

Loftur Guttormsson:

The breakthrough of social history in Icelandic historiography

(Published in *Nordic Historiography in the 20th Century*, pp. 265–279 (Tid og tanke 5). Eds. Frank Meyer & Jan Eivind Myhre. Department of History, University of Oslo, 2000)

There is no simple way of delimiting the scope and range of social history within the broad field of historical research. In the context of English historiography Adrian Wilson has distinguished between three different yet overlapping approaches: First, the history of the people; second, the ‘social-history paradigm’, consisting in the historical application of concepts derived from the social sciences; and third, the aspiration to a totalising history which has been called ‘the history of society’.¹ The breakthrough of social history referred to in the title of this article, comprises mainly Wilson’s two first approaches. On the one hand, the “history of the people’s” approach including the perspective associated with “history from below” which emerged in reaction against a predominantly state- and politically oriented history. On the other hand, the social science orientation of historical research which is widely acknowledged as one of the main characteristics of the so-called social history paradigm which took root in western academic milieus in the 1960s and early 1970s.² By contrast, the third approach is of a very limited relevance to the development of social history in Iceland.

In comparison with Continental Europe, social history as defined above developed belatedly in Iceland. It was not until the late 1970s and the early 1980s that it emerged as a dynamic perspective appealing particularly to a younger generation of historians born around the Second World War and thereafter.

The aim of this paper is, firstly, to illustrate the background and the antecedents of the belated emergence of the social history approach in Iceland.³ Secondly, to analyse the theoretical perspectives and methodological trends which

¹ Adrian Wilson, A critical portrait of social history, in Adrian Wilson (ed.), *Rethinking social history. English society 1570–1920 and its interpretation*, Manchester 1993, p. 9.

² Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century. From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Hanover and London 1997, pp. 43–47, 51–77; Inga Floto, *Historie. Nyere og nyeste tid* (Videnskabernes historie i det 20. århundrede), Copenhagen 1985), pp. 143–152; Reinhard Rürup, Einführung, in *Historische Sozialwissenschaft. Beiträge zur Einführung in die Forschungspraxis*, Göttingen 1977, pp. 5–15.

³ In the Icelandic context I prefer to use the terms “approach” or “perspective” rather than the more ambitious concept “paradigm”, as a way of characterizing these trends and currents. In this respect I tend to follow the example of Norwegian historians rather than that of a number of Danish colleagues.

characterized social historical works in their initial phases, and to assess the novelty of the social-history approach in the context of the Icelandic historiographical tradition. Thirdly, to examine briefly in what way and to what extent this approach has been affected during the last fifteen years by the perspectives associated with cultural history, micro-history and postmodernistic trends.

Late beginnings

History as an academic discipline constituted from the very beginning an integral part of Icelandic studies –*íslensk fræði*– which comprised the study of Icelandic literature, language (or philology) and history. It was not until 1965 that history as an academic discipline became a fully independent subject at the University of Iceland leading to B.A. degree and further to M.A. degree (until 1990 the latter used to be termed “cand.mag.” degree in Iceland).⁴

The long-lasting inclusion of history within the broad field of *íslensk fræði* had a deep influence on what kinds of methodology and subject matter were deemed most relevant and worthy of historical investigation. Historical research remained firmly rooted in the philological tradition. Thus, medieval times constituted the predilected area of research where a critical evaluation of the classical sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) and of the contemporary sagas (e.g. *Sturlunga* and *Biskupasögur*) was increasingly emphasized. Among the five historians who obtained tenure in history at the University during the period 1911–1951, four specialized in medieval and early modern history.⁵ The early modern period tended to be viewed in a very negative light as it encompassed Iceland as a dependency of the Danish crown, the introduction of Lutherianism and the establishment of the Danish monopoly trade.

