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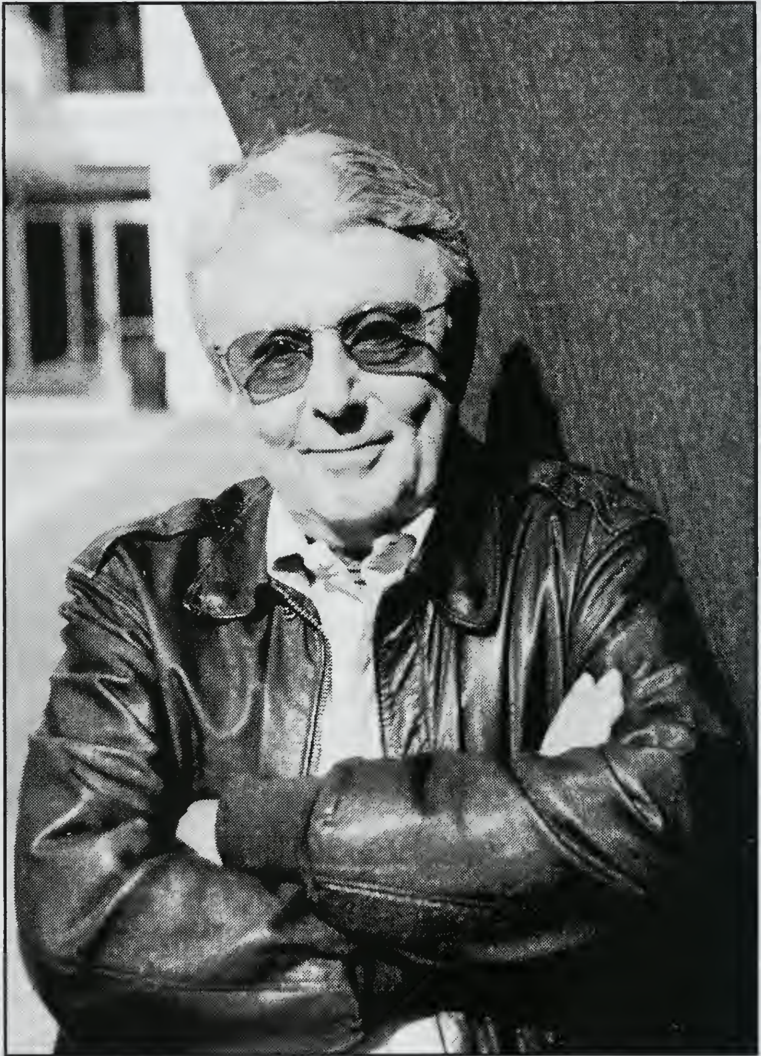

Geoffrey Symcox

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Conversation: Geoffrey Symcox

By Curtis Young

Tell us about yourself.

I'm not a cultural historian. Born in 1938 in England. Swindon, county of Wiltshire, where I grew up. Came to America in 1962, in order to continue graduate study. Came to UCLA as a graduate student. Got my Ph.D. in 1967. I came with an M.A. Got my B.A. in 1960.

How did you get started with history?

As a schoolboy. First I was no good at math which closed off the sciences. I was attracted to history by a charismatic teacher.

How did you learn your skills as a historian?

Didn't learn much. Skills are reading and writing. Had been drilled in writing compositions from a tender age. And the business of putting history papers together, the mechanics of footnotes, he figured out in graduate school. Did his first archival work for his Ph.D. in Paris in the mid-1960s. One goes into the archives, looks at it, figures out the handwriting for the first few days and there it is. There's no trick.

You (the interviewer) are working on late 18th century by which point people had decent handwriting. I was doing 17th century, documents had deteriorated.

Do you look at the archive as a map?

That's how it works. It took me a while to figure it out. Originally, I was following correspondence from year A to year B. Things pop out at you.

What was the most challenging or most difficult aspect of all this?

