Until recently, history has told the story of the winners. Within the last two decades, however, a new kind of social history has emerged. The stigmatized—beggars, criminals, homosexuals, heretics, and the mentally ill—have driven kings, generals, robber barons, and bishops from the traditional center of historiographic attention. Even though contemporary historians are now concerned with historically stigmatized groups, much of their research remains unknown to scholars in other disciplines.

Social psychologists and sociologists by and large assume the importance of individual motivation and behavior in the stigma process. Contemporary social historians, on the other hand, are less interested in the particular actor, or the discrete event, perse, than in the deeply ingrained, slowly moving conditions underlying historical change. As Fernand Braudel, the most influential proponent of this approach, has put it, an appreciation of long-term structural conditions is more important to historical understanding than is a simple examination of the “conjuncture” of events (Braudel, 1980; Hexter, 1972; Stoianovitch, 1976; Stone, 1979).
Much of the historical community’s ignorance of stigma research in other disciplines seems rooted in methodological prejudice predating the current popularity of social history. The historiographic mainstream, as the shifting fortunes of family history and the history of sexuality show, remains leery of applying clinically derived (to say nothing of Freudian) insights to earlier historical contexts (Bizière, 1984; Stone, 1981). This particular prejudice seems all the more troublesome, given the usual enthusiasm with which historians borrow from economists, anthropologists, art historians, and demographers.

Historians do not choose their subjects randomly. Movers and shakers fascinate us. Like geologists, we are more drawn to the fault lines and fissures of the past than to the regularity of even, unbroken terrain. And when we examine a subject and develop its story, we essentially widen those fissures. Our attention marks historical actors with a power that continues to separate them from their less extraordinary contemporaries, even generations after they have died.

Technique and “objectivity” aside, the essential nature of what historians do today is little different from what Stone Age storytellers did. Storytellers in oral cultures employ parallel construction (X did this, but Y did that) and an agonistic tone (praising X while damning Y) to order events and impress their listeners. The drama of struggle—of good over evil, order over chaos, definition over ambiguity—is usually the underlying script. Remembering and retelling history, in other words, is a violent and self-serving act, a way of marking boundaries between us and them. The tongue is as mighty as the sword: Like physical combat, public speech has traditionally been man’s work (Ong, 1981, 1982).

This sense of polarization and conflict does not disappear with the appearance of writing. Far from it. Since classical times, historical language has carried this underlying rhetorical structure. Men have been the subjects and practitioners of history, public behavior, and power; except as dramatic foils, the feminine, the private, and the dispossessed have been discredited or absent. In fact, the more that “objective,” “scientific” historiography has freed itself of an explicitly moral and theological vocabu-