The institutional set-up and scholarly preferences mentioned above reflected a predominantly nationalistic conception of history according to which the Free State (*þjóðveldið*) constituted the golden age of Icelandic history. At the same time, the Free State represented a political ideal which was to be cultivated in the Icelandic people’s struggle for independence of the Danish kingdom. With the exception of the first appointed professor of history at the University, Jón J. Aðils, who specialized in the history of the monopoly trade, Icelandic academic historians emphasized political

⁴ Ingi Sigurðsson, *Íslensk sagnfræði frá miðri 19. öld til miðrar 20. aldar* (Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 15), Reykjavík 1986, p. 32.

and cultural trends which they tended to depict as a gradual process of decline and regression until the first signs of national regeneration emerged in the age of Enlightenment and Romanticism. At the same time, this development was presented as the narrative of leading historical figures and aristocratic personalities.⁶ While the internal strifes between these leading personalities were portrayed in colourful terms, scant attention was normally paid to the analysis of the socio-economic background of their political and cultural authority. Obviously, investigation into the nature of the relationship between those in authority and the common people was not on the order of the day, probably because it risked to unveil the existence of conflicting interests and, simultaneously, to undermine the long-cherished belief in the historical continuity of national unity.

However, once independence was achieved in 1944, the liberal, nationalistic view of Icelandic history summarized here inevitably in a very simplified form, gradually lost its appeal and credibility, in particular among the younger generation. In the words of one of the social historians of the 1980s, Icelanders need no longer “look at the society of the past as constituting one consensual bloc and there are good arguments for maintaining that in some cases, Icelanders have been worst to their fellow countrymen ...”.⁷

Interestingly enough, beside the nationalistic trend which prevailed among the few academic historians of the period, a more popular kind of historical writing was practiced by amateur historians, the so-called *sagnaþættir*.⁸ On the one hand, this popular historical writing was rooted in the saga tradition as well as the oral tradition which in the course of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century was gradually recorded and published.⁹ On the other hand, at a more advanced stage, popular historical writing was influenced by the development of historical ethnology exemplified by Troels Lund’s monumental work, *Dagligt liv i Norden i det 16de aarhundrede*.¹⁰ It was partly under the influence of this work that

⁵ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson, Sagatradition og historietradition på Island (unpublished paper cited with the permission of the author).

⁶ See Loftur Guttormsson, *Kristni á Íslandi, 3.b. Frá siðaskiptum til upplýsingar*, Reykjavík 2000, p. 10.

⁷ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, Íslensk söguendurskoðun, *Saga. Tímarit Sögufélags* 33/1995, p. 67.

⁸ See Ingi Sigurðsson, *Íslensk sagnfræði*, pp. 44–52.

⁹ See, e.g., Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Sagnaþættir og þjóðsögur* 1–12, Reykjavík 1940–1957. It is interesting to note that in the meantime, Guðni Jónsson (1901–1974) had completed a doctoral thesis, an in-depth study of a locality in southern Iceland. He was appointed professor of history at the University in 1957.

¹⁰ Troels Lund’s work was originally published in 14 volumes in the period 1879–1901.

Jónas Jónasson (1856-1918), a rural pastor, portrayed the folkways of early modern and nineteenth century Iceland in a work published posthumously.¹¹ In contrast to the political perspective of academic history, these historical narratives represented a specific version of the “history from below”. By focusing on the memorable episodes and the everyday life of the common people they tended to disregard entirely the world of politics and power games which had been the main concern of current academic history.

Even if the works of amateur historians were welcomed and warmly received by the general public, they did not by themselves challenge seriously the prevailing liberal, nationalistic view. For this the intervention of professional historians was required. This is what happened in the 1940s and 1950s. On the one hand, economic history found an energetic spokesman in the person of Þorkell Jóhannesson (1895-1960), professor of history at the University during the last sixteen years of his life.¹² On the other hand, among those questioning the nationalistic view were historians outside the academic community, particularly Sverrir Kristjánsson (1908-1976) and Björn Þorsteinsson (1917-1985), both active members of the Socialist Party. While Kristjánsson’s main field of research was nineteenth century politics and society, Þorsteinsson was a medievalist specializing in the history of the fifteenth century. However, both were inspired by marxism either in its classical German form (in the case of Kristjánsson) or mediated by the English school of marxist historians (in the case of Þorsteinsson).¹³ It has been argued convincingly that the marxist tendencies of these two historians were considerably inhibited by their involvement in the struggle against the presence of American armed forces in post-war Iceland.¹⁴ However, as far as Þorsteinsson is concerned it is evident that in several of surveys of the development of medieval society published in the 1960s and 1970s, he lays more and more stress on the impact of social differentiation and social conflicts between the landowning aristocracy and the common people (tenants/crofters).¹⁵

¹¹ Jónas Jónasson, *Íslenzkir þjóðhættir*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Reykjavík 1934.