None of it was particularly difficult. It was essentially reading the materials, primary at the Bibliothèque Nationale and putting it together in a coherent narrative. What I was writing was essentially narrative history. What changed things, was by the time I finished my Ph.D., I realized there was a whole revolution going on in historical studies. Old style political history, positivist history was on the way out. There were these French people, the Annales people, who had suddenly got into social history. So in the late 60s I made a transition into doing social history. Of course a major influence was Braudel, and then reading these other stars, people like Ladurie, Goubert, you know the names. What happened to me is that I sort of reinvented myself along with everyone else as a social historian.

I did old style political, diplomatic history that's what my dissertation was. Then I transitioned outside of that. What happened, when I did my first book, was to try and amalgamate the findings of social history with a traditional, political, diplomatic, military narrative. What I did was a study of the French navy from 1688 to 1697, and the thing that struck me already in the archives while I was doing my Ph.D. research, was that by the end of that period, by the end of the nine-years war, from 1688 to 1697, the French navy had ceased to operate. Well why was this? Lack of money. Why lack of money? Then looking at Goubert and the boys, I realized, the argument was very simple. There was a huge famine in France…1693, 94, 95, and the money, the taxes weren't coming in. Louis XIV and his ministers had to decide, what are we going to cut? You can't cut the army, so you cut the navy. It's as simple as that.

So the argument of my first book was essentially combining the work of demographers and social historians of the Annales School to provide an explanatory mechanism for a political, military development.

How do you distinguish social from cultural history?

Well cultural history is the daughter of social history. Without the Annales people, without the breakthrough to social history, which was essentially the big rupture with traditional, positivist, political history…without the rupture, post-1945, the breakthrough of the Annales School, the old methodology would probably still be with us. But for all sorts of reasons in the post-1945 period in France, you had dissatisfaction with this traditional methodology. And the emergence of a whole cluster of people around the periodical "Annales", Braudel and Febvre being the leaders…in the mid-1940s they are the outsiders, by the mid-1960s they are the establishment. They have essentially conquered all the positions of power and they then come to dominate historical research and writing in the English speaking world. So by the mid-1960s people in England and in the United States are doing French-style social history. And that was the impact that I felt along with all the other junior people who were recruited around the same time. And we had a social history reading group, that kind of thing. And so we had big arguments about demography and all this stuff that sounds a little bit archaic now. Now, out of social history, by the 1970s, the Annales group is fragmenting, it was already, by its very nature an eclectic group. And the idea was that there is a grab bag of methodologies and approaches and so what happens in the 1970s is that the methodological spectrum expands a little further, and it starts to include, quite notably anthropology. Plus at the same time you have the impact of political changes. So you have a feminist movement, so people start doing women's history. And you have de-colonization, so you have black power, and you

have ethnic history. And so, suddenly the methodology, which was…you start with a relatively simple type of methodology from political/diplomatic history. You do the documents, you write a narrative. Social history, you do the numbers, you figure out the structures, you see how they change over time or don't change over time. You're trying to recreate patterns of everyday life, but in a very broad sociological, statistical pattern. But then, boom, suddenly that isn't enough. The big breakthrough in the Annales is history from below. If you start doing history from below you think, women are down below, peasants are below, all the ethnicities are down below. And suddenly it opens the doors to, not just peasants in Languedoc, but everybody. What happens in the 70s is a fragmentation, which I think is very fruitful. And I think it is out of the marriage of social history which is being stripped of its statistical underpinnings. The imperative of social history to get at everyday life with anthropology which offers a different methodology from statistics, so by the early 1970s there's a sense that the statistical project has run its course. Let's go beyond this and so you get at different places, different approaches. So you get Keith Thomas in Britain looking at witchcraft. A big influence in the later 1970s was the emergence of micro-history and Ginzburg and Giovanni Lévi and a group of Italian historians who had been enthralled originally to the Annales social history group…Giovanni Lévi worked very much in the vein of Annales historiography but then he got tired of that, and he began to read anthropology. Ginzburg went in the same direction. Ginzburg and Lévi are cousins actually. And they put together this idea of studying not the big picture, but of taking a small sample, and from that you start to infer what's going on all around you. Hence Ginzburg's miller, hence Natalie Davis' "Martin Guere." Now that approach I found very interesting and very useful, because it's a counterpoint too ...I don't say we should discard the great, big structures, but they leave out what the micro-historians call the sense of life as its lived. It gets more and more complicated, when you feed in historical sociology, Charles Tilley, also Perry Anderson, "Lineages of Absolutist State," a work of history is also a work of sociology. You feed that, and you feed in the new ethnological approaches.

