

SOCIAL THEMES

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Along with the rise of world history itself, the growing focus of many historians on topics in social history has been one of the most profound changes in the discipline over the past half century. The movement was spurred by French historians writing in the 1930s and 1940s, concerned about making sure that ordinary people and their ordinary aspects of life received historical attention. It was picked up in Britain and the United States, and elsewhere, by the 1960s. Studies of groups of people like workers, or peasants, or women proliferated. So did examinations of relatively unfamiliar topics, like childhood. The definition of historical significance expanded greatly, and so did historians' ability to link past patterns, in areas such as family life, to present concerns.

It has not been easy to merge social history with world history, and many promising topics have yet to mature sufficiently to permit a junction. Many social historians, because of the demands of their new topics, have focused on relatively small slices of time, and often small geographical regions as well. Sketches of a topic for one region – example: some intriguing work on the history of sleep in Western Europe – simply have not yet been generalized. Promoting more fruitful combinations between social and world history remains a vital task for the future.

A number of social history topics have, however, reached sufficient maturity to allow integration with a world history framework. Basic social structure obviously allows comparisons among major regions – different systems of inequality provided some of the most distinctive features of traditional societies in places like the Indian subcontinent. Family history has been explored in many regions and over many time periods, and the same obviously holds true for gender.

On the whole, social themes call attention particularly to the sweeping effects of the great transitions in world history: from hunting and gathering to agriculture, and now from agriculture to industry. These transitions redefined social structures in many ways, but also had surprisingly sweeping impacts on family life and even leisure patterns. Great questions arise in dealing with the key time periods within the Agricultural Age. The rise of the missionary religions obviously had great potential impact on social structure – particularly in arguing that all people were spiritually equal. It could also bear on family life or childhood. Religious differences could have major effects, for example with the distinctive Christian hostility to homosexuality that emerged either in the later Roman Empire or in the early postclassical centuries. In some aspects of society, religion probably counted for a lot – as in attacks on traditional practices of infanticide. In other cases, particularly concerning social inequality, the impact may have been surprisingly modest, or at least indirect. A host of interesting questions result.

Attention to social themes can also challenge comparison among regions. Women, for example, were treated as inferiors in all the agricultural societies, under the system known as patriarchy. Did it make much difference, to women, which particular version of inferiority was in play? Do we need to know more than that inferiority was commonplace? Again, debate is possible: yet different societies introduced quite different implementations of patriarchy, including extremes such as Chinese footbinding.

Attention to social themes should also be crosschecked against other key themes, most obviously around population trends and disease, but also in the cultural area.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why has social history been gaining so much scholarly attention? Are social history topics as important as more conventional subjects in political or intellectual history?
2. What are the most important social changes to examine within the Agricultural Age?
3. What additional social themes should be examined as part of the exploration of world history? Example: is it possible to imagine a history of mental illness on a global scale?