¹² Jóhannesson’s main field of research was agrarian history – what corresponded nicely to his political loyalty as member of the “Progressive Party” whose main support came from the rural population and the Cooperative movement.

¹³ Concerning these currents, see Inga Floto, *Historie. Nyere og nyeste tid*, pp. 192–200.

¹⁴ On Þorsteinsson’s view of history see Helgi Þorláksson, ”Stéttakúgun eða samfylking bænda. Um söguskoðun Björns Þorsteinssonar”. *Saga og kirkja. Afmælisrit Magnúsar Mús Lárussonar*, Reykjavík 1988, pp. 185–191.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 188–191.

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked important changes in the institutional setting of history teaching and historical research at the University. During this period the University experienced a rapid expansion in terms of student enrolment and teaching staff. For the first time history as an academic discipline counted several full-time members at a time. It was no doubt of importance for the development of revisionistic views among history students that in the early 1970s, Björn Þorsteinsson got a tenure at the University together with a somewhat younger colleague, Jón Guðnason, who shared more or less his marxist tendencies.¹⁶ In addition, a few years later Gunnar Karlsson became a member of the faculty. They all opened up new fields of research which corresponded to the social and political preoccupations of the post-independence period. This is true of Jón Guðnason's research in capitalist and working class developments as well as Gunnar Karlsson's local in-depth study of the social and cultural background of nineteenth century political mobilization for the nationalistic cause.¹⁷

During the 1970s the establishment of professional contacts with Nordic colleagues, mainly through Icelandic participation in the Congresses of Nordic Historians and the Nordic Methodology Conferences, represented another important contribution of the new team to the reorientation of historical research. History students, some of whom were still preparing their M.A. degree, got acquainted with the mainstream of Nordic historical research through their participation in projects, e.g., those concerned with the late medieval depopulation (*Ødegårdsprojektet*), the transatlantic migrations of the 19th century, the urbanization process in the Nordic countries, poor law administration, etc.¹⁸ There is no doubt that the integration of Icelandic historians within the mainstream of Nordic and European historical research was a major contributing factor to the promotion of the social history perspective in the "saga island" itself.

A social-history breakthrough

Despite the revisionistic tendencies and the reorientation of historical research which characterized the 1970s, the breakthrough of a new approach, let alone a new

¹⁶ Jón Guðnason was the son of professor Guðni Jónsson mentioned above.

¹⁷ This was the main subject of Gunnar Karlsson's doctoral thesis, *Sjálfstæðisbarátta suður-þingeyinga og Jón á Gautlöndum*, Reykjavík 1978.

paradigm, did not become a reality until the early 1980s. For this belated breakthrough one can detect several reasons which will be discussed briefly below.

Even if marxism contributed effectively to the emergence of structural history as opposed to the narration of individual events and personalities,¹⁹ it did not produce a characteristic “history from below” perspective. With the help of source materials which lent themselves to quantitative treatment, emphasis was laid on clarifying the placement of different classes and social groups within the larger social system whereas qualitative sources giving voice to the life-experiences of the lower social groups, were largely ignored. This was so because in accordance with the marxist tradition, the social – let alone the cultural – component of historical reality tended to be conceived as secondary to the economic one. This conception was likely to remain unchanged as long as social history was practiced, essentially, as an offshoot of economic history.²⁰

Expectedly, the notion of structural history in the 1970s was affected to some extent by the quantitative methodology of the social sciences, particularly economics and demography. However, this methodology seems to have had very limited impact on historical writing as currently practiced during this period. Thus, articles published in *Saga. Tímarit Sögufélags* (the Icelandic Historical Review) in the 1970s, contain very few cases where information is being processed and presented in the form of tables and graphs.²¹ On the whole, the number of articles which can reasonably be classified as belonging to social history is very limited. At this time social history was far from occupying a prominent place on the pages of the official organ of Icelandic historians. Advancing in the shadow of specialized research reports and dissertations, it remained, as it were, largely in the trenches.

Whether one looks at research results published in specialized periodicals or in book form, the early 1980s constitute a turning point in this respect. Mention will here only be made of the main works published during this period by the six most prominent social historians, focusing on different aspects of early modern and nineteenth-century Icelandic society. Thus Bragi Guðmundsson analyzed the socio-

¹⁸ Among those taking active part in these Nordic projects, one should mention particularly the following historians “coming of age” in the 1970s: Björn Teitsson, Helgi Skúli Kjartansson and Gisli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson.

