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# 1 ♣ Introduction

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It is a truism that historical (like all social science) research is influenced by the preoccupations and moods of the society in which the historian works. (In this sense, as Croce put it, all history is contemporary history.)<sup>1</sup> The direction of research is oriented by concepts whose pervasive influence is based on affirmations of widespread, if not universal validity. Inevitably the assumptions underlying such affirmations subsequently emerge as at best limited in space and time, at worst doubtful or unverifiable, while the nature and type of explanation appears as conditioned more or less heavily by contemporary concerns. To identify such phases of research and place them in their precise historical context can be of practical use (beyond its intrinsic historiographical interest) as the very underscoring of the limits of previous work facilitates the identification of new objects, concepts or methods of research.

As the pace of change has accelerated in all domains so dramatically in our lifetime, so arguably the aims, methods and strategies of historical research have shifted at a faster pace than in the past. Most striking has been the move away from the optimistic assumptions of the 1950s and 1960s, codified in the dominant academic modes of historical research, to the more sceptical, self-enquiring and necessarily pluralistic approaches of the past decade. This is not the place to engage in a discussion of the theoretical, epistemological and philosophical bases on which historians base their research. Few reflective practising historians

I wish to thank Maurice Aymard, Sandra Cavallo, Simona Cerutti, Laurence Fontaine, Carlo Poni, Osvaldo Raggio and Jacques Revel for their comments on earlier versions of this Introduction. The comments about the European University Institute research project on work and family expressed here are shared by all the authors, although responsibility for the views expressed in the Introduction as a whole remains entirely mine.

<sup>1</sup> B. Croce, 'Storia e Cronaca', *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1st edn 1917), Bari 1973, pp. 3–17.

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today would deny the cumulative effect on their establishment of the sapping operations of neighbouring disciplines, from linguistic analysis to economics, from sociology and anthropology to political philosophy and scientific logic. At the same time, the reluctance of historians – quintessentially ‘national’, for the most part, in their reading and teaching – to interest themselves in developments in their discipline beyond their frontiers has become at least slightly less impermeable as a result of the increase in the availability of published work in translation throughout the western world. Paradoxically, the very crisis of universities (especially in Britain) may have accelerated the receptivity of the younger generation of historians towards the implications for their discipline of the contributions of one or another of outsiders, such as Karl Polanyi, Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, Marshall Sahlins, Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu or Mary Douglas, to mention only the most obvious names.<sup>2</sup> Interest in the analyses and interpretative models developed by such authors, or more generally by social scientists, does not of course imply passive receptivity. When tested against the empirical evidence of historical sources, the models have often proved insufficient, even misleading. But they have acted as a powerful stimulus by offering new or alternative possibilities in interpreting the documentation utilized by historians.

Perhaps such remarks are unduly optimistic. Maybe they underestimate the resistance to change of academics in their struggle for predominance within their disciplines, which Bourdieu has dissected so pitilessly.<sup>3</sup> But at least they should serve the purpose of situating the change in approaches towards economic and social history in the broader context of an undeniable evolution, marked by horizons of the intellectual and academic debate. For it is in economic and social history, alongside cultural history, that the changes have been most marked.

Economic historians have never denied the close relationships of their discipline with economic theory. The two derived from the common

<sup>2</sup> K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, New York 1944; N. Elias, *The Court Society*, Oxford 1983; M. Foucault, *Disciplinary Power and Subjection*, Oxford 1986; M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, London 1974; C. Geertz, *The Interpretations of Cultures*, New York 1973; P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge 1977; M. Douglas, *The World of Goods*, New York 1978.

<sup>3</sup> P. Bourdieu, L. Boltanski and P. Malidier, ‘La Défense du corps’, *Social Science Information*, 10:4, 1971, pp. 45–86; P. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, Cambridge 1988. Without excessive polemical intent, it is relevant to quote the common reaction of a political and an economic historian, both very distinguished, to the contributions of exponents of other disciplines (in particular philosophers) to historical methodology: ‘The problems and meaning of endeavors to rediscover the past have for some time formed a favorite theme for certain philosophers whose profound and original analyses do not always seem relevant to the working historian’, R.W. Fogel and G.R. Elton, *Which Road to the Past? Two Views of History*, New Haven, CT 1983, p. 1.

