

Article

Understanding Research Methodology: Social History and the Reformation Period in Europe

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of the social-historical methodology, highlights relevant scholarship on this approach, and offers specific examples of studies on the Reformation period in Europe that use the social-historical method. I begin by explaining how the social-historical methodology, otherwise known as new social history, originated from the historical method. While highlighting key scholarship on this approach, I outline how the social-historical method differs from the historical method. I also present two essential methodological features of social history, including using sources in new, more analytical ways. I conclude by presenting specific examples of how historians of the early modern period, such as Kirsi Stjerna and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, apply the social-historical method in their own studies. This last section focuses on works that explore women's history, family life, work, and witchcraft, primarily during the Reformation period in Europe. My goal is to provide a resource for emerging young scholars, such as undergraduate students and newly admitted graduate students, who are interested in strengthening their own work by better understanding the social-historical research method and how it is used in the study of history and religion.



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1. Introduction

When I started out as a young academic, I was always being asked by my professors about my specific research method or methodology. I remember having a difficult time accurately defining the framework of my own research methodology because I was not able to find many relevant and published academic sources that provided a comprehensive explanation of the social-historical method, especially within a religious studies context.¹ This article ensures that essential conversations about research methodology in the study of history and religion, especially those addressing the social-historical method, remain current and ongoing.² I begin this article by explaining how the social-historical methodology, otherwise known as new social history, originated from the historical method. While highlighting key scholarship on this approach, I outline how the social-historical method differs from the historical method. I also present two essential methodological features of social history, including using sources in new, more analytical ways. This article concludes by presenting specific examples of how historians of the early modern period, such as Kirsi Stjerna and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, apply the social-historical method in their own studies. This last section focuses on works that explore women's history, family life, work, and witchcraft, primarily during the Reformation period in Europe. My goal is to provide a valuable resource for emerging young scholars, such as undergraduate students and newly admitted graduate students, who are interested in strengthening their own work by better understanding the social-historical research method and how it is used in the study of history and religion.

2. What Is the Historical Method?

According to Natalie Davis, history, as a field, offers scholars “ideas, points of view, perspectives, landmarks, indices—possibilities” (Davis et al. 2010, p. 67). Historians use a common investigative technique called the historical method to explore these perspectives and possibilities.³ It is the historian’s task to “find and communicate the strangeness and the familiar in the past” through exploring, organizing, and studying collected sources and data (Davis et al. 2010, p. 122). The historical method provides a contextual framework to accomplish such tasks by outlining how to discover historical data, interpret, present, and piece together evidence to formulate conclusions about proposed research questions (Lange 2013, p. 13). Following from this, the historical method may be defined as an organized body of rules and principles created in order to help historians successfully collect historical sources, evaluate them, and present a synthesis of the results.⁴

The historical method emerged during the nineteenth century when the study of Western history first became standardized within universities and research centers (Iggers 2005, p. 23). Once the study of history became standardized, theorists, including Leopold von Ranke, began to express certain assumptions about “proper” historical inquiries and “acceptable” research methodologies (Hoeffler 2011, p. 68).⁵ Ranke held two main assumptions. He maintained that histories are theories of truth that portray real people who existed and actions that really took place. Second, he argued that the historian has no other task than to narrate historical events “as they happened” (Bloch 1953, p. 138). Traditional historians generally adopted these two basic assumptions. They further argued that the proper focus for all historical study was political history and the “great men” who existed. Conventional historians also maintained that history should be written as historical narratives in order to explain events “as they happened” (Himmelfarb 1987, p. 1). Traditional historians presented historical facts and events as stories worth writing about “for their own sake” or simply as a story that should be told (McDowell 2002, p. 12). Throughout the nineteenth century, Ranke’s assumptions became the foundation for traditional historical inquiries and essentially determined the structure for conventional historical studies and research methodologies (Iggers 2005, p. 31).