¹⁹ See Jürgen Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte*, 2nd edition, Göttingen 1986, pp. 77–80.

²⁰ During this period the most important works in Icelandic economic history were produced abroad, by professor Björn Lárússon at the Institute of Economic History, University of Lund (Sweden). They became influential among the younger generation of Icelandic historians in the 1970s.

economic stratification of early modern society²² while Guðmundur Hálfðanarson studied the demographic development of the eighteenth-century Iceland, with emphasis on “crisis mortality”.²³ Guðmundur Jónsson examined the servant population as a social group in the nineteenth century;²⁴ Gísli Gunnarsson analyzed the interaction between the Danish monopoly trade and Icelandic social system, with special reference to its demographic aspects;²⁵ Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson studied poverty and poor relief in nineteenth century Reykjavík;²⁶ lastly, Loftur Guttormsson studied literacy and family history in the early modern period.²⁷

The works of these authors can be qualified as paradigmatic for the social history approach as defined above. Their main characteristics will be summarized in the following.

Firstly, in contrast to the “revisionist” historians of the 1970s,²⁸ the social historians of the early 1980s applied systematically concepts and methods borrowed from the social sciences. This was done overtly by some, more tacitly by others.²⁹ The disciplines which served most widely as theoretical and methodological models were demography, sociology, economics and to some extent, anthropology.³⁰

Secondly, as far as source material is concerned, the use of micro-demographic sources such as parish registers, catechetical registers (*sálnaregistur*) which so far had not been used to any large extent by historians, played a strategic role in the formation

²¹ For a few exceptions see *Saga. Tímarit Sögufélags* 9/1971, and 16/1978.

²² Bragi Guðmundsson, *Efnamenn og eignir þeirra um 1700 . Athugun á íslenskum gósseigendum í jarðabók Árna og Páls og fleiri heimildum* (Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 14), Reykjavík 1985.

²³ Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Fólksfjöldaþróun Íslands á 18. öld*. M.A. dissertation at the University of Iceland.

²⁴ Guðmundur Jónsson, *Vinnuhjú á 19. öld* (Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 5), Reykjavík, 1981.

²⁵ Gísli Gunnarsson, *Monopoly Trade and Economic Stagnation: Studies in the Foreign Trade of Iceland 1602-1787*, Lund 1983, and *Fertility and Nuptiality in Iceland's Demographic History* (Meddelande från ekonomisk-historiska institutionen 32), Lund 1983.

²⁶ Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson, *Ómagar og utangarðsfólk. Fátækramál Reykjavíkur 1786-1907* (Safn til sögu Reykjavíkur), Reykjavík 1982.

²⁷ Loftur Guttormsson, *Ísland. Læsefærdighed og folkeuddannelse 1540-1800*, in M. Jokipii og I. Nummela (eds.), *Ur nordisk kulturhistoria. Läskunnighet och folkbildning före folkskoleväsendet. XVIII Nordiska historikermötet. Mötesrapport III* (Studia Historica Jväsckylväensia 22,3), Jväsckylä 1981, pp. 123-191, and *Bernska, ungdomur og uppeldi á einveldisöld. Tilraun til félagslegrar og lýðfræðilegrar greiningar* (Ritröð Sagnfræðistofnunar 10), Reykjavík 1983.

²⁸ Apparently, Björn Þorsteinsson was highly critical of the notion of history as the social science of the past (Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, personal communication).

²⁹ Most determined among the first were Loftur Guttormsson, *Sagnfræði og félagsfræði. Sambúðarvandamál þeirra skoðuð í sögulegu ljósi*, *Saga. Tímarit Sögufélags*, 16–17 /1978–1979, and Gísli Gunnarsson, see an interview in *Sagnir. Blað sagnfræðinema* 4 /1983.

³⁰ For comparison see Nils Johan Ringdal, *Komparativt sideblikk til Skandinavia*, in Nils J. Ringdal (ed.), *Frontlinjer i historiefaget – moderne historieskrivning i internasjonalt perspektiv*, Oslo 1983, pp. 137–139; Dagfinn Slettan, *Socialhistorien efter 1970: 'Fra socialhistorie til kulturhistorie'*, in William

of the new social history. This is not true only of studies in historical demography but also of investigations into family and childhood history and into the development of particular social groups, such as the poor and domestic servants.³¹ Of course, census material and land registers continued to be used extensively as was the case with the social structural works of the 1970s.

