

# History: From Moral Science to the Computer

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In order to understand history as it has been practised in the twentieth century, we must go back in time. Not necessarily to Herodotus and Thucydides, nor even to the great founding figures of the ages of learning and of the Enlightenment, however enduring their influence. But to those historians who in the course of the nineteenth century brought to its conclusion the radical renewal of knowledge about the past: the means that enabled them to acquire it, arguments which were accepted as proofs, conceptual frameworks supposed to make deeds intelligible, ways of talking about times past – to historians who integrated this knowledge that was formerly split between literature, learned research and theology supplanted by philosophy, around a discipline comparable to philology as much from the epistemological point of view as in terms of status and driven not only by ambition to retain the exclusive right to the term *history* but also, very early, by that of conquering a superior position in the world of science.

## **The fundamental dogma of scholarly history in the nineteenth century**

Our story began in Göttingen, in about 1770, and continued in Berlin in the 1820s around Ranke and his pupils, and also in the 1860s around Mommsen, before the participants of their seminaries introduced their knowledge into the universities of all European nations and the United States. This consisted of enforcing, with the fullest rigour upon the practice of research and writing, upon the evaluation of published works and in the first place upon higher education, what we might call the fundamental dogma of scholarly history: the past cannot be known except through the agency of sources, and the only sources are written ones. In short: history is made out of texts. The only obvious exceptions, coinage and seals, are similar to writing. If material objects are studied by historians – as happens in the case of weapons, armour, clothing, buildings – it is in order to understand the texts. When they are studied in order to supplement the latter, material objects are no longer part of the mainspring of history; they are an element of archaeology which is a distinct discipline, separated from history by an unbridgeable divide.

From the seventeenth century, to respond to the arguments of the Pyrrhonists, historians have been forced to privilege, among texts, not narratives but documents that are public, in the sense that they emanate from an institution or are designed for institutional use: charters, contracts, laws, treaties, judicial decisions, reports of deliberations, etc. Now most documents of this nature were to be found in the archives of the administrations concerned, who only allowed access to them for reasons of the service itself. Hence the crucial importance for history of the establishment of public archives. Hence too, in each

State, the dependence of the practice of history on the archival policies undertaken there, an element of its dependence on the cultural and political environment, which helped to define it distinctively according to nation. Hence, finally, the preference accorded to periods distant in time, for the documents which survived from it, apparently without modern significance, were for this reason more easily accessible to historians in the nineteenth century.

With the adoption of the fundamental dogma, a demarcation of principle was established between the past and the present. The first is only knowable through the agency of the sources; the second is only knowable thanks to the perception which appears to grasp it without any mediation. A history of present times is therefore inconceivable, unless it is a history which does not respect the fundamental dogma and which sets itself therefore in opposition, epistemologically, to scholarly history. The same applies to the history produced by writers, journalists and amateurs who claim to be historians of the contemporary, a quality that the champions of scholarly history can only deny them because of the difference in cognitive practice between the one and the other, and the demands, not easily reconcilable, which this entails in respect of research and writing.

Other corollaries of the fundamental dogma determine the regulatory idea of history and, by so doing, direct historians in their choices. If the past can only be known through the medium of written material, the period through which humankind lived before the appearance of writing is, from the epistemological point of view, different in its very principle from the era following this event; hence the division between history and prehistory. For the same reason, peoples without writing are the object of a knowledge which also contrasts radically with knowledge gained through the medium of sources, for accounts transmitted orally cannot be used for this purpose. In both cases, the difference in the manner of knowing is considered to represent the style of existence of the epochs and peoples without writing, more spontaneous, more natural, in a word closer to animality than that which is proper to historic periods and peoples; like archaeology, ethnography thus differs from history not only in the techniques that it uses but in the very status of its object. The insistence on the double meaning of the word *history*, which indicates simultaneously the facts as they happened and the account of these facts addressed to posterity, in effect underlines this character seen as a constituent element of history which is, according to some, the identity of reality and consciousness, and according to others, the inseparability of action and reflection, which only writing is considered to make possible.