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matrix of eighteenth-century political economy; economic history, in its evolution, has consistently incorporated advances in theory. Indeed, the increasing insistence on econometrics and mathematical modelling in the one field has led to parallel developments in the so-called 'new economic history'. If, in recent years, a small but growing number of historians has moved away from the dominant modes of analysis in economic history, it is not because of the lack of conceptual or methodological tools. The reasons are to be found elsewhere, in dissatisfaction on the one hand with the assumption of a linear evolution towards an 'Atlantic' model of mechanized industrialization, and, on the other, with the inadequacy of explanations of rational behaviour that find their origins in the classical economists.

Nobody would deny the major advances in our understanding of the formation of the contemporary western world that have resulted from the historiography of economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Our knowledge of English and American economic history has increased enormously, the range of sources has widened and their utilization to answer questions of theory has become incomparably more sophisticated. The reservations, that have been formulated with increasing clarity, relate to three assumptions implicit in the analytical framework of the economic-growth school. The first questions the applicability of the model itself to the economic history of all states, and in particular of the extra-European countries of the Third World. Within Europe, as Milward and Saul have shown,<sup>5</sup> the assumption of a single model (with or without the variants of 'first-' and 'second-comers') forces a range of very differing experiences into a constrictive mould. Even more, viewed through the lens of 'successful' industrialization and 'take-off' into self-sustained growth, the extra-European world is reduced to an undifferentiated and passive object of European penetration: all cats are black in the night of economic backwardness.<sup>6</sup>

The second reservation relates to the interpretation of economic

<sup>4</sup> A. Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, New York 1965; W.W. Rostow, *How It All Began. Origins of the Modern Economy*, London 1975; H.J. Habakkuk, *American and British Technology in the 19th Century*, Cambridge 1962; D.S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus*, Cambridge 1969.

<sup>5</sup> A.S. Milward and S.B. Saul, *The Economic Development of Continental Europe 1780-1870*, London 1973.

<sup>6</sup> D. Seers, 'The Limitations of the Special Case', *Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Economics and Statistics*, 25:2, 1963, pp. 77-98, and 'The Congruence of Marxism and Other Neo-Classical Doctrines', Discussion Paper, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 1978; J. Knapp (ed.), *The Teaching of Development Economics*, Cass 1967 (including P. Streeton, 'The Use and Abuse of Models in Development Economics'); Milward and Saul, *The Economic Development of Continental Europe*.

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growth in terms of industrialization, and in particular mechanization and the factory mode of production. Criticism has focussed increasingly on the teleological implications of a history of industry that regards the mechanized factory as a necessary point of arrival. The ‘proto-industrial’ exponents and many others, like Maxine Berg, point to the long history of manufacturing before the factory; Samuel to the continued importance of manual and dispersed production, Sabel and Zeitlin to the success of alternative technologies in the factory age.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, reservations are increasingly expressed about the adequacy of purely ‘economic’ explanations of processes of economic change. The ‘residual’, that category which economists fill with what they cannot classify otherwise, has tended to assume ever larger proportions in historical explanations of economic processes. It is not without significance that those economists and economic historians – such as Hicks, Jones, North and Thomas, even Rostow – who have had the courage to risk a world’s eye view of the history of economic development have been forced back on institutional and social explanations, which usually lack the quantifiable characteristics of more purely ‘economic’ factors.<sup>8</sup> The issue of quantification is an important one, as it is accepted as the necessary basis for verification of hypotheses.<sup>9</sup> It relates essentially to the macro level of the economy. But analyses of economic growth remain rooted in explanations of individual rational behaviour whose origins are to be found in the classical political economists and Walrasian equilibrium theory. They assume, on the one hand, a coherence and systematicity of the market system and, on the other, a form of behaviour of individuals that corresponds to the tenets of economic rationality. Failure to meet such expectations of rationality are accounted for in terms of other elements, such as ‘custom’. The implicit opposition of custom (or other unexplained behaviour) to economic rationality casts it into the category of the anomalous ‘residual’.