3. Origins of the Social-Historical Method

However, by the end of the nineteenth century, this perspective received much criticism as many historians were unsatisfied with the Rankean model (Iggers 2005, p. 2). Many historians, such as Jacob Burckhardt, Karl Lamprecht, and James Robinson, rejected the basic premise of the “old history” method. Instead, they began to emphasize a “new history” that went beyond political history and embraced social and cultural factors as significant topics that were worth including in historical studies.

During the twentieth century, historians, such as Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, continued to assert similar criticisms and pushed for innovative research methods that would move beyond simply focusing on the “political” in order to include a broader “human history” within scholarship about history (Burke 1992, p. 14). They believed that by engaging with other academic disciplines, a novel research method that embraced all human activities in society could replace the “old” one. Bloch and Febvre argued that this new, more interdisciplinary method could greatly benefit historians and the study of history overall. This perspective was continued by Fernand Braudel, Febvre’s successor, who maintained that an interdisciplinary approach to history was essential in exploring the “human experience as a whole” (Burke 1992, p. 15). Indeed, this was when the historical method became “linked more closely to the empirical social sciences”, which changed the way historians approached history and historical methodology (Iggers 2005, p. 31). Martha Howell argues that “the enduring connections between the social sciences and history have contributed to what many scholars today would characterize as a blurring of boundaries among the disciplines” (Howell and Prevenier 2001, p. 95). By “blurring the boundaries” between history and the social sciences, historians were able to embrace innovative and interdisciplinary approaches that were not adopted by traditional historical

methodologies. Such interdisciplinary approaches provided historians with “new ways of thinking about how human beings organize themselves into groups, whether by family, community, or class” (Howell and Prevenier 2001, pp. 89–90). These new ways of thinking were concerned with all human activities and were shaped by various disciplines such as anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology (Sreedharan 2007, pp. 24–28). As Darren Slade argues, even the term “social-historical” itself “suggests a compilation of diverse methods, particularly historical-descriptive, theoretical, and social-analytic forms of inquiry” (Slade 2020, p. 12). The social-historical method or new social history originated from these interdisciplinary ways of thinking about history. The method strongly emphasized social and cultural contexts and influences while incorporating basic aspects of the traditional historical research methodology (Rahikainen and Fellman 2012, p. 5).

4. How Is the Social-Historical Method Different?

New social history sharply contrasts with the “old history” in two important ways.⁶ First, historians, such as Lamprecht, Robinson, Febvre, and Bloch, were opposed to the extent to which political history dominated the discipline and they adopted an approach that emphasized the inclusion of social and cultural factors (Marwick 1971, pp. 90–94). Where the “old history” typically examined legislation, politics, diplomacy, foreign policy, wars, and revolutions, the “new history” shifted its focus towards social problems, institutions, communities, family, sex, birth, and death. Allan Megill et al. argues that these historians changed the ways in which they studied the past and this influenced, perhaps, the most important methodological shift towards a new social history.⁷ Megill further argues that the rise of the “new history” broadened “the vision of historians [and the discipline], bringing to view aspects of the human past that were once ignored or underrated” (Megill et al. 2007, pp. 1–3). In other words, it emphasized looking at society more broadly speaking, including various aspects that affected religion that were once neglected, such as gender (Slade 2020, p. 3).⁸ Incorporating these new research areas is certainly one strength of this method because this shift has made it possible for historians to provide a more meaningful account of the factors that influenced the course of history (McDowell 2002, p. 20). It not only provided a new way of thinking about underrated topics, such as women and gender, but also made historians re-think their approach. For instance, E.H. Carr argues that when conventional historians focused solely on “great men” without considering social forces, they mistakenly placed these men outside of history and suggested that these men could impose their will on history. Carr argues that, instead, these men should be considered as individuals who not only shaped social forces, but who were also shaped by them (Carr 1961, pp. 54–56). In short, scholars describe the “old” method as a “history from above” or “elitist history”, while the new method is a “history from below” or a “populist history” (Himmelfarb 1987, pp. 14–15).