Faithful to the fundamental dogma, history attaches importance to individuals in proportion to the writings which relate to them, whether these writings emanate from these individuals themselves or from others. Thus it privileges events, above all great events, i.e. those which leave behind them a particularly extensive train of written material. For the same reason, history studies only the institutions and social categories which have produced written material; the more that they produced, or the more that was written about them, the more attention they receive. The mass of the population in premodern societies therefore remains outside its scope or is only considered in relation to what is said of them by representatives of literate social groups, while research focuses on rights and the State and, within the State's activities, on diplomacy and on war.

To apply the fundamental dogma, is to write history only of that which has provoked the production of texts and which has therefore already been consciously observed by contemporaries themselves. This excludes everything that they did not consider worthy

of being recorded in written form, and everything of which they were ignorant, in particular slow changes that extended over decades or even centuries. In consequence, history is a tributary of the short term, that of individuals and events. Its time, defined by dates, is a time of ruptures from which continuities are absent, a time of innovations without permanent elements. It is a linear time, irreversible and progressive because of the increasing power of States and the propagation of writing which goes hand in hand with its growing significance.

The result of all this is that the domain of history is not yet completely separated from that of memory. True, the historian should first approach the past via the medium of sources; documents should be granted preference; and the historian must be aware of the temporal distance between him/herself and the period under consideration. Sources should be treated in a critical manner: verify or establish dates and attributions, bring to light the circumstances which have led to their production, draw out the interests and prejudices which are projected on to them. Yet at the end of all these operations, the historian has none the less adopted, be it in his own personal perspective, that which the authors of the documents that he uses have perceived and recorded. In other words, that which they have committed to memory.

## **History and philology**

In the division of texts between history and philology, works endowed with artistic value – literary texts – are attributed to the latter. Out of philology, or inspired by philology, other disciplines are formed – history of art, history of literature, history of philosophy and, much later, history of sciences. They derive, in the case of the first, from the distinction of a class of objects endowed with artistic value and for the three others, from the distinction of classes of texts endowed either with artistic value – but in this case it is a question of verbal art – or with cognitive value (logic), the two not being mutually exclusive; all these objects and all these texts may also possess an educative or ethical value.

‘To have value’ here means: to show a capacity to transcend time, to retain permanently an actuality, to preserve the power, after having been capable of moving generations of our predecessors, to operate with the same strength on ourselves and on our descendants down to the most distant future, to please us and to please them, to deal with problems still present, living, even to propose solutions for them that remain pertinent whatever the circumstances. Their eternal exemplariness for literature, art, philosophy, ethics or science, differentiates works which possess it from those which, even if they have moved, awoken or pushed into action the contemporaries of their creators, have only done so during a limited period, before becoming dead stars thereafter. The latter have only historical value: enclosed in their own times, they concern only those that they interest because the role that they have so far played renders them suitable to serve as source for the study of this time past.

The definition of art, literature, philosophy or science through the eternal exemplarity of the works that belong to them invests the artist, the writer, the thinker, the scholar with an almost superhuman creative capacity – imagination or intuition – and lavishes on him the admiration due to a demi-god, a true cult. It is, further, an act of admiration that the definition locates at the departure of any study of the works. This leads on to set at

the centre of the questionnaire with which one approaches them the enigma of qualities which confer on them the capacity to transcend time. And to assimilate the end of any study of a work with the revelation of what has enabled the artist (the writer, the scholar, the thinker) to operate so that it is detached both from the person and from the circumstances that presided over its genesis to lead an independent life for hundreds of years.

What about history now? Logically, it should only have been concerned with what is left over by philology and its satellite disciplines. The works will fall to history, therefore, that have only a historical value and the texts which are not works because they are only means, while a work is always an end in itself. These produced by routine activities are only documents and they occupy a place in the hierarchy of texts that is markedly inferior to that of the works. Some texts, located at the frontier between works endowed with a supra-temporal value and documents, belong, of course, as much to philologists as to historians. This applies to Roman law, the model for all law, to the canon law which the Catholic Church still applies, to treaties, conventions and other diplomatic acts which still retain their validity. Hence the special place of the history of law and the history of diplomacy. For the rest, the competence of history, with a few exceptions, extends only to documents. Reader of documents by the agency of which he makes the past an object of cognition, the historian, unlike the philologist, has thus nothing to admire; his domain is not that of values but that of deeds, not that of judgements but that of facts. He has only to describe things as they really happened.