Quantification has not been, of course, the prerogative of English and

<sup>7</sup> M. Berg, ‘Political Economy and the Principles of Manufacture 1700–1800’, in M. Berg, P. Hudson and M. Sonenscher (eds.), *Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory*, Cambridge 1983; R. Samuel, ‘The Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain’, *History Workshop*, 3, 1977, pp. 6–72; C. Sabel and J. Zeitlin, ‘Historical Alternatives to Mass Production’, *Past and Present*, 108, 1985, pp. 133–76.

<sup>8</sup> J. Hicks, *A Theory of Economic History*, Oxford 1969; E.L. Jones, *The European Miracle*, Cambridge 1981; D.C. North and R.P. Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World*, Cambridge 1973; Rostow, *How It All Began*.

<sup>9</sup> R.W. Fogel, ‘“Scientific” History and Traditional History’, in Fogel and Elton, *Which Road to the Past?*

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American economic historians of growth. Nor indeed has it been the reserve of economic historians. The deployment of time-series analyses of massive data sources is equally the characteristic of the Braudelian *longue durée* approach, practised by the *Annales* historians of society and culture, as much as of the economy.<sup>10</sup> Evidence based on statistical series, however crude and imprecise, is of the essence of the structural approach as the series provide indicators of dimensions and trends. Few would deny the necessity of statistical series for certain types of research and its utility for many others. Even in so treacherous a field as the history of criminality – where the data are more closely the product of those who formulate the object than an accurate indicator of what is counted – their careful use to provide a preliminary framework of long-term trends can be defended.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, outside the field of economic history, the adequacy of the statistical approach raises doubts. Social and cultural phenomena cannot be understood in serial form like population and prices, essentially for two reasons. First, because by definition the scale is large, which has the effect of flattening out and losing the specificity of the historical situation. Second, because their very expression in statistical form creates stable and unchanging categories, as if historical reality could be defined and divided up once and for all. The models of causality, for which historians have constructed their statistical series, are usually constructed around too-simplistic correlations. The time-series are both too rigid and too macroscopic, as they assume that what is most repetitive and least individualized (the statistical mean or mode) is representative. As historians of society and culture, like Ginzburg and Grendi, point out, to understand and analyze in their specificity how social realities were constructed requires a reduction of scale and a search for alternative approaches.<sup>12</sup>

This is the historiographical context within which two historians

<sup>10</sup> P. Chaunu, 'L'Histoire sérielle. Bilan et perspectives', *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire*, 9, 1970, pp. 459–84; P. Chaunu, 'Un Nouveau Champ pour l'histoire sérielle: le quantitatif au troisième niveau', *Mélanges en l'honneur de Fernand Braudel*, Toulouse 1973, vol. II, pp. 105–25; F. Furet, 'Le Quantitatif en histoire', in J. Le Goff and P. Nora (eds.), *Faire de l'histoire*, Paris 1974, vol. I, pp. 42–61.

<sup>11</sup> L. Stone, 'The History of Violence in England: a Rejoinder', *Past and Present*, 108, 1985, pp. 216–24.

<sup>12</sup> C. Ginzburg and C. Poni, 'Il Nome e il Come: Scambio Ineguale e Mercato Storiografico', *Quaderni Storici*, 40, 1979, pp. 181–90; E. Grendi, 'Micro-analisi e Storia Sociale', *Quaderni Storici*, 35, 1977, pp. 506–20. Although his concerns are different, Roger Chartier's critique of the approach to cultural history of the 1960s to 1970s seems to me to point in the same direction: R. Chartier, *Cultural History between Practices and Representations*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 1–16.