New social history or the social-historical method has received some criticism for problematizing the traditional concern of the historian, that being political history and great male leaders. For example, those who defend traditional historical methods, such as Gertrude Himmelfarb, were concerned with what might happen if the new social history came to completely dominate the discipline. She wrote: “What does it imply about one’s sense of the past and of the present [. . .] past and present devoid of the principles of liberty and rights, checks and balances, self-government and good government?” (Himmelfarb 1987, pp. 14–15). However, such criticisms are often taken too far because the social historian’s main purpose is to recover parts of history that have typically been overlooked or neglected. The new social history method also does not completely deny the significance of political history as a legitimate historical study (McDowell 2002, p. 16). Instead, new social historians emphasize researching the lives of ordinary people, actions of individuals, and social movements, while investigating what these elements have to say about society. Natalie Davis explains in her own words: “I do savor the individual persons I write about, but I’m probably more interested in the way individual life is an opening toward the society around him or her” (Davis et al. 2010, p. 74).

Second, the new social history differs from the “old history” because it is not entirely narrative, but rather more analytical.⁹ Bloch and Febvre criticized conventional history for this limitation and they argued that the new social historian would be “less concerned with the narrative of events than with the analysis of [social] structures” (Burke 1992, p. 14). The new social method does not present historical facts entirely in narrative form, but rather incorporates problem-solving and innovative investigative approaches. This new approach has received some criticism from conventional historians who argued that it fails to capture the dynamic movement of history. However, even though the social-historical method is “less concerned” with narrative, it does not mean that it rejects it altogether; it combines narrative elements with critical analyses which places those events into wider social and cultural contexts (McDowell 2002, p. 16). For social historians, traditional historical narratives provide only a basic descriptive account of history with inadequate analytical content. In other words, the conventional historian inquires: What happened? How did it happen? By comparison, the new social historian critically asks: *Why* did it happen?

5. Two Features of the Social-Historical Method

Using the social-historical method to answer *why* certain events occurred relies on two essential methodological features that are strongly associated with one another. One main feature is that the method helps to make sense of the past through researching and organizing whatever historical traces have been left behind.¹⁰ These traces can range from different materials such as printed sources and visual images, to archaeological sites. For Davis: “The sources [...] are a magic thread that links me to people long since dead and with situations that have crumbled to dust. The sources set off my reflection and imagination, I stay in dialogue with them [...] this liaison with the past is the heart of my vocation as historian” (Davis et al. 2010, p. 22). Indeed, the sources are instrumental to the social historian, which points to a methodological disadvantage. The social-historical method cannot create or formulate its own data. Therefore, the social historian must heavily rely on the presence and accessibility of sources because they cannot critically analyze historical phenomena that lack the appropriate data.

The most widely consulted available materials are primary and secondary sources. Written records such as letters, reports, and diaries that were composed at the time when the specific events took place are primary sources. These tend to possess a higher status than items written later (Cantor and Schneider 1986, p. 39). These materials do not have to possess original thought or show any literary skill to be considered a useful primary source. For example, many social historians, such as Davis, examine periods in which many individuals were illiterate, so there is a concern for finding appropriate sources—“not only where these sources were, but what they were [...] a journeymen’s initiate rite, a village festive organization, an informal gathering of women [...] could be ‘read’ as fruitfully as a diary, a political tract, a sermon, or a body of laws” (Davis 1975, p. xvi). For these historians, literary skill is therefore not as significant as how the sources may be “read” or what they might have to say about a society and cultural traditions.

By comparison, materials that were written after the event took place, which use primary sources and contain factual or interpretative materials, are secondary sources. Secondary sources are written by individuals who were not present at the events they describe. However, this is not to say that secondary sources are not still useful. On the contrary, they help to organize facts and interpretations. Primary sources or “the traces that are left behind” help social historians collect information about the past while reflecting upon opinions and interpretations from relevant secondary sources.¹¹ It is for this reason that the social historian should critically evaluate historical events using a combination of both primary and secondary sources.