Facts are however known which, in this perspective, pose a problem because they appear to be related to works that bear a supra-temporal value. This applies to political creations which have retained their exemplariness to the present day: Athens and Sparta, Alexander's empire, the Roman republic. This supra-temporality also applies to decisions that have retained such an exemplariness: to Hannibal's strategy at the battle of Cannae or to Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. It applies, moreover, to all those heroic individuals whose work, always exemplary, has been their very life: the great captains, Louis XIV, Frederick II of Prussia. It is true that unlike works of art or literature which we can always see or read, these political works no longer exist and can therefore only be studied through the medium of the texts which speak of them. The question still remains: what attitude to adopt towards them? Should they be treated as a philologist treats a literary masterpiece? Or should one deduct their supra-temporal value to approach them as one approaches any other fact which happened in the past?

### **Hermeneutic approach, ethological approach**

These questions are not restricted to the specific case of political works. They apply to the ensemble of works, whatever they may be. And they give rise to two responses, each of which in its way defines philology, the disciplines that gravitate around it, and history. According to the first, which prevails in Germany, they are all hermeneutic sciences. The second, which considers them as moral sciences, dominates in France. The treatment of the works that they advocate and that they put into action differs in several ways.

Hermeneutics, of which the rules were codified at the end of the eighteenth century, sets at the heart of the work the mental reconstitution of this work by the philologist, it being understood that everything which is valid for the philologist is also valid for the art

historian and the historian of politics, diplomacy and war, provided that it approaches States, battles, treaties, heroes, as so many works endowed with enduring exemplarity. The philologist should therefore himself be in his way an artist of the word. It is not of course required of him that he should be a creator capable of producing an unprecedented literary text and thus win the gratitude of all peoples and all ages. However what he should learn is to be able to re-create in himself something already created and public.

Only re-creation in fact makes it possible to grasp the work studied in its individuality and to understand it: to discover not only formal procedures but above all the qualities and the states of mind from which it arises, to become aware of significant relationships between the parts and the whole, to bring to light the features which make this work in its individuality worthy of being studied, for they endow it with its artistic value – its capacity to speak to human beings and to move them long after its creation and very far from the site of its birth. The work is thus approached from the inside, through repeatedly identifying with it and standing back from it. The author is also approached from the inside; the incidents of his visible biography have no importance except where they have shaped his interiority. Each work is thus a monad. It is a monad in the Leibnizian meaning of the term: it reflects in its own way the entire universe, and it is in elucidating what it contains that one unveils its universal import.

The ethological approach of which the rules also date essentially from the end of the eighteenth century, even if their roots are deeply set in the seventeenth century, is that of an observation from the exterior; even when one practices introspection, the I which looks inward is exterior to the I which is the object of the regard. The philologist should not be an artist, but exclusively a scholar. Only an observation which compares the work being studied with other analogues and with contemporary phenomena makes it possible to explain it, to reduce it to an intersection of causal chains, to reconstruct the unique conjunction of circumstances – otherwise repetitive and subject to regularities – which has enabled the work to flower. Thus the ethological approach can call on the facts of biography to establish a link between ‘the work’ and ‘the life’ of its author; it can also call upon the ‘setting’, whether it is social or natural. In this case, the question arises of a determination of the creators through the latter, which had no need to be posed by hermeneutics, for which the only necessity capable of imposing itself on a creator is that which is immanent in its very creation.

