of cultures. It underscores the critically important ways in which persons make up stories to try to understand themselves, shape those stories into collective frames of action, and wield them against each other. It makes the enormously complex connection between words and “realities” come more clearly into focus. In works like these one can hear Americans thinking: furiously, impassioned, seriously, derivatively, of course, but also creatively, often with angry intent and cruel consequences, but at other times, with courage and idealism.

Simply adding hurdles to the general examination marathon will not make a wiser or more capacious discipline. But if some parts of the ever-longer reading lists that we assign to graduate students were to move over for an immersion in this discipline so closely parallel to our own, and if we trusted that some of what we need to know about U.S. history could be acquired later, on the job, we might all be better off.

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<sup>3</sup>Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York, 2016); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Sarah E. Igo, “Toward a Free-Range Intellectual History,” in *The Worlds of American Intellectual History*, eds. Joel Isaac, James T. Kloppenberg, Michael O’Brien, and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen (Oxford, 2017), 324–42.