Thirdly, the works mentioned above bear a clear imprint of current international research perspectives and approaches. By this time, the younger generation of Icelandic historians had become closely linked to the wider historical community. In effect, four out of the six historians in question had received their academic education in history abroad, either wholly or partially, in Sweden, England and France.³² This helps to explain why many of the works in question include explicit theoretical and comparative views inspired by influential works, e.g., by Peter Laslett and his colleagues at the Cambridge Group, by Karl Polanyi and Philippe Ariès or, more generally, by the *Annales* school. On the whole, however, Icelandic social historians were less concerned with theoretical constructions than was the case with their Swedish and Danish colleagues in the 1970s.³³

This overview warrants the conclusion that in the course of a decade, from approximately 1975 to 1985, Icelandic history as an academic discipline was being radically transformed. This was the result of many factors, including student pressure and involvement. In effect, the students who entered the history department during this period took active part in the change process.³⁴ In many cases they complemented their education in history with courses in sociology or political science offered by the newly founded Faculty of Social Science.³⁵ At the end of the period the social-history approach was experienced by the students as an important and distinctive perspective which nobody could ignore.³⁶

H. Hubbard et al. (eds.), *Making a Historical Culture. Historiography in Norway*, Oslo 1995, pp. 78–97.

³¹ The works of Loftur Guttormsson and Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson which came out in the early 1980s exemplify clearly this point.

³² It is not without interest to note in this context that three among the historians in question had attended a Nordic research seminar on historical anthropology held in Copenhagen in 1980.

³³ See Klas Åmark, „Några drag i den svenska historieforskningens utveckling under 1960– och 1970-talen, in *Teori- og metodproblem i modern svensk historieforskning*, Stockholm 1981, pp. 30–32; Bernard E. Jensen, Teoriernes årti. 70'erne revisited, in Ning Conick-Smith et al. (eds.), *Historiens kultur. Fortælling, kritik, metode*. (Tilgnet Niels Finn Christiansen.) Copenhagen 1997, pp. 263–279.

³⁴ Ample evidence of this can be found in the history students' organ, *Sagnir*, which started coming out in 1980.

³⁵ Guðmundur Jónsson, personal communication.

³⁶ Jón Ólafur Ísberg, personal communication.

This perspective did not only affect the practice of historical research but also the interpretation of a good deal of the Icelandic past. It is important to note that almost the totality of the social historical works coming out during this period, dealt with one or another aspect of Icelandic society from early modern times to the end of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Altogether these work laid the basis for a radically new view of the “Danish period” in Icelandic history rejecting the hitherto prevailing nationalistic interpretation. From this perspective the nature of the Icelandic *ancien régime* appeared in a very different light. On the one hand, it highlighted the economic and administrative mechanisms which linked Danish royal and mercantile interests to those of the Icelandic elite groups. On the other hand, the analysis of the main features of the demographic and social structures uncovered the placement and the mobility of the different social /gender/age groups within the overall system.

Apparently, this shift in perspective was not promoted by any explicitly formulated grand theory, in the manner of the “history of society” approach or *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*.³⁸ One dares say, however, that to some extent it was guided by a mixture of conflict theory in a neo-marxist clothing, and modernization theory.³⁹

Towards a sociocultural history

During the following decade, from 1985 to 1995, the social-history approach was not far from gaining a paradigmatic status in Icelandic historical writing.⁴⁰ There are clear indications that it affected increasingly such important research areas as political history and cultural history. A few examples must do her in order to substantiate this point. As regards the cultural sphere, it may be pointed out that in the works of the present author, the social history approach was from the outset closely associated with the perspective of “mentality history”.⁴¹ Further, a collection of essays on the enlightenment in Iceland edited by Ingi Sigurðsson, reflects in many ways the

³⁷ To this *corpus* belongs legitimately an important work by the Swedish historian Harald Gustafsson, *Mellan kung och allmoge – ämbetsmän, beslutsprocess och inflytande paa 1700-talets Island*, Stockholm 1985.

