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FROM NARRATIVE HISTORY TO HISTORY AS A PROBLEM

History is the child of narrative. It is not defined by an object of study, but rather by a type of narration. To say that history studies time means no more than that it arranges all of its objects of study in a temporal framework: to make history is to tell a story.

To narrate is actually to tell "what has happened:" to someone or something, to an individual, to a country, to an institution, to the people who lived up to the moment of the narrative, and to the products of their labor. It brings to life the chaos of events which make up the tissue of an existence, the thread of a lifetime. Its model is naturally biographic narrative, because this describes something which man can view as a mirror of time: the clean-cut duration of a lifetime, between birth and death, the dates (that can be uncovered) of the great events which took place between its beginning and its end. The empiric nature of the "subject" of the story determines the division of time.

A history of "France" or of any other country basically follows the same logic: by definition it may only begin with the origins of France, followed by an account of the stages of its growth and the formation of the nation, illustrated by chronological divisions.

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The only difference is that such a history leaves the future open; however the narration of the past, which is the nation's treasure, is also intended to give some indication of this future, and consequently to freeze time.

Historic narrative must follow a division of time which is dictated by the crude premisses of experience: basically it records the recollections of individuals and communities. It keeps alive what they have chosen of their past, or simply of the past, without taking apart or reconstructing the objects within this past. It tells about moments and not about objects. Even when it deals with, or tries to deal with "civilizations," this kind of history cannot avoid the rule: when Voltaire compares the era of Pericles or of Augustus to that of Louis XIV, the concrete incarnations of successive periods of greatness are proof enough that he is comparing periods and not concepts.

This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why this type of history was primarily, although not exclusively, biographical or political. Within the collective experience of humanity, what is most fascinating for accounts and most available for narration are the adventures of great men and of states. It is not surprising that history has developed, throughout Greek and Roman antiquity, and then in modern Europe, into chronicles of power and war. The divisions of the narrative tended to underline the misfortunes and the victories of mankind—the great moments of history.

In such a history the event is a moment. It is this which above all else characterizes it: it is the unique point in time in which something happens which cannot be diminished either by what has happened before it or by what will happen after it. This "something," that is the historic fact distinguished by an event, can never be compared, strictly speaking, to a preceding or subsequent fact, since it is its empirically unique nature which makes it important. The Battle of Waterloo and the death of Stalin only happened once, they cannot be compared to any other battle or any other death—they transformed the history of the world.

Thus an event, taken by itself, is unintelligible. It is like the pebble I pick up from beach: meaningless. For it to acquire significance I must integrate it into a stream of other events, in relation to which it will become meaningful: this is the function of the narrative. Waterloo is meaningful in relation to a

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history which tells for example about the life of Napoleon, or about the First Empire, or about the Franco-English rivalry of the 19th century. The death of Stalin becomes important in relation to the history of Russia during the 20th century, or to international communism, or to whatever other chronological constellation of facts which one might imagine. This means that within the framework of narrative history an event, even though it is by definition unique and not comparable, acquires significance according to its position on the axis of the narrative, in other words on the axis of time.

Since an event is not an object intellectually created to be studied, it cannot acquire significance by means of an analysis of its relationship to other comparable or identical objects within a system. As it belongs to the category of the experienced, to the realm of "what has happened," it cannot be organized or even simply named, except in relation to the external and global significance of the historical time period which it is intended to emphasize. All narrative history is a succession of origin-events, which can be called history of events. All history of events is also teleological history: only the "final cause" of the history makes possible an understanding of the events of which it is made up.

This "final cause" can differ considerably from one historian to another and according to the subjects they have chosen to tell about. For a long time it was enveloped in religious apologetics or moral edification, which are no longer fashionable. One cannot say as much for the exaltation of power or of national consciousness which continues to be one of the most important functions of narrative history, having been its driving force. All peoples need an account of their origins and a memorial to their times of greatness which is at the same time a guarantee of their future. Just as the ability to write brings power, thus our archives are the memories or symbols of power. Not even transnational history, generally referred to as history of civilizations, can to any greater degree escape the inevitable obligation to indicate some preliminary orientation. In the secular world we live in, besides national consciousness, this type of history more often accentuates the other great collective experience of mankind since the 18th century: the feeling of progress. Progress assumes different names and aspects, it sometimes refers to the development of material

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goods, but more often to the problematic exaltation of the concepts of reason, democracy, freedom, or equality. Confronted with the uncertainties which such a list brings to mind, we must recognize the full ambiguity of the deeds and values which characterize the contemporary world, and yet the impossibility of not calling them to mind also as implicit foundations of a particular history: it is important that the narrator place his own world at the end of the time period he is describing.