History, as a hermeneutic science, also differs in several ways from history, as a moral science. First in the selection of topics. The first takes no interest in anything except that which is susceptible to being treated as a work, and it therefore accords a very great importance to the role of the individual. The second confers its preference on collective deeds and turns above all to institutions. The latter studies revolutions – English and French – the history of civilization, of the Third Estate, or of feudalism. The former, Alexander the Great, politico-diplomatic history, the Italian *condottieri* of the Renaissance. The choice of subject obviously implies a selection of the relevant sources, dependent, however, to a large degree on the conditions of access to archives which only improved in the second half of the nineteenth century; the mediaevalists can privilege non-narrative sources when the modernists, as soon as they pass beyond the seventeenth century, are still condemned to use above all narratives and memoirs. That said, the barrier between the practitioners of hermeneutics and those who opt for the ethological approach is

anything but watertight. Styles of thought, of study and of writing history cross frontiers, and the practice of historians is in general far more eclectic than their declarations of principle. But that which truly unites the discipline and makes of the differences between the hermeneutic and the ethological approach its internal problem, is the general agreement concerning the fundamental dogma: for the one as for the other, history is made out of sources, and there are only written sources.

### The statistical approach: the social sciences

Beginning in the final decades of the eighteenth century, the economy, now established as a discipline concerned with production and exchange, began to lay claim to the dignity of being the only science capable of foreseeing the future of human societies and therefore of explaining their past development. For this reason its followers turned to documents which had hitherto had very little attraction for historians, unless they took an interest in economic questions in the manner of David Hume. These documents concern the history of commerce, prices, financial exchanges, taxation, customs duties, manufacturing and national policies that concern them, the state of the population at different periods, the national wealth which is the object of attempts at evaluation. On the other hand, from the first half of the nineteenth century, research began to proliferate which was aimed at grasping social facts quantitatively without direct relation to production and trade exchanges: measuring, for example, the number of suicides or crimes each year in a particular country, filling them out by age, civil status, levels of education, social categories, extracting seasonal fluctuations from them and studying their variations over long periods. They culminated in the establishment of a new discipline which, after being described as *social physics*, was to become known as *sociology*.

But there is something much more profound happening here than the appearance of two new disciplines, however significant they may be. For what they offer, and what is incorporated in the definition of their respective objectives and in the cognitive processes that they put into practice, is a major epistemological innovation: the development of a statistical approach to human facts, a modality *sui generis* of knowledge of these facts, different in its principle of hermeneutic treatment and ethological treatment. Statistics is in effect not interested in individuals in their singularity, in events in their oneness, in institutions in their specificity or in works considered incomparable. Its syllabus consists of data – everyday, ordinary, in vast quantity, repetitive. And it settles down to counting the data, even measuring them, in order to bring out, through series of numbers, the regularity that rules over them.

In the social sciences which apply the statistical treatment, the exteriority of the researcher in relation to what he studies is much greater than in the case of moral sciences. And the independence of the procedures used in respect of the researcher's personal preferences and his value-judgements is also greater; so much and so effectively that it was long thought complete. Moreover, in insisting on the regularities that govern human deeds and which render them to some extent foreseeable, the statistical treatment seems to efface the frontier between the realms of liberty and of determinism, between man and nature. There is therefore a powerful temptation to treat human history as if it was only a prolongation of natural history, and to look for the laws alleged to govern it or, further,

to erase the qualitative difference between human history and biological evolution, and to reduce the first to the second.

Moral sciences, hermeneutic sciences, social sciences, natural sciences: such was the most general form, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, of division of university disciplines according to the modalities of the cognition that they applied. Different choices in the ensemble of virtual objects of study correspond to this epistemological difference. But these choices also depend on the countries in which they are operated. Thus the same object may be approached differently in France than in Germany. In general, however, the division of the field of knowledge into disciplines that are autonomous in relation to each other ensures the peaceful coexistence of approaches which proceed from philosophical options that may be divergent, even incompatible. The particularity of history resides in the fact that it is on its terrain that they meet and confront each other.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of economic history, which would later become economic and social history, as a recognized discipline of historical scholarship. This occurred in parallel in several nations: in Germany (Schmoller and his school, Max Weber, Sombart), in Great Britain (Unwin, Clapham), in the United States (with the first academic Chair of Economic History in 1892, at Harvard, for Ashley), in France (Levasseur, d'Avenel, Mantoux), in Belgium (Henri Pirenne), and Russia (Vinogradov and his school, Rostovzev, Kareiev). It was only in the final decades of the century, marked by advances in sociology and economics, that it began to veer increasingly towards the statistical approach, which gave rise to significant debates within the discipline itself. The influence of Marx's work contributed powerfully to this development.