The second feature of the social-historical approach is moving beyond presenting simple narratives to critically analyzing the data that has been collected from the primary and secondary sources. After researching, the social historian addresses complex problems and

investigates them by “dissecting them into their component parts and their relationships” (Elton 1968, pp. 116–17). The social historian must also subjectively interpret past events based on the source data that is available.¹² By critically analyzing historical materials, the social historian is composing “not a mosaic but a painting in which the canvas is covered several times over with different pigments and patterns, until an amalgam of colour and design emerges from the repeated process” (Elton 1968, pp. 47–50).

6. Studies on the Reformation Period in Europe

Examples of how historians of the early modern period apply the social-historical method can be shown by exploring works that address women’s history, family life, work, and witchcraft, especially during the Reformation period in Europe. There are three ways such scholars use the social-historical methodology. These three approaches can be found throughout each example that is provided, but each approach is also be individually highlighted by the examined works in this article. First, historians, such as Kirsi Stjerna and Roland Bainton, apply the social-historical method by examining previously neglected topics such as women and the social and cultural factors affecting women and their lives. Second, historians, such as Merry Wiesner-Hanks, Steven Ozment, and Heide Wunder, study and organize both primary and secondary sources to create a dialogue and liaison with the past. Third, historians, such as Lyndal Roper and Jonathan Durrant, use innovative investigative approaches and critically analyze information in order to piece together complex components to help make sense of women’s historical experiences and lives during the Reformation period.

Historians who apply the social-historical method examine new research topics and previously undervalued questions, such as women and women’s lives, while placing them within a wider social and cultural context.¹³ Women’s history has often been neglected by conventional historians who did not acknowledge such broader social and cultural influences. However, historians began to address “mothers, sisters, wives, daughters or mistresses” (Wunder 1998). Once ignored or underrated, such women were now being represented in many remarkable works, especially studies on the Protestant Reformation and women.¹⁴ The works by Kirsi Stjerna and Roland Bainton are two good examples of this progress. These studies apply the social-historical method by focusing on women and women’s lives, especially women during the Protestant Reformation. Bainton provides two reasons for pursuing this topic. He states: “I have always had an interest in those who have not had their due [. . .] and to assess the impact of the Reformation on the social order” (Bainton 1971, p. 9). Similarly, Stjerna argues: “Their stories [women’s stories] call for a re-examination of Reformation history and theology and for a consideration of the actual benefits and losses generated by the Reformation for women in particular” (Stjerna 2009, p. 2). She also notes the importance of addressing individuals who have previously been neglected by traditional scholarship, including women. It is for this reason that she focuses on women who represent different geographical, social, and cultural contexts. These two works interpret women’s biographies in light of the reformers’ teachings about women’s role in society and the Church. Stjerna and Bainton both present and critically analyze the biographies of women who maintained different roles, including political, religious, or household roles, during the Reformation period. Through critically evaluating sources, these historians attempt to answer similar questions that were previously posed by Davis: Who were these women? What kind of a reformer were they? How did they understand themselves as a reformer? What were their opinions? What impact did the Reformation have on their lives? (Davis 1975).

The second way that historians apply the social-historical methodology is by referring to primary and secondary source materials, which is a key feature of this method. Social historians rely on historical sources that tell scholars more about social and cultural influences. For example, historians of the early modern period explore women’s family lives and their relation to the household in attempts to explain how these factors influenced women’s historical experiences.¹⁵ Two notable studies investigate this topic: Steven Ozment’s work

titled *When Fathers Rule: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Ozment 1983) and Lyndal Roper on *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Roper 1989). These two studies discuss women's history and examine how social factors, such as marriage and family life, affected women's lives. Specifically, these two works explore the domestication of the Reformation through weddings, marriages, spousal duties, and bearing and rearing children, among many other topics. Apart from focusing on women and their social contexts, these scholars also use the social-historical method by primarily examining primary source materials. While Roper's primary sources mainly focus on state records, Ozment engages with self-conscious reports by contemporary observers and participants. These sources derive from individuals who assessed contemporary beliefs and practices and reflected on them within their own lives and societies. For instance, Ozment includes medical tracts which were used as guides for midwives and pregnant women, "housefather" books, guides to estate management, martial relations, childbirth, and moral court records. Ozment argues that these various primary sources allow scholars to approach family life in Reformation Europe "on the level at which people actually lived [. . .] through these sources we can listen sympathetically as people comment on themselves and their times both by word and by deed, speaking their minds and venting their emotions on the subjects of marriage and parenthood" (Ozment 1983, pp. 2–3). By analyzing primary sources, Ozment attempts to reconstruct attitudes toward marriage and parenthood in Reformation Europe, especially focusing on the father figure.¹⁶