Narrative history is the reconstruction of an experience on a temporal axis: this reconstruction necessitates a certain amount of conceptualization, which, however, is never made explicit. It is implied in the temporal finality which structures and gives meaning to all narrative.

The possibly definitive recession of this form of history seems to me to characterize the recent evolution of historiography. Even though it still flourishes on the level of production for mass consumption, it is being increasingly abandoned by professionals in the field. I feel that the form of historiography has changed (without our always being aware of it) from narrative history to history as a problem, at the expense of the following changes:

1. The historian has surrendered before the immense indeterminacy of the object of his knowledge—time. He no longer keeps up the pretense of describing what has taken place, or even the most important events in the history of mankind, or of a part of mankind. He is aware that he is choosing what to examine of the past, and that by doing so he raises certain problems relative to a particular time period. In other works he constructs his own object of study by limiting not only the time period, and the events, but also the problems posed by this time period and by these events. He cannot therefore avoid some explicit conceptual elaboration: a good question, a carefully posed problem is becoming more important—although it is still less common—than the aptitude or patience needed to bring to light an unknown, but marginal fact.

2. As he breaks away from narration, the historian also breaks away from his traditional source material—the unique event. If, instead of describing a unique, fleeting, incomparable experience, he tries to explicate a problem, he needs historical facts which are less vague than those to be found in man's memory. He

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must conceptualize the objects of his enquiry, integrating them into a network of meanings, which consequently renders them nearly identical, or at least comparable within a given period of time. Quantitative history provides the easiest—though not the only—means for this kind of intellectual task.

3. In defining his object of study the historian must also "invent" his sources, which are not necessarily appropriate as such, to his enquiry. He may even manage to lay his hands on a set of records which not only prove to be utilizable in themselves, but will stimulate new ideas, leading him to a new and more valuable theory. This is a blessing when it occurs. However the opposite is more often the case. Today the historian who is trying to pose and resolve a problem must find pertinent sources and organize them to render them comparable and malleable, so as to be able to describe and interpret the phenomenon he is studying on the basis of a certain number of conceptual hypotheses.

4. The fourth change in the historian's profession derives from the above. The conclusions of a study are becoming more and more inseparable from the verification procedures upon which they are based, as well as from the intellectual obligations which are their consequences. The narration's particular kind of logic—*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*—is no more adaptable to that kind of history than the traditional method, of generalizing the singular. Here the phantom of mathematics takes form. Quantitative analysis and statistical procedures, on condition that they are adaptable to the problem and scrupulously carried out, are among the most rigorous methods for "testing" premises.

Before proceeding further we should begin to ask ourselves what are the reasons for these changes in historiography. They are probably related to factors external to learning itself, such as the general crisis progress is experiencing at the present time, which is challenging the concept that evolution be dominated by the European model of the 19th and 20th centuries, and even the concept of a linear and world-wide history. However the reasons are also related to factors inherent to learning, such as the widespread influence of Marxist theory on social sciences; or the brilliant development of some of these sciences, which deal with limited and defined objects (economics, demography, anthropology); or the impact of computer technology which enables

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calculations hitherto unimaginable, on condition that the problems which are to be resolved and the hypotheses which are to be tested have been previously and rigorously formulated. Instead of pursuing this vast problem, I would rather limit myself to examining some of the consequences these changes have had on our profession and on our body of knowledge.

The nature of the archives in which we record history has changed from a collection of documents into a succession of premisses. If, from now on, historians will be examining a conceptually clear object of enquiry, at the same time trying to be faithful to the specific nature of their field, which is the study of the evolution of given phenomena in a temporal framework, they will need pertinent premisses—seldom available as such—at their disposal which can be compared over a relatively long period of time. A historic fact no longer means the explosion of an important event, which ruptures the silence of time, but rather a chosen and constructed phenomenon whose regularity facilitates its identification and examination by means of a chronological series of identical premisses comparable within given time intervals. These premisses no longer exist independently, but as parts of a system made up of those premisses which precede them and those that follow them. An examination of their internal coherence (by establishing their comparability within the system of which they are part) is a better test of their validity than an external examination of their probability (by comparison to other accounts of the period).