From its first appearance, however, economic and social history turned towards objects in which historians had previously taken only a marginal interest, if at all. It concentrated on variations in prices, rents, wages, relations between land-owners and peasants in the country and within corporations in towns, on business enterprises (commercial companies, banks, factories), on the industrial revolution, the formation of the bourgeoisie as social class and psychological type, on economic crises and business cycles. In this way, economic and social history introduces a whole new range of written sources: market price-lists, account books, inventories, commercial correspondence, etc., and submits these sources to a treatment which privileges their repetitive elements, even when it is not a question of quantifiable data, and even more so when such data are available. Which, in a word, proceeds from the statistical approach, indeed applies it directly to documents that have survived from the past.

Nothing shows better the novelty of such a manner of practising history than the controversies roused by its claim to be, if not the only one that practices it correctly, at least the best, appropriate to all periods and all objects; Max Weber's polemic against Edouard Meyer, or François Simiand's lawsuit against historians, are particularly memorable examples. While raising new questions, these controversies have revived old problems which one might have thought if not settled, at least deprived of their original virulence by the passage of time. Is history a science or an art? And if it is held to be a science, what meaning do we give this expression? Is a science of the individual conceivable? Is history concerned with repetitions and, if so, where do they appear? Should they be privileged to the detriment of singular facts or, on the contrary, should the latter be the exclusive object of focus? And what type of determinism does history uncover, if indeed it does so – laws which suffer no exception, or probabilist regularities? What are the respective roles of

individuals and masses? Where are the motors of historical dynamics situated and of what do they consist?

### From political history to economic and social history

All the questions debated at the turn of the twentieth century, in most European countries and in the United States, emphasise the point of knowing whether the three approaches – ethological, hermeneutic and statistical – are incompatible or whether they are susceptible to being reconciled in the course of research designed to establish facts and in the construction of conceptual frameworks designed to render these facts intelligible. But these debates do not question the fundamental dogma of scholarly history. Yet in this late nineteenth-century era, the latter also began to be the object of dispute of which the importance was not perceived initially because at the time it seemed to arise either on the margins of history or outside it. On the margins: like the German *Siedlungsgeschichte* which, to fill the lack of gaps in ancient and mediaeval written sources, turned to the study of landscapes, peasant techniques and customs, place names and ethnonyms, remains found during archaeological excavations. Outside: in France, for example, the human geography of Vidal de La Blache, designed to explore the national territory and to shed light on the forces that have shaped it, also turns to landscapes, place-names, peasant tools, village customs.

Both of them certainly keep faith with the idea that the past can only be known through the medium of sources. But they reject in their practice the limitation of sources to texts and texts alone. In fact they promote the shape of fields and division of woodland, road patterns and village lay-out, ploughs and swing-ploughs, tiles, bricks and the traces left by vanished industries to the dignity of historic sources. In so doing they elevate to an instrument of cognition the gaze directed to elements of the natural and, above all, the human environment, and show the value of documents such as plans, maps, pictures. The transposition of the geographers' approach into an economic and social history dominated by statistical knowledge was to be the major innovation of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch. It conferred its originality on the review that they launched in 1929, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, and its fertility on the research programme that they presented and put into effect.

The period between the 1890s and the end of the 1960s was one of growing strength in economic and social history which, at times which vary according to country, superseded the political history and cultural history practised sometimes as moral sciences and sometimes as hermeneutic sciences. In most countries the latter none the less retained their dominant position until after the Second World War, because they dealt with great and burning problems of the national past and enjoyed public favour. There are, it seems, only two exceptions to this rule: the United States, because of the enormous influence of Charles A. Beard and his economic interpretation of American history, and the Soviet Union, because of the imposition by the Bolshevik power of Marxism–Leninism, initially in the extremist version of Mikolai N. Pokrovski and, from the mid-1930s, in the more moderate form which made it possible to link up with the tradition of Russian economic and social history, represented in particular by E.A. Kosminski, D.M. Petrushevski, Boris Porchnev and Evgeni V. Tarlé.