³⁸ See Kocka, *Sozialgeschichte*, pp. 97–107; Wilson, Introduction, pp. 20–24.

³⁹ It may be relevant to point out that in the 1970s, some of the social historians in question were active members of the People’s Alliance, heir to the former Socialist Party.

⁴⁰ The term “paradigmatic” is used here deliberately in a diluted “kuhnian” sense.

⁴¹ Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Félagssagan fyrr og nú*, in Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon (eds.), *Einsagan – ólíkar leiðir. Átta ritgerðir og eitt myndlistarverk*, Reykjavík 1998, pp. 45–47; Loftur Guttormsson, *Barndommen i mentalitetshistorisk perspektiv*, in Chr. Kvium og B. Wählin (eds.), *Mentalitetsforandringer* (Studier i historisk metode 19), Aarhus 1987, pp. 73–94.

pervasive impact of the social-history approach.⁴² As far as the political sphere is concerned, the works of Guðmundur Hálfðanarson present a reinterpretation of recurrent problems in 19th century political history in the light of a culturally-oriented social history.⁴³ It should be noted, too, that many of the most important results of the social historical research of the 1980s did already find their way into a multiform historical atlas edited by a group of young historians and published in three-volumes in 1989–1993.⁴⁴

A more specific way of assessing the impact of the social history approach during the last fifteen years is to examine the extent to which it has affected established fields of research such as local history and medieval history.

As pointed out above, medieval history constituted the core of academic history as long as it was practiced within the framework of Icelandic studies. In the 1940's and 1950's academic historians such as Jón Jóhannesson (1907-1957), an adherent of incisive source criticism, had become increasingly sceptical of the historical validity of the Icelandic sagas.⁴⁵ Typically, his survey of the history of the Free State only contains relatively few references to the sagas. Similar reservations vis-à-vis using the sagas as historical sources characterizes another survey in Icelandic medieval history published on public initiative in the mid-1970's.⁴⁶ However, the late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a certain rehabilitation of *Íslendingasögur* among Icelandic historians. Referring to the growing interest shown by foreign historians and anthropologists in the sagas, the medieval historian Helgi Thorláksson suggested that they might yield useful knowledge of Icelandic society prior to 1200; he contended that medieval historians had many lessons to learn especially from the way the sagas had been used by American and European

⁴² Ingi Sigurðsson (ed.), *Upplýsingin á Íslandi. Tíu ritgerðir*, Reykjavík 1990.

⁴³ See in particular Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, *Old Provinces – Modern Nations. Political responses to state integration in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iceland and Brittany*. Ph. D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1991.

⁴⁴ Árni D. Júlíusson et al. (eds.), *Íslenskur söguatlas*, see especially vol. 2, *Frá öndverðri 18. öld til fullveldis*, Reykjavík 1992; cf. Gunnar Karlsson, *Hvernig verður ný söguskoðun til, Saga.Tímarit Sögufélags* 33/1995, pp. 77–83.

⁴⁵ See Jón Jóhannesson, Formáli, *Íslendinga saga. 1. Þjóðveldisöld*, Reykjavík 1956.

⁴⁶ *Saga Íslands*, vol. 2, ed. by Sigurður Línadal, Reykjavík 1975. Here, admittedly, a chapter written by the folklorist Árni Björnsson on “common folkways” constitutes an exception. It has to be noted, however, that his stance was in line with a common view according to which the Sagas could legitimately be used as evidence of ancient folkways and mores, see Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement. The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia*, London 1970, pp. xxiv–xxv. Similar arguments based on notions of cultural continuity, were put forward by Sigurður Nordal, *The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Sagas* (W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture 15), Glasgow 1957, p. 29.

anthropologists.⁴⁷ Some years later, the positive assessment of the historical source value of the sagas was corroborated by two young historians examining gender, kinship and power relations in the context of the Free State period.⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, this change in the view of the sagas is closely related to efforts that were being made to apply the social history approach to the field of medieval studies. Thus, problems relating to social structure, kinship and social behaviour are of particular concern to historians like Jón Viðar Sigurðsson.⁴⁹