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brought up in the earlier tradition of economic history formulated the research project of which the following essays form part. Not all members of the project would necessarily accept such a contextualization, as they belong to a younger generation, whose interests and formation were already critical of economic historiography.

The project, funded generously by the European University Institute between 1984 and 1987, was directed by Stuart Woolf and Carlo Poni. Its purpose was deliberately open-ended: to explore the relationships between social life and institutions in pre-industrial Europe through the perspective of the working practices of the family and group. Our intention was deliberately to reverse the normal approach to the study of the history of work, in which the family appears without autonomy, reactive or responsive to externally imposed authority and conditions. The family at work has formed the focal point of our research, given its role as the base unit of the labour force, as the structure procuring subsistence and as the meeting place where all forms of resources are pooled. Our purpose has not been to ignore the importance of other forms of social organization, such as neighbourhood, community, kinship or friendship, but to study these in relation to the family. At the outset we could not have anticipated the complexity of the conceptual and methodological implications of our approach. But at our regular meetings and annual conferences, to which we invited outside participants, we became ever more conscious of the theoretical ramifications and practical problems of sources and research strategies that resulted from the determination to move away from functionalist or 'vertical' assumptions about social relations by placing families as the main actors in highly specific and closely delimited historical contexts.

Like all research, our concerns were not, of course, without precedents. The choice of theme belongs to a well-established area with distinguished antecedents: the study of the social fabric onto which the successive industrial revolutions were grafted. The social consequences of industrialization, as an object of investigation, are of course far older than the scientific study of the industrial revolution, dating back before Engels to the process itself in its early manifestations. Such consequences coloured and in good part were responsible for the widespread debates of the 1830s and 1840s on pauperism and urban conditions.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> S. Woolf, 'The Poor and What to Do with Them. The Restoration Debate in Europe and Italy', in J.A. Davis and P. Ginsborg (eds.), *Politics and Society in Nineteenth Century Italy*, Cambridge 1990; J.H. Treble, *Urban Poverty in Britain 1830-1914*, London 1979; H.J. Dyos and M. Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian City*, London 1973.



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However, recent historiographical developments have differed from this classic theme in at least two respects. In the first place, there has been a notable shift away from the broad aggregate – the nation-state or the class, anonymous protagonists of impersonal forces of change – towards the study of the component areas of members of such collectivities, such as the local productive region, the inhabitants of the city or the peasant family.

Second, a certain unease about the historical reality, or at least the rapidity, of the breadth of the ruptures and discontinuities imposed by the industrial revolution has encouraged the study of those sectors of the economy or society that would appear to have resisted or, more commonly, to have absorbed the pressures of change. As against the plight of the handloom weavers after mechanization, the prolonged survival of hand technologies in Victorian Britain has returned to the fore.<sup>14</sup> Continuity rather than change, adaptation rather than ruin, have gained or regained attention in recent research. Within this context labour history has acquired a different significance, pushed back chronologically to the centuries before the factory and thematically to the craft and guild before the trade union.<sup>15</sup> A premise for this research project has been the observation that methods of working and earning remained, over a period of centuries, relatively untouched by technological or organizational innovations and constantly structured by institutional and customary practices. This applied not only to the tertiary sector, such as urban consumption trades, portage or retailing, but to major industries like building and even mining. We concluded from this somewhat unoriginal observation that it would be advantageous to concentrate on the reproduction of work practices, as this could allow us to penetrate the working experiences of the great majority of the labouring families in pre-industrial (and indeed industrializing) Europe, while also highlighting by contrast those processes of production where technical or organizational changes caused real, direct and dramatic effects on the families, as well as gradually transforming the economy of Europe.

The history of the family has attracted considerable attention in

<sup>14</sup> Samuel, 'Workshop of the World'.