The intellectual process which sets up the premisses is thus two-fold. First of all, we must indicate their significance, which determines their correct application. For example: a historian who is interested in the problem of literacy can avail himself of records of signatures, regarding periods preceding the 19th century. However, what significance does the ability to sign one's name have in relation to the usual criteria for determining literacy, which is the ability to read and write? Furthermore, a historian who studies crises, and different kinds of economic crises of modern times, makes considerable use of series of prices. However, he must first answer the question: what is the significance of the given price? What movements, or levels of economic life does it indicate? Once he has established the significance of the premisses he must put them in a series, show

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how they are comparable to each other, decide what temporal framework they concern, and what statistical procedures are appropriate to use, etc. None of these procedures are only techniques—they require methodological choices at each step of the process.

One can confront this view of historic research with a sort of "previous question:" namely that historian's sources often have gaps, are fragmentary, or are simply inexistent, according to the hazards of conservation. In any case, the difference between history and other social sciences is not one of principle, but of condition. There are undoubtedly problems, particularly relating to the more remote periods of the past, for which the material for analysis has disappeared. To compensate for this it must be noted that this material was not elaborated for the first time in the 19th century, within the collections of public archives. The material is almost infinitely elastic, and often its very existence is revealed by a historian's curiosity, or by the problem he sets himself. The classic example in this field is the parish registers, which slept for centuries in French towns until the recent advent of historic demography in the 1950's discovered their immense value. Besides which, a historian who is unable to find immediately pertinent premisses to answer the question he has set himself, is often able to get around the obstacle by means of a preliminary treatment of the premisses which makes it possible to use them in the second stage of the process.

From this point of view, there is always a possibility of a "substitutional" use of historical premisses. In a recent article I classified three kinds of serial premisses: the first is the simplest, the easiest to manipulate, and is made up of the available quantitative premisses set up in such a way as to answer directly the question which is being examined. Births, marriages and deaths listed in parish registers can be used in this way by the demographic historian. Classical calculations of demographic percentages can be elaborated, by means of minimal and standardized manipulation (the technique used to reconstruct the numbers of families). The historical specialist in political attitudes can use the same technique with election results. The second kind of source also includes quantitative premisses, which, however, are used in a substitutional way, to answer questions which are quite different from those for which the premisses had been originally

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assembled. An example is the historian's use of the calculation of time intervals between births to study the diffusion of contraception and the sexual behavior of peoples in the past. Also the specialist in economic growth uses this method when examining series of prices. In the former examples the main problem involved in maipulating the premisses is their pertinence and eventual reorganization in relation to the problem examined. Finally, there is a third kind of source, which requires even more careful handling: it refers to premisses not of a numeric nature, which the historian nevertheless wants to use in his series. In order to do this he must not only establish their pertinence and value, as in the preceding case, but he must also systematically reorganize them into conceptual units which are chronologically comparable. An example is the use of notarized marriage contracts to study endogamy, social mobility, fortune or literacy. Another is the use of wills to analyse death feelings.

Thus, if one were to attempt to classify the most recent conquest of contemporary historiography on the basis of the obligatory stages of their performance, it follows that one would take into consideration both the kind of conceptualization of the problems, and the quality of the sources utilized in relation to these problems. For example, it is clear that historic demography or the history of economics are the best equipped, from this dual point of view, at least as regards the so-called "modern" period; first of all because they profit from concepts elaborated by specific disciplines such as demography and political economics—concepts which can be imported through history at the cost of only minor adaptations. They are better equipped also because the objects of these studies are easier to abstract, to define and to measure than most products of human activity; furthermore, most European states have been establishing and conserving the premisses for them for many centuries.

Nevertheless, even within these "advanced" sectors of history things are not so simple as the criteria formulated from the academic classification of our disciplines would lead us to believe. History, by nature indeterminable, always tends to overflow the boundaries of the sectorial accomplishments of these specialized fields. The question which arises is whether and to what extent history has managed, by borrowing and integrating into its own premisses some of these accomplish-

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ments, to establish a knowledge of the past which could qualify as scientific.