Local history is another established field where the impact of social history has made itself increasingly felt during the period in question. Admittedly, local history has never attained in Iceland the respectable academic status which it has since long occupied in Norway where it is backed up by a particular institute and a specialized periodical.⁵⁰ There are hardly any parallels in Iceland, either, to the academic micro-history projects which in Norway during the 1970s were organized largely within a local historical context.⁵¹ Under these circumstances local historical writing in Iceland has been affected by the social-history perspective mainly in two different ways. On the one hand, the huge increase in the writing and publication of local history works has been accompanied by a marked trend towards professionalization.⁵² Thus, many academically trained historians have been commissioned to do local history research and writing for the account of the most important towns and townships. On the other hand, this type of historical research and writing is inevitably focused on the twentieth century as in Iceland urbanization did not start until the end of the nineteenth century. In contrast to old-style local history which was mainly concerned with rural communities in a relatively distant

⁴⁷ Helgi Þorláksson, *Að vita sann á sögunum. Hvaða vitneskju geta Íslendingasögurnar veitt um íslenskt þjóðfélag fyrir 1200?* *Ný saga* 1/1987, pp. 87–96. One of Þorláksson's chief authorities was the American historian Jesse Byock, see his *Medieval Iceland. Society, Saga, and Power*, Berkeley 1988, pp. 35–50.

⁴⁸ Jón V. Sigurðsson, *Goder og magtforhold på Island i fristatstiden*, Bergen 1993, pp. 12–38; Agnes Arnórsdóttir, *Konur og vígamenn. Staða kynjanna á Íslandi á 12. og 13. öld* (Studia historica 12), Reykjavík 1995, pp. 20–21.

⁴⁹ See Jón V. Sigurðsson, *Goder og magtforhold*, pp. 22–26.

⁵⁰ See Jarle Simensen, National and transnational history: the Norwegian example in this volume.

⁵¹ See Finn Olstad, Sosialhistorien etter Langholm, in Anne Kristine Børresen et al. (eds.), *Historikerne som historie. Rapport fra HIFO-seminaret 1995* (Skriftserie fra Historisk institutt 14), Trondheim 1996, pp. 93–105.

⁵² Loftur Guttormson, Nogle træk af historieforskningen i Island, p. 92. See further Ingi Sigurðsson's chapter in this volume.

past, the new urban history emphasizes quite naturally the economic, demographic and social processes of urbanization.⁵³

It is interesting to note that recent works in local history are marked by shifts in emphasis from the socio-economic to the cultural components of the past. In this respect Icelandic local history reflects developments which have been taking place in the broad field of social history since the 1980s. Typically, the portrayal of different aspects of everyday life constitutes one of the main objectives explicitly pursued by the authors of the newly published *Saga Reykjavíkur*.⁵⁴ Furthermore, people's personal experience of everyday life is highlighted in some of the most recent local histories.⁵⁵

In Iceland as elsewhere, the transition from social to cultural history took the form of "mentality history"; the latter put its mark on some of the social historical works of the 1980s – at a time when the history of mentalities *à la française* was rapidly losing ground on the continent.⁵⁶ In this respect developments in Iceland were considerably delayed even in comparison with other Nordic countries.⁵⁷ Similarly, it was not until recently that the critique directed on the Continent against the history of mentalities in the early 1980s,⁵⁸ was echoed in Iceland, mainly from the perspective of microhistory. Its chief protagonist, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, argued recently that the social historical research of the 1980s tended to minimize personal freedom and responsibility by over-emphasizing the impact of structural constraints on individual life-courses. Magnússon attributed his tendency to the high degree of dependence of current social history, including the history of mentalities, on quantitative, demographic methods.⁵⁹ In order to correct this alleged bias he urged Icelandic social historians to make use of the insights and methods of microhistory by

⁵³ See e.g. Friðrik G. Olgeirsson, *Hundrað ár í Horninu. Saga Ólafsfjarðar 1883–1944*, vol. 2, Ólafsfjörður 1988; Jón Þ. Þór, *Saga Ísafjarðar*, vol. 2, *Félags- og menningarsaga 1867–1920*, Ísafjörður 1984.

⁵⁴ Guðjón Friðriksson, Formáli, *Saga Reykjavíkur. Bærin vaknar*, vol. 1, Reykjavík 1991, p. vii–viii. See further Eggert Þór Bernharðsson, *Saga Reykjavíkur. Borgin 1940–1990*, vol. 2, Reykjavík 1998.