In the 60s Natalie Davis was integrating anthropological approaches to the study of peasant insurrections or urban riots. And that is a pointer to what everyone else will be doing later on. The anthropology she's using is not Levi-Strauss, its people who study urban riots and, I remember visiting Giovanni Levi and he's got all these English anthropologists writing about African magic on his shelf. It's the field work, it's the ethnology rather than the structuralist. There was a great vogue for Levi Strauss in the 60s. But that ran its course because there isn't much a historian can do with it. But the ethnographic stuff, Geertz writing about Bali and you can use that kind of stuff to

try to understand crowd behavior. Or you have studies of kingship, of magical kingship in other places, and suddenly you realize that the French monarchy was a magical kingship. So that's the sort of thing...this is where cultural history comes in. By 1980 or so, old style social history is pretty much out. You still have the Cambridge group in England doing very good demographic history. E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Scofield's "English Population History from Family Reconstitution 1580-1837," Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy, and Society in Past Times, which came out in 1981 is kind of a terminal point in that great movement of statistically based history.

The other great terminal point I'd say is 1978 when you have David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch- Zuber, "Tuscans and their Families," a Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427. That is a monstrous piece of statistical inquiry based on this huge documentary source; you've got 270,000 tax returns from Tuscany and all they did was feed them into a computer and you come out with all marriage patterns...that and the Wrigley, Scofield thing on the English population, is essentially the end of that the sunset of social history. By the 80s everybody is a cultural historian. And everyone is talking about Foucault. It takes a while to catch on because Foucault's first book is 1960s, because we're waiting for translations. It took a while for him to catch on. The first one was the "History of Madness." Another thing that caught on at the same time was Hayden White. So by the 80s you've got cultural history in full flower, which is suddenly hit by post-modernity. Now you have a whole new layering on the already burgeoning field of cultural history you've suddenly got people going "post-modern." (What Geoffrey calls "po-mo.") That's where I left it.

There's a question I wanted to ask at the end of this. Where are we going, what's the future. What's the next big thing?

Who the hell knows?

How much longer are we going to do footnotes to this history?

I don't think you are. The beauty of it is that...the field is much, much broader than it was, certainly for an old style political historian like me. There were certain big political problems, you know, the question of the Spanish Secession. And these were then done in erudite, heavily footnoted terms. Think of social history, you've got a huge statistical apparatus, but the methodology is rather restricted. What happens with the cultural history is that the number of approaches at your disposal and the number of possible subjects are exponential. So what the micro-historians did is to suddenly elevate a minor insignificant event into something worthy of study. Now that's a big breakthrough too. So what you've got here is a field that is exponential expansion.

I wouldn't worry about that. Actually it's a lot less restricted than fifty years ago. There are things you can do that when I was a graduate student was just not there. Don't worry about where its going, it's going wherever you want it to go, wherever you push it. There are some smart people who are figuring out, look here is an interesting subject, let's find a way to get at it.

How do you judge excellence within the tradition? What standards do you use?