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In order to throw some light on this very old problem it seems best to examine some examples which gradually increase in complexity and uncertainty. I will borrow them from the realm of historic demography, which has been one of the most studied fields of French historiography in the past twenty years. It is also one of the fields which particularly facilitates mathematical formulation of problems. This privilege derives from the particular nature of the discipline and from the sacrifices which allowed the definition of its object: demography is entirely founded on a basic principle which is abstractly equal, according to which Napoleon's birth has exactly the same importance as that of any one of his future soldiers. By thus hypothetically sacrificing all the particular aspects in the life of individuals, in other words the essential nature of their history, it reconstructs historic mankind into permutable and measurable units, by means of constant and comparable events: birth, marriage and death. Stripped of everything meaningful that each civilization has in its own way given them, these events are reduced to their most fundamental essence; namely the fact that they took place.

I previously referred to events, since I do not see, *a priori*, what distinguishes one particular historic fact from another particular historic fact: for example, an anonymous birth from a famous battle. Seen from this point of view, the current distinction between structural history and history of events, can have no meaning with regard to the historic premisses itself: there are no facts which are not events and there are no facts which are events. History is a permanent event. However, some classes of events can be more easily conceptualized than others; in other words they can be integrated into an intelligible system—as in the case of demographic events.

In fact these crude, and in particular, simple premisses, regarding births, marriages and deaths, have become the object of a specific body of knowledge: demography. They can thus stimulate a certain number of calculations and analyses, which themselves are equally prefabricated objects of historic research.

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In other words, they are objects or concepts elaborated by a discipline other than history—in this case demography, for which however, history also supplied primary material; i.e. the records of births, marriages and deaths. To the limited degree that it works with certain or verifiable premisses—though this "limited degree" is actually a considerable degree, since the problem of verifying numeric sources is not an easy one—historic demography produces results which are comparable to those of demography itself; namely a set of relationships which permits measuring the elements of a given population and the way in which they are evolving.

These elements, measured year after year, produce results which are clear and certain—not ambiguous. However this is not true of their interpretation. Let us examine the general mortality rate over a century, for example in France during the 18th century. In order to establish when the maximum cut-off point of mortality occured, it is necessary to subdivide the source into age groups, to obtain the infant or juvenile mortality rate. Let us suppose that there has been a spectacular increase in the survival of new-borns (0-1 year): a series of very different hypotheses might explain a phenomenon of this type; from an increasing number of mid-wives throughout the countryside to a tranformation of the nursing system, not to mention a sudden victory of medicine over an infants' disease. How can a choice be made, without testing each of these theories as well as several others?

One can, it is true, proceed in a different way, starting from not just one variable but from the set of variables of a demographic system. Approaching the problem from this angle denotes a method which is more properly demographic than historical. It uses or constructs a model of reproduction for a populace which is considered stable, temporarily putting the time factor aside. Let us suppose that all of the "cases" pertaining to this model have been recorded; the question which the historian must examine remains; how has the system evolved? One can diagnose at what point the system changed, by studying what happened or even by simulating what might have happened if one or another variable of the system were missing, or were quite different, for example how the system progressed, or if the opposite were true, how it regressed. However an analysis of these strategic variables refers back, as in the preceding case, to

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elements which are exogenous to the system and at the same time influence it; in other words to hypotheses which are ouside of the demographic field which refer back to concepts that have not been constructed into a scientific discipline, and to indications which are often still to be invented.

Let us examine the problem of marital age—the main variable of demographic control among the populations of pre-industrial Europe between the 12th and 19th centuries. Although I cannot go into the question in detail here, it would seem to me that the recession of marital age was the fundamental endogenous instrument active in stabilizing the full dimension of these populations, besides external drains that they were undergoing (such as famine, epidemics and wars) whose impact, however, was decreasing over that period of time. How does this control work? In two ways. In the long run a progressive increase in the marital age, up to its classical "plateaux" of 25 or 26 years of age (of women), annuls 10 years of possible fertility and cuts down, aside from any contraceptive intervention, the number of children per "complete" family. In the short run, the considerable variation in mortality rates following the turn of events during a particular juncture in time is recuperated by means of a compensating variation in the marital age. When a populace goes through a demographic crisis (whatever its cause), it postpones marriages, thus retarding the marital age. Instead, as soon as it comes out of the crisis, it adds younger age groups to those of the postponed marriages. In this way the temporary lowering of the marital age brings the level back to its position before the crisis. In such a way a demographic model can be easily conceived and made to function, which could enable one to study how a populace evolves—all else being equal—using the variations in marital age as a starting point; under what conditions does it grow, and under what conditions does it diminish?