Elsewhere, matters turned out differently. In Germany the tradition of Ranke, personified by Friedrich Meinecke, reigned over university teaching of history until Hitler came to power. In Italy the great figure of Benedetto Croce sustained the primacy of ethico-political history, just like the school of Sir Lewis Namier in England, that of a political history focussed around institutions and ideas. Johan Huizinga, whose cultural history derived from a hermeneutic approach, stood out in Netherlands historiography. And in France in the inter-war years the most famous historian, if not the most influential, was probably Charles Seignobos. And yet in all these countries, as in several others, the followers of economic and social history were numerous and eminent. Reviews proliferated everywhere with the expression 'economic and social history' or its synonyms in their titles, as well as chairs dedicated to this discipline. Growing importance was accorded to the history of prices, which in the 1930s formed the object of an international enquiry.

It was only after 1945 that economic and social history took the place once held by political history, and it set its imprint on the history of all periods and all domains: that it became, in other words, the guiding discipline of historical knowledge as a whole. Evidence for this is the international influence of French historians such as Fernand Braudel and Ernest Labrousse and, more broadly of the current which appealed to Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, which expressed itself in the *Annales* and whose members were almost all engaged in teaching the VIth section of the *Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris. Evidence of this is the publication in Great Britain, from 1952, of a review such as *Past and Present* whose founders, all distinguished practitioners of social history – notably Eric Hobsbawm and Edward P. Thompson – sought inspiration in the *Annales* and in the Marxism which also took root powerfully in western universities. Evidence of this are the great controversies of the period. In continuation of pre-First World War concerns, they dealt with the move from the ancient economy (from slavery, according to the Marxists) to the mediaeval economy (feudal, according to the Marxists) and with the origins of capitalism, notably the relationships between the Protestant ethic on the one hand and the spirit of capitalism on the other. They were also concerned with new subjects: with crises, their returns and their effects (fourteenth century, seventeenth century), with the conditions of an economic take-off, or with the relationships between social orders and classes. Evidence of this is the penetration of the statistical approach into areas which originally lay completely outside it, particularly in the study of cultural phenomena – literacy, the production and circulation of books – and political phenomena (electoral behaviour, for example).

In the form in which it was practised from the 1930s onwards, economic and social history gradually moved away from its former orientations. It shifted its centre of gravity from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It took less interest in large-scale commerce and ever greater interest, following in the wake of Marc Bloch, in rural history, in the history of peasant life and agricultural production as well as in crises and conjunctures, mainly agricultural, the subject of studies by Wilhelm Abel and Ernest Labrousse. It abandoned a simple notion of the time of history, which saw it as one-dimensional and uniformly progressive, turning to a distinction – the major contribution of Fernand Braudel – between the long duration of structures, punctuated by irreversible changes, revolutions, the more rapid and cyclical variations of conjunctures, and the abrupt and linear time of events. The first is measured in centuries, even millennia; the second in decades; the third, in years, months, days and hours.

To explain the fluctuations of conjunctures which may be grasped through the series of prices, practitioners of economic and social history followed the economists' example and took to constructing models which clarify the mutual dependency between variables such as changes in the natural environment, population shifts, technical innovations, the production of precious metals, etc. This led them notably to create a history of the climate, using as sources the movements of glaciers and the annual growth-rings of trees, and a demographic history which looks at epidemics, physical care and hygiene, and sexual practices including contraception. In this way they reached the point of putting in a new light the question of the role of non-economic factors: attitudinal, cultural, political.