<sup>15</sup> W.H. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France, The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*, Cambridge 1980; M. Sonenscher, 'Work and Wages in Paris in the Eighteenth Century', in Berg, Hudson and Sonenscher (eds.), *Manufacture in Town and Country*; S.L. Kaplan and C.J. Koeppe (eds.), *Work in France. Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice*, Ithaca 1986; P. Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work*, Cambridge 1987.

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recent years because of the contributions of historical demography and the wave of research on proto-industrialization. At the theoretical level, the conceptualization of the study of the family owes much to both anthropology and sociology. For the anthropologists, the kinship system in primitive societies – of which the family was a constituent, albeit subordinate element – was the key to understanding social organization. For the sociologists, analysis of the functions of the family was of importance in understanding the transition from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ society. For the former, the family was one more indicator in the decodification of the rules of an essentially unchanging structure; for the latter, it reflected through its composition and comportment impersonal changes of a vaster and omnicomprehensive nature.<sup>16</sup>

Historical demography concentrated attention directly on the family with the methodological innovations of family reconstitution (on the basis of birth, marriage and death registers) and comparisons of family composition, structures and mean household size (on the basis of family listings and *états d'âme*).<sup>17</sup> The reconstruction of family genealogies, of enormous potential for population history, as Schofield and Wrigley have demonstrated,<sup>18</sup> nevertheless tells us little, by itself, of the social relations, internal dynamics and strategies of families. Equally, although the analysis of data on composition and size of household has considerably advanced our knowledge of the family life-cycle, the insistence on statistics derived from household listings produced by authorities for their own multiple purposes has tended to leave the family in a vacuum, insulated as much from the dynamics of its internal relations as from its actions within the wider society.

<sup>16</sup> F. Zonabend, ‘Regard Ethnologique sur la Parenté et la Famille’, in A. Burguière, C. Klapisch-Zuber, M. Segalen and F. Zonabend (eds.), *Histoire de la Famille*, vol. I, Paris 1986, pp. 15–75; R. Rowland, ‘Población, Familia, Sociedad’, *Gestae*, 1:1, 1989, pp. 15–21; M. Segalen, *Sociologie de la Famille*, 2nd edn, Paris 1988; E. Hammel, ‘On the . . . of Studying Household Form and Function’, in R.M. Netting, R.R. Wilk and E.J. Arnold (eds.), *Households, Comparative and Historical Studies of the Domestic Group*, Berkeley 1984; D. Sabeian and H. Medick (eds.), *Interest and Emotion. Essays on the Study of Family and Kinship*, Cambridge 1984.

<sup>17</sup> E.A. Wrigley (ed.), *An Introduction to English Historical Demography*, London 1966; T.P.R. Laslett (ed.), *Household and Family in Past Time*, London 1972; E.A. Wrigley, *Identifying People in the Past*, London 1973; R. Wall (ed.), *Family Forms in Historic Europe*, Cambridge 1983; M. Barbagli, *Sotto lo Stesso Tetto*, Bologna 1984; L. Stone, ‘Family History in the 1980s’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 1981, pp. 51–87; L.A. Tilly and M. Cohen, ‘Does the Family Have a History?’ *Social Science History*, 1982, pp. 131–79. A major international conference was held at Trieste on ‘Strutture e Rapporti Familiari in Età Moderna’ (September 1983), whose papers unfortunately have not been published.

<sup>18</sup> R.S. Schofield and E.A. Wrigley, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871. A Reconstruction*, London 1981.



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The relevance for the history of the family of the research on proto-industrialization derives primarily from Hans Medick's hypotheses about the effects of such rural industrial development on authority and gender relations within the household. Among the cluster of propositions raised in Mendels' original model, this particular aspect has subsequently attracted relatively little research, although Medick and Sabeian developed and expanded the approach into a dialogue with anthropologists on the difficult theme of the nature and role of sentiment in internal family relations.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the very concentration of research on rural manufacture has led to neglect of other aspects of considerable importance for the history of the family, such as (for example) the relationships between such rural industries and the surrounding agricultural practices, tertiary activities, long-distance migration as an alternative to proto-industry, or urban domestic production.