This kind of simulation allows one to outline the role of a variable within a system, and even during the evolution of the system. It does not, however, throw light on the causes unfluencing the evolution. In other words it allows one to describe, not interpret, and still less to explain. This kind of simulation can go as far as the formulation of the question: what factors are apt to influence a cultural behavior pattern, such as marital age?

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But at that point any number of interpretations are possible. In the long run the rise in marital age in classical Europe, up to 25 or 26 years, can be interpreted as an optimal adjustment of the population density in relation to available resources: take for example Chaunu, Le Roy Ladurie, rediscovering Malthus! In the rich Europe, the "developed" Europe of the 17th-18th centuries, this belt of high agricultural production going from the London basin to northern Italy, passing through the Low Countries, open-field France and the Rhine valley, a relationship between man and land was stabilized at 40 inhabitants to each square kilometer. This proposition, even if approximately true—which is not certain, since premisses concerning productivity and agricultural production for that period are in many ways difficult to establish—says nothing about the compromises caused by this adjustment of the marital age. To the extent that it was not accompanied by an increase in births of illegitimate children, did it mean a more perfect internalization, during a longer adolescence, of the rules of sexual austerity? Or can it be said that a kind of socio-economic adaptation is more likely; children wait to get married, to settle down, until the preceding generation passes on to them the running of the family?

It might be pointed out that there are fewer uncertainties concerning variations in marital age over a short period of time. Why does a populace postpone marriages during a period of crisis? The answer is relatively clear: because of doubts regarding the future, which stem from the image of the present. Historic awareness is actually an awareness determined by short range events; the time juncture conditions reactions of optimism or pessimism regarding the future. When a historian comes across these kinds of reactions, that indicate conscious behavior in response to a given event, it is fairly easy for him to reconstruct the progression by means of evidence they left—all he has to do is bring to light the reasons for the historical agents. The boring part is that this kind of redundancy does not lead very far! Crises postpone marriages, prosperity multiplies them, until the next crisis cuts them down again. Well and good. But the basic problem that remains is how, over successive periods of adjustments in a decreasing direction, did a general recession in marital age come about, to the extent of slowing down the "natural" growth of the populations of pre-industrial Europe.

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At this point a descriptive discovery of this kind necessarily leads the historian to explanatory hypotheses which are fragile in two ways; firstly because they were by nature out of reach of the people whose behavior he is studying and consequently there are no directly usable written traces. Secondly because he will have to abandon a purely demographic analysis, and with it the factual and conceptual precision it requires. He will have to understand the mechanism by which the probability of collective behavior, indicated in the analysis of the premisses concerning marital age, is embodied in the multiplicity of individual behavior.

Let us return to the two hypotheses presented above. Though they are of a different nature, they are not incompatible. They both make an effort to facilitate, for the people who lived in that period, a harmonizing of expectations and possibilities which is one of the conditions of social life—that somewhat melancholy mechanism by which men predict and construct the most probable future. However the first is of a psychological nature, and the second of an economic nature. The first indicates a morality, the second a strategy. The first cannot be measured, the second can be. Actually, the historian can formulate a relationship between the younger generation's need, and the exploitation demand, or job vacancies due to deaths of old people. If he does not have enough premisses at hand to work on a macro-economic scale, he can at least attack the problem from a series of monographs on family exploits, which will enable him to outline the rotation of generations around a single exploit. This is an objective process, that can, at least theoretically, lead to a clear conclusion. On the other hand, the idea of the extension of a puritanical super-ego (on a sexual level) throughout classical Europe is a hypothesis which cannot help but lead to ambiguous answers. It is easy enough to see why this hypothesis might seem likely. Take for example the Protestant ethic, the Counter-Reformation or Norbert Elias' "civilization." However neither can it be proven that it is true, nor that it is false.