There are certain books that you can't really ignore which have taken on a kind of timeless quality. They are there and one needs to come to terms with them like Gibbon, *Fall of the Roman Empire*, like Marc Bloch *The Royal Touch*, or *French Rural History* which is an enormously important book because that is where the whole idea of broadening methodology which is behind the Annales school takes off, because at one point in that book, Bloch says the important thing for the historian is to leave his archives and his notarial documents and his title deeds behind and go out into the field and get his boots muddy. Why are field patterns different from one part of France to another part of France? That's the opening there. Then the book on the healing kings. Suddenly you realize, this whole business of kingship is a lot weirder than I had thought. And suddenly you think, boy there's, if you look at the traditional histories of the French monarchy there's something missing. Bloch has suddenly brought an elephant into this rather stuffy room.

You mention Bloch, Gibbon, what about Elias?

Obviously Elias, but Elias is to my mind an unsatisfactory book. It's an important book. (*Court Society*) For my purposes its very important because that's what got one thinking about the court as something worth studying. It's not just frivolity. Now the problem with Elias' book is, first of all, it was written in the 1920s and never retired. And it was published in the 60s as an apostle of scholarship of the 1920s. And then its based on one source, which is Saint-Simon. And he's a sociologist, but he's got a kind of Weberian approach where's he creating, he doesn't like to call it so, but he's creating an ideal type. And he's taking Saint-Simon as the key to understanding this ideal type, now, that's a major methodological error. Because Saint-Simon's view of looking at the court of Louis XIV is not the only way of looking at it…there are so many contingencies. And you have to discount the huge biases in Saint Simon. Now you've got a brilliant idea. The court is important, the court can be studied, and the court can be studied from a sociological perspective, and he dismisses historical methodology. He says what you've got to do is start figuring out these patterns of interaction. Fine. But the way he does it is all wrong. It's a brilliant book, it's an important book, it gets a whole movement

started of which I am now a part.

Where do you place scintillating, really great writing? I started reading Braudel and I'm reading it in translation but the poetry is still there. And I'm thinking this is the way to write history.

Nobody could write like Braudel. Nobody could think like Braudel. Braudel had this idea of putting everything together in a giant synthesis. And he could do this by a linguistic slight of hand. He could do tricks with language which cover up the gaps in his evidence or his methodology. I prize good writing and I despise bad writing. It seems to me that if you've got something to say and it's important and worth saying, then say it so people can understand it. And furthermore say in a way that it is not a chore to read.

Try to write in a way to keep the reader's attention. They're not simply putting the stuff down on a page and saying here it is, take it. I think there's a considerable amount of attention paid to good writing. We are storytellers. And we're also trying to talk about sociological strategies. So we're trying to integrate the Braudelian static and the Braudelian mobile together. So we have to be storytellers, but we also have to be analysts, and we have to be synthesizers. So its tricky. But one of the ways in which I evaluate a book is whether it's clear and whether it's a pleasure to read. So you go back to Gibbon, just a pleasure to read.

Even Michelet? Problematic history, but interesting.

Yeah, it's great stuff, he carries you along.

A lot of important books out there that are very difficult to read. But it seems to me that's a disservice to the profession. If you've got something to say then try and say it in such a way that can reach as many people as possible. Be engaging.

Then on the other hand we have the Simon Schama's who are historians, professionally trained, institutionally centered, who are writing for a public.

Well Schama, I think…I don't understand what his complaint is. He's saying that historians are not interested in talking to general readers. Well that's true. But essentially that's like saying that people writing in medical journals aren't writing to general readers. Look, this is a professional literature. One of the things that happens when you structure yourselves into a profession is that you have a community of people who speak the same language and whose agendas are rather similar. And they are not the agendas and concerns of the general public. Now good popular history, that's very good. Now if Schama wants to write that fine, he can do it. I just don't think he should take

the rest of us to task. If he wants to make a million dollars doing a TV series, fine. Eugen Weber did it. Eugen is a terrific writer, but he's also a very good scholar. And Eugen never turned around as Schama did and said, "you silly people, you are just a bunch of Mandarins talking to one another," because he recognized the realities of the profession. I think this is just a preemptive strike by Schama against popular critics, he's just a popular hack now.