Works by Merry Wiesner-Hanks and Heide Wunder also provide good examples of how historians of the early modern period, who apply the social-historical method, use primary and secondary source materials in order to create a dialogue with the past. For example, women's work identity and economic roles have typically been an overlooked aspect of women's lives and social contexts during the Reformation period. When trying to find sources on women's work, Wiesner-Hanks states: "By now I would think [. . .] that no archivist would answer a researcher looking for information on women's work, as one did me fifteen years ago, 'Oh, we have no material on that. Women didn't work in this city in the sixteenth century . . . '" (Wiesner-Hanks 1998, p. 130). With these sources, Wiesner-Hanks and Wunder focus on women's work identity and concepts of work through combining reproductive as well as productive activities.¹⁷ Both scholars define reproductive not simply as childbearing, but also the care and nurturing of the entire family, which allowed them to successfully take part in productive labour. Wunder argues that "the purpose of this argument was to impart a positive quality to women's work in the private household, which, in and of itself, is considered to be merely reproductive" (Wunder 1998, p. 67). This was the case for late medieval and early modern societies, where production often occurred in the household and every family member participated in productive and reproductive labour (Wiesner-Hanks 1998, p. 129). Through their research on primary sources, such as written accounts, visual images, and guild and court records, Wiesner-Hanks and Wunder both explore work and other economic activities associated with women, the family, and the household. Wiesner-Hanks also refers to unprinted primary sources located in archives in Germany and France and asserts that "there are very few published sources about any of these women, which has meant hundreds of hours in city, church, and state archives, but has also resulted in a much broader understanding of both the ideological meaning and the actual circumstances of women's work lives" (Wiesner-Hanks 1998, p. 130). From researching and collecting primary sources, Wiesner-Hanks and Wunder critically analyze how social and economic structural changes were reflected throughout society by gender-specific labour divisions.¹⁸

Finally, historians of the early modern period who use the social-historical method do not simply present the information that they discover as simple narratives. Rather, narratives are combined with event details and critically analyzed in order to examine each topic within broader social contexts. Social historians take complex problems and investigate them by looking at each of their "components" or parts. For example, scholars, including Lyndal Roper and Jonathan Durrant, apply the social-historical method by

analyzing women's social and cultural circumstances relating to witchcraft during the early modern period in Europe.¹⁹ These scholars consider how each of these individual parts relate to sex and gender while attempting to explain why certain events or situations occurred in history. The works by Roper and Durrant explain why women were often accused of witchcraft and they critically evaluate the root causes of these accusations. Roper argues that social factors such as property, political power, age, or marital status significantly influenced accusations (Roper 1994, p. 201). Durrant also points out that witchcraft accusations related to society's views surrounding sexual guilt, sin, and, predominately, maternity (Durrant 2007, pp. 181–85). Through examining primary sources such as court cases, trial records, legal codes, and wood-cuttings, Roper investigates two sides of the story: "The fears of those who accused, and the self-understanding of people who in the end [. . .] came to see themselves as witches" (Roper 1994, pp. 201–2). Durrant takes a slightly different approach by noting that "locating sociality in witchcraft confession narratives requires a different methodology" to those that may be used in reading witchcraft accusation narratives and pamphlets (Durrant 2007, pp. 90–91). For Durrant, examining confession narratives are more difficult because they are a mixture of different voices, including the accused, the suspect, and the witness. He argues that applying a social-historical perspective helps historians, including himself, illuminate and critically analyze sources, which can tell scholars more about the social and cultural worlds in which these women, accused of being witches, existed.