What is the reason for this? In the first place the super-ego is a psychological concept which can neither be proven true nor false. It is used to interpret behavior which could be interpreted in an infinite number of ways: for example, the idea of an individual's enacting an internal control over himself can be

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substituted with the idea of the reinforcement of external constraints, such as the Church and clergy; however, there are not nor will there ever be pertinent premisses which can support psychological hypotheses with historical evidence. The subjects are dead, and very few even among the small number who wrote about themselves bothered with that part of their being that before Freud they had neither the means nor even the curiosity to explore. Concerning what today is included in the vague term "mentality," the historian is obliged both to examine scattered and ambiguous texts, and to find some indications, not of psychology, but of behavior itself, in order to deduce its psychological roots.

In the first instance he comes across difficulties in connection with the significance of a given testimony, which is both subjective and exceptional. Certainly, to some extent all historical premisses (except those which make up the traces left of men's material lives) are subjective: even the registration of a birth or an account of an event, were at some time put down on paper by someone. However the compulsion to record an event varies considerably in relation to the object observed, and the nature of the observation and of the observer: according to whether it concerns a normal, repetitive event (i.e. comparable to a previous one), or an extraordinary event, noteworthy just because it does not constitute a habit; according to whether it is a systematic observation, governed by certain rules, or a chance testimony, a census or an impression; finally, according to whether the relationship linking the observer to the object observed is in the nature of knowledge or not.

Regarding my example, historical testimony that can inform us about the psychological roots of behavior has been, over a period of a few centuries, of a literary nature; I use "literary" in the larger sense of the word, including certain texts which posterity has not elevated to this honor, the few unedited personal journals, the few old manuscripts which can throw some light on the subject. However these testimonies are by nature scarce, it is impossible to use them in systematic temporal series, and they are limited to a very narrow social environment. He who prefers to bypass their subjective nature will have to consult a different kind of documentation, of a normative type: for example, manuals of conduct, or specialized treatises on religious

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morality, like penitentials. However this sort of text is subject to the same kind of ambiguity as government legislation. It prescribes an optimal conduct, which one can never determine to what extent people accepted, obeyed or internalized. Does repetition of the same rules of conduct over a long historical period determine their penetration into society, or rather does it determine resistance to them? The second hypothesis is equally, if not more, probable than the first: in this case the normative text is more interesting for its "exposition of motivations," and its value as observation, than for what it forbids or orders; finally, it essentially reflects the environment from which it was produced—the State or the Church.

For this reason a historian examining mentalities, who is trying to establish levels of median behavior, cannot be content with the kind of traditional literature which historical testimony is—that is inevitably subjective, not representative, and ambiguous. He must examine behavior itself, that is the objective indications of behavior. The hypothesis discussed above concerning a "Weberian" super-ego extending its control over the souls of classical Europe can be tested for many of the signs of a given behavior: for instance, the number of births of illegitimate children, or births outside of marriage, or the use of contraception. The decrease in, or small number of births of illegitimate children, or births outside of marriage, in a society in which the marital age is high, would seem to denote a long period of accepted chastity. However for these indications to be meaningful, it would be necessary to prove that during the period, the use of contraceptives was not greatly developed among the populations of Europe. How can this be ascertained? Not by means of literary testimony, which is very rare in this realm of the unexpressed. It can basically be ascertained by measuring inter-genetic intervals. In other words the spacing of children's births during the married life of couples. The statistical means used to measure the evolution of this spacing during the life of a family is well known. Starting with a group of married women old enough to give birth, the number of births is put in relation to the mothers' ages. If the fertility of the couple decreases very rapidly after the first children, considering the mother's age, then the intervention of a contraceptive method can be deduced. Otherwise, there occurs a succession of births, slowed down only by the length

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of time taken up by nursing the latest born child, and the biological decrease in fertility in relation to the potential mother's aging.