It is not my purpose to engage in even the sketchiest of historiographical surveys. What our research project shared in common with historical demography and aspects of proto-industrial research was the concentration on the family cycle. This signified a change in dimension from the aggregate to the particular, from macro- towards micro-studies.

Our purpose was not just to test models or hypotheses formulated on the basis of macro-studies, which is the most habitual explanation of case-studies. Our aim was more ambitious. We proposed micro-studies, moving outwards from the family and group, in order to detect what could only be identified at that scale: the changing relations between families and resources, whether economic or institutional. The family was to be studied in its cycle in order to understand its 'strategies' or, as Bourdieu puts it, its *habitus*, 'a system of schemes structuring every decision without ever becoming completely and systematically explicit'.<sup>20</sup> Our common interest was to explore, in the context of the specific theme of the family and work, the relations and connections between

<sup>19</sup> H. Medick, 'The Proto-Industrial Family Economy: the Structural Function of Household and Family during the Transition from Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism', *Social History*, 3, 1976, pp. 291–315. David Levine, above all, has developed the theme: *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism*, London 1976; and D. Levine, 'Industrialization and the Proletarian Family in England', *Past and Present*, 107, 1985, pp. 168–203; A. Dewerpe, *L'Industrie aux Champs*, Rome 1985; A. Cento Bull, 'Proto-industrialization, Small-Scale Capital Accumulation and Diffused Entrepreneurship. The Case of the Brianza in Lombardy', *Social History*, 14, 1989, pp. 177–200; Medick and Sabeian (eds.), *Interest and Emotion*.

<sup>20</sup> P. Bourdieu, 'Marriage Strategies as Strategies of Social Reproduction', in R. Forster and O. Ranum (eds.), *Family and Society. Selections from the 'Annales'*, Baltimore–London 1976, p. 119.

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families (or their individual members) and the social structuring of access to the labour market and resources. It was through the practices of these families (as distinct from, and sometimes in contrast with, the formal rules) that we hoped to identify relationships that otherwise remain hidden and to understand the mechanisms and functioning of strategies that varied according to the changing needs of individuals and families in their life cycle. In hindsight, it seems to me that, to a greater or lesser extent, we assumed as the conceptual hinterland of such an approach the anthropological idea of exchange as deployed by Sahlins, Bourdieu's sociology of 'practice', Geertz's definition of culture and Elias' insistence on the continuously changing forms of 'interdependence' that condition interpersonal relations.<sup>21</sup> Again, it is essential to add that such concepts served as a stimulus and indirectly. The relationship between the theoretical models of the social scientists and the empirical historical research was never one way. If the concepts encouraged a rethinking of the historical sources, these very sources led to 'a questioning or even rejection of the model as too abstract or historically inaccurate (as, for instance, in the case of Foucault's concept of *renfermement*).

What is common to the essays in this volume is their methodological approach. Our concern for micro-studies goes far beyond a predilection for 'history from below', for justice to be rendered to the forgotten or excluded of history. 'History from below' tends to be written too frequently as the mirror image of history 'from above', institutionally or in sectoral segments. Our aim was to try to understand how institutional forms or rules, theoretically imposed on all society, were appropriated and allocated in different ways by groups and families and transformed in the process.<sup>22</sup> To explore this, the research was deliberately directed towards categories that were not the customary ones: family, guild, charitable institution, the individual life course, relations of vertical interdependence, hierarchies of power or prestige.

Three aspects of this reduction in scale merit attention. First (and most obvious), the change in dimensions acts as an antidote not only to

<sup>21</sup> Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*; Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*; Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, New York 1983; Elias, *The Court Society*.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *Disciplinary Power and Subjection*, pp. 229–42; P. Veyne, 'Foucault révolutionne l'histoire', *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, Paris 1978. Even though one of the main results of our research has been to challenge some of Foucault's conclusions, particularly over the segregation from society of the poor and weak through *renfermement*, it would be ungenerous to deny the significance of his writings for our general approach.