We've talked about the future of history being wherever we take it ...

You know, us old gentlemen of leisure we're running out of things to say.

In a selfish way, the pleasure it gives me. I enjoy doing it. I consider myself very, very lucky to get paid for something I actually like doing. I love teaching, I like research, I like writing. I like all the aspects of the profession except the bureaucracy. And one of the problems that we face now, is more and more time is taken out in doing all the bureaucratic formalities. I know the department has to function, can't function without it. But it's a huge drain on one's time. That's why I got out, to free myself of that kind of paper shuffling. I can teach and I can do my work which is what I'm doing now.

See what's happening now is that I'm resuming life as a graduate student. When you're a graduate student you can devote yourself to...you can do a little teaching, you've got this thesis and interest and your teeth in it, you're a full time scholar, then you get your job and, I remember all the time, graduate students complaining, oh how difficult it is in graduate school. Darling, it's paradise. Wait till you join a department and then you have all this administrative crap dumped on you. So I've come out the other end. I'm now back as a graduate student.

I taught this summer which left scant little time for me to do my work.

You were just teaching. You weren't doing all the paper shuffling. The paper is stuff that...last year I was caught up in a committee, a small matter, dealing with the education abroad program. By the end of the year I had it all lined up and then it just fell into a black hole. Hours and hours of writing for nothing.

What are you doing now?

I've got a couple of pieces, I've got several pieces coming out. And then I've got a project I have to do for some colleagues in Turin for a commemorative volume, it's a complicated story, but there's a grand palace, royal palace outside Turin called the La Venaria Reale, which was built in the 17th century, which was then ruined by invading French armies, and was then, in its semi-ruined state, turned into a barracks used by the Italian army which further added to the ruins. Anyway, they got lots of money...the army finally vacated it in 1980 and it stood empty,

dilapidated, then they got huge amounts of money from the European Union and then a lot of money from local banks and they restored it. And it is gorgeous, it is stunningly beautiful. It's the biggest art restoration project in Europe right now. And the central hall is one of the most beautiful buildings you have ever seen in your life. The Hall of Mirrors at Versailles is pokey by comparison. It's dark, it's pokey, and brown. This on the other hand is sunlight, it is gorgeous, it's one of the most beautiful architectural spaces you'll ever seen. Anyway, they are going to re-open it next year and they want a commemorative volume on the history of the House of Savoy, and the Savoy art state and the monarchy that created it. So I'm doing a chapter for this, which is going to be for the general public. Right, and I had to do a history of Turin which came out during the Olympics, that's for the general public. So Simon Schama…so we don't all write as Mandarins for other Mandarins.

And then I've got another project. There's a group of treatises written in the 16th century on why cities grow. And there's one particularly important one by a guy called Giovani Galteri which I think is worth translating into English because it's probably the first real attempt to do an open sociology. So I'm going to see about whether some press will pick up the translation. I won't do the translation until some one will publish it. And then I've got another project which is to do a history of the city of Turin, late 17th, early 18th century. I did a lot of chapters on this for a big Italian history a while ago. What I want to do is update these chapters and add some stuff on the architecture and try and get it published with lots of pictures.

This is why I had to clear my desk of all this administrative crap. I've got very important stuff to do.

So do you know why I'm not a cultural historian? At a certain point I had to jump off the twig. I would describe myself as an urban historian. And what I want to do if it works out is to write what Braudel and the boys used to call the "total history" of Turin in this period. But Braudel's total history left out art, left out intellectual life. I'm going to try to integrate all that stuff with the physical, demographic, and political, as well. Total history. In other words, I'm just reverting to my origins as an Annales historian flying the flag of total history, if I can actually get around to it.