The conditions for this kind of experiment seem to be clear and simple. For example graphs unambiguously prove that Canadian peoples of the 18th century knew nothing of contraception, and that instead, French dukes and peers of the same period used it. However between these two extremes the conclusions remain ambiguous. Precisely because the spacing of births during the life of a couple is also influenced by other factors than contraception, it is impossible to isolate this factor alone. An increased interval between births, if it is not abrupt, could be due to a change in nursing methods and a later weaning of the latest-born child. For this reason categorical conclusions are difficult to prove, as witnessed by the discussion concerning this problem in progress over the last 10 years or so.

In an effort to summarize the methodological conclusions which can be drawn, it seems to me that we arrive at unsurmountable uncertainties on three levels. Firstly, the concept of the super-ego seen as a sort of austere collective moral conscience governing individual behavior, cannot be actually proven. Secondly there are subjective historical premises and testimonies, which are rare, unrepresentative and ambiguous. Thirdly, there are objective signs which are equally ambiguous. The hypothesis that was presented is more in the realm of the probable than of the true.

It would therefore be incorrect to believe that the passage from narrative history to history as a problem (or if one prefers, to conceptualized history) suffices to enter *ipso facto* into the scientific domain of the demonstrable. Conceptualized history is probably superior, from the point of view of knowlege, to narrative history, because it substitutes an understanding of the past on the basis of the future with factors explicitly formulated for its explanation. It also unearths and constructs historical facts intended to support the proposed explanation, thus, by specifying and editing, it considerably expands the realm of history itself. Maybe Max Weber chose the wrong path with his *Protestant Ethics*, but what a landmark it was! A conceptual discovery can be judged by the areas of research it opens up, and by the traces it leaves behind.

The fact remains that we still have not arrived at scientific

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history. In the first place there are some questions, some concepts which do not lead to clear, unambiguous answers. Secondly, there are some questions which in principle lead to clear answers, but which nevertheless cannot be resolved either because of a lack of premisses, or because of their own nature—whether it be the result of the ambiguous character of the premisses, or the fact that they cannot be proven by means of strict analytical techniques.

As we have seen—and we could give numerous examples—these techniques are suitable to the manipulation of premisses which are clear (or have been made clear), are available in chronological series, that can answer unambiguous questions generally formulated by the more developed contemporary social sciences, such as demography and economics. To this extent even history can lead to sure conclusions. For example, one can calculate the great variation in demographic behavior in western Europe since the 17th century. It can be said that there was a rise in prices in France during the 18th century. One can find out (as in B. Fogel's latest book) that the production of slave labor in the United States before the Civil War was greater than that of non-slave labor in the north of the country. It must also be said that this kind of history, characterized by its potential for extrapolating very specific questions from the past which are usually elaborated with other disciplines, is both very satisfying and very limited. It enables one to arrive at sure conclusions, and at a good description of a localized phenomenon that has been chosen as the object of study.

However, the interpretations of these conclusions does not lead to the same degree of certainty as the conclusions themselves. An interpretation is basically the analysis of the objective and subjective mechanisms by which a probable collective behavior—the same one revealed by the treatment of the premisses—is embodied in individual behavior of a given period, as well as the study of the transformation of these mechanisms. An interpretation therefore goes beyond the level of described premisses in order to put it in relation to other levels of historical reality. It generally needs additional premisses, belonging to a different field, which are neither necessarily available, nor necessarily clear. Such an interpretation often leads to hypotheses which are not proven, or not provable.

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The problem posed by history's recent evolution, and in particular by the use of strict demonstration techniques, is not to find out whether history itself can become a science. Considering the indeterminacy of its object, the answer to this question is undoubtedly negative. The problem is to be aware of the limits within which these techniques can be useful to a discipline which is basically unscientific. Although these limits are obvious, one should not deduce that history should go back to its ancient function of adventure narration. Instead, the unreasonable ambitions of history as a whole should be lowered. Within the limits of our knowledge of the past, the sectorial discoveries, the methods of some disciplines, and the conceptual hypotheses which issue from the contemporary pot-pourri which we call the sciences of man, should be used to the greatest extent possible. The cost of this change is the break-up of history into many histories, and historians' renunciation of their role of social magistrates. However, the profits in terms of knowledge might be worth these sacrifices: history will probably always oscillate between the art of narration, the value of the concept and the rigor of its proofs; but if these proofs are more stable and the concepts more explicit, knowledge benefits and the art of narration loses nothing.

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