⁵⁵ Bjarni Guðmarsson, *Saga Keflavíkur 1890–1920*, vol. 2, Reykjanesbær 1997; Kristján Sveinsson, *Saga Njarðvíkur*, Þjóðsaga 1996.

⁵⁶ See Reinhard Sieder, Sozialgeschichte auf dem Weg zur einer historischen Kulturwissenschaft, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 20/1994, pp. 445–458.

⁵⁷ See Dagfinn Slettan, Sosialhistorie etter 1970: 'Fra sosialhistorie til kulturhistorie', *Historisk tidskrift* 1–2/1996, pp. 104–111.

⁵⁸ See in particular Roger Chartier, *Cultural History. Between Practices and Representations*, Oxford 1988, pp. 27–48 (reedition of an article originally published in 1982); Peter Burke, Strengths and Weaknesses of the History of Mentalities, *History of European Ideas* 7/1986, pp. 439–451.

⁵⁹ Sigurður G. Magnússon, Félagssagan fyrr og nú, in Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon (eds.), *Einsagan – ólíkar leiðir*, Reykjavík 1998, pp. 21–22.

means of which the actions, expectations and life-experiences of ordinary people could be reconstructed. Showing good example, Magnússon himself published an original work based on the case of two obscure brothers who were brought up in an isolated rural community at the end of the nineteenth century; on their death, they left an extraordinarily abundant and varied collection of personal source material such as diaries, letters and miscellaneous notations.⁶⁰ In addition, Magnússon launched a documentary series with the aim of making original personal documents familiar and more easily accessible for those who might want to practice socio-cultural history in the microhistorical manner.⁶¹

Concluding remarks

Until the 1950s teaching and research in history at the University of Iceland was practiced as an integral part of Icelandic studies. Historical research remained heavily indebted to the philological tradition centered on the analysis and the interpretation of texts dating from the medieval times. Prevailing nationalistic views contributed further to marking out this period as a privileged field of research. These circumstances were far from propitious for fostering a view of history as a discipline composed by a number of distinct sub-disciplines, such as economic history and social history. The focus rested on the cultural continuity of national history.

Rapid economic and social changes which characterized the postwar period in Iceland as elsewhere, affected gradually the general perspectives guiding historical research at the methodological as well as the substantive level. After the successful conclusion of the political struggle for national independence, problems relating to the economic and social modernization of the country moved to the forefront. Furthermore, in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, history developed into a fully independent academic discipline with an increasing number of tenured teachers. Simultaneously, the growing professional communication of Icelandic historians with the outside world contributed effectively to the integration of national history to the mainstream of European historiographical development. One manifestation of this is

⁶⁰ Sigurður G. Magnússon, *Menntun, ást & sorg. Einsögurannsókn á íslensku sveitasamfélagi 19. og 20. aldar* (Studia historica 15), Reykjavík 1997.

⁶¹ Among the volumes already published is the diary of Magnús Magnússon, a poor and autodidact versifier who served as the prototype of Ólafur Kárason, the chief personage in Halldór Laxness' novel, *The Light of the World*.

the considerable impact which marxism exerted on some of the leading Icelandic historians during the 1970s.

Besides the impact of international contacts, internal factors such as the establishment of a Faculty of social sciences at the University and a dynamic expansion of the academic community contributed effectively to the breakthrough of the social-history approach in the early 1980s. Among the leading historians in this process some had received their professional education abroad; on returning home, they brought with them a set of different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Another characteristic feature of the Icelandic case is the very short time it took the perspective of social history to affect significantly other major fields of historical research. Thus it can be argued that during the period 1990–1995, this perspective was close to attaining a paradigmatic status among professional historians in Iceland.

As usual, new developments abroad challenging, in this case, the predominance of the social historical perspective, emerged belatedly in Iceland. Recently microhistory has been presented as a healthy remedy against the alleged depersonalizing and generalizing tendencies of the social historical practice. At this moment it is not clear how far the advocates of microhistory are willing to go in unison with the more radical spokesmen of the “linguistic turn” who are mainly to be found within cultural and gender studies.⁶² Apparently, outspoken postmodernistic trends have not so far gained momentum among the small community of Clio’s practitioners in Iceland.

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⁶² For a constructive view of the challenge posed by postmodernism to social history, see Miguel A. Cabrera, Linguistic approach or return to subjectivism? In search of an alternative to social history, *Social history* 24/ January 1999, pp. 74–89.