7. Conclusions

While highlighting relevant scholarship on the social-historical methodology, the first section of this paper explained how the social-historical method originated from the historical method. By "blurring the boundaries" or engaging with other academic disciplines, the social-historical approach provides historians with innovative ways of thinking about how individuals, including women, organized themselves throughout history. This methodology broadened the vision of historians to include social and cultural influences within historical studies. By providing specific examples of studies that explore women's history, family life, work, and witchcraft, primarily during the Reformation period in Europe, this article concluded by outlining how prominent scholars use the social-historical method in their own works. As these various examples show, many of these historians address new research areas that were often outside the realm of conventional and "proper" historical studies, such as gender and women's history. These examples also demonstrate that social historians rely on primary and secondary sources, as well as critically investigate and analyze what these sources tell scholars about society and culture in the past. These works, among others, have broadened the discipline of history and religion and have provided new ways of thinking about the human experience by investigating the *why*, rather than the *what* or *how*.

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Notes

- ¹ During my research, I discovered that most studies focused solely on the historical method without saying anything specific about the social-historical methodology itself, or that most studies were simply outdated, with many of them dating back to the 1950s and 1960s.
- ² For one of the most recent and relevant articles on this topic, see (Slade 2020). Slade's work approaches this topic differently than this article. For instance, he offers a "definitional dissection" of the prefix "socio-" and suffix "-historical" while also outlining six unique principles of the social-historical method. One principle details how the social-historical method, while multi-disciplinary, does not necessitate the use of any and all social-scientific fields

or theories. Another explains that the social-historical method is not the same as the sociology of religion. Unlike this article, Slade does not focus on discussing examples of specific academic works that use the social-historical method, but rather briefly explores how this research method can be used in the study of Christianity and ancient apocalypticism (Slade 2020, pp. 5–8). Apart from Slade’s article, I continue to find a lack of published resources for students on the social-historical method, especially recently published works.

For more information on using the historical method in religious studies, see (Rüpke 2011, pp. 285–309).

See (Shafter and Bennett 1980).

Ranke significantly influenced the historical profession, especially during the nineteenth century, as it emerged in Europe and the United States.

For an example of a study that takes a conventional historical approach, see (Childs 1979).

One new way of studying the past included applying a psychoanalytical interpretation. While there are scholars who see the value in using this approach (Roper 1994), others have criticized the method for relying far too much on a-priori theories than “actual” evidence (Himmelfarb 1987, p. 14).

Due to this, there is an overlap with gender history. Historians such as Joan Wallach Scott who have emphasized the importance of social history and studying gender throughout history have helped to significantly shape the field of gender history, see (Scott 1986, 2010); see also Louise Tilly’s article on “Gender, Women’s History, and Social History” (Tilly 1989).

Merry Wiesner-Hanks’ work titled: *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reformation Practice* is a good example of a recent study that is not solely concerned with presenting a narrative of the historical events, but places more emphasis on providing a deeper analysis (Wiesner-Hanks 2005).

For information on the essential features of the historical method, see (Gottschalk 1950, pp. 27–29).

For more information on archival sources, see (Gunn and Faire 2012).

Some critics consider historical impartiality and subjectivity to be a weakness of the social-historical method. However, those who practice subjectivity, like Davis, argue that it can actually be a positive aspect: “For me, ‘subjectivity’ isn’t just a philosophical question [. . .] subjectivity is also a daily practice. I want to push my research as far as I can in order to discover and understand the mental and affective worlds of persons and communities of the past” (Davis et al. 2010, p. 122).

For example, see (Wiesner-Hanks 1993).

See (Abrams and Harvey 1997; Muravyeva and Toivo 2013).

For information on marriage, martial duties, and sex in early modern society, see (Somerville 1995, pp. 114–34).

Similarly, Roper critically analyzes the sources that she has collected in order to determine how the Protestant Reformation affected marriage and family life (Roper 1989, p. 4).

See also (Clark 1992; Cahn 1987; Howell 1986; Wiesner-Hanks 1986a).

See also (Wiesner-Hanks 1986b, pp. 191–205).

For an example of a similar study, see (Brauner and Brown 1995).

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