The promotion of economic and social history to the rank of the guiding discipline of historical knowledge as a whole is only one of the aspects of the new role that devolved on to social sciences in a western world fashioned by two industrial revolutions: first the revolution of steam, coal and steel, then the revolution of electricity, chemistry and the internal combustion engine. In effect, they lie at the origin of difficult, even explosive, social problems, following the spread of urbanization and the growth in the number of workers engaged in heavy industry; reforms designed to integrate this category into the nation were to come to a head with the appearance of the 'Welfare State'. Another aspect of the changes brought about by the industrial revolutions is the growth in power of Marxism, with which economic and social history was strongly connected, and which from the 1890s onwards became a political force, with the expanding electorate of the social-democrat parties, and in certain countries, particularly Germany, entered the universities. The First World War and the social upheavals which followed it, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the economic growth of the Soviet Union, contrasted with the great crisis in the capitalist societies, the accession to power of Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany, the destructions of the Second World War – all this led even democratic countries to invest responsibility for economic and social reconstruction, and in general the well-being of the population, in the State. Hence the adoption of planning in its many forms, and the fresh importance of the social sciences seen to support the gathering of data on the state of society and to offer theoretical bases of economic, cultural, educational and medical policies.

### **The new cultural history**

After about 1965 economic and social history began to yield its dominance to a history which was both cultural and political; it will be seen that it had little in common with cultural and political history as they were practised in the first half of the century. The transition from one to the other was ensured, to a large degree, by the agency of historical demography, or the history of populations placed at the crossroads of the economy, and of the problematics of the body and of representations which regulate attitudes concerning life and its stages, sexuality, death. The work of Philippe Ariès demonstrates this role of demography in a particularly forceful way. But this transition was also achieved by other means. Thus, in the case of Witold Kula, it was a study of measures, principally agricultural measures and, in the case of Jacques Le Goff, the study of social groups and the problems of time and work in the Middle Ages. The influence of anthropology on

historians, in particular on Classical and Mediaeval specialists, also operated in this direction; this can clearly be seen in the researches of Jean-Pierre Vernant.

Yet the promotion of cultural and political history to the rank of the guiding discipline of historical scholarship resulted not only from changes immanent to the economic and social history. It was also the effect of a true epistemological mutation in the disciplines which have long retained an autonomous position within this scholarship: in the history of literature, the history of art, the history of science and, to a lesser degree, apparently, the history of philosophy. In contrast to straightforward history, moral science first of all and then, to a growing degree but never exclusively, social science, until the 1960s all these disciplines remained faithful to the hermeneutic approach despite local attempts to apply the statistical approach in one or another of them. This is best illustrated by the history of art, in which the most significant and most influential work has from the 1920s been produced by the followers of iconology (Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, Edgar Wind, André Chastel) who with masterly rigour adapted the rules of hermeneutics to the study of the visual arts; the authors who attempted a sociology of art of more or less Marxist inspiration (Arnold Hauser, Frederick Antal) have always remained marginal.

During the course of the 1960s the entire foundations of the hermeneutic approach came into question. The very notions of an author identical to a strictly determined individual and of a well defined work presented once for all time had thus to face objections (Michel Foucault) which appear to have deprived them for ever of the kind of apodictic obviousness that they formerly enjoyed. Elsewhere, the admiration that was required, faced with works and their creators, even before beginning a study in order to understand them from the inside, gave way to a generalized suspicion considered to be the only position which made it possible to understand them. This is manifest above all in the history of sciences as it was cultivated allegedly, not without some abuse, in the wake of Thomas S. Kuhn, with the purpose of revealing the illusory nature of the rationality to which they laid claim.

Similarly, the notion of a value, artistic, cognitive or other, identified with the capacity of certain works of the mind to transcend time, to retain an eternal exemplariness in their respective domains, also came to be discredited. It was no longer a matter of wondering how a creator managed to confer such a value on a specific item in his works. It was a matter of establishing how the successive generations of spectators or readers have re-produced, as it were, a work from the elements available to them, have attributed it to one or another different originator and have invested it with different significations, sometimes contradictory and, in general, far distant from those which presided over the origins of the work, if indeed they can be disentangled from the layers of meaning superimposed over time. One could say that if aesthetic still exists, the accent now falls, particularly in literary matters, on an aesthetic of reception (Hans Robert Jauss). And that if the word *hermeneutics* is used today more often than ever, the ensemble of presuppositions and processes to which it refers is completely different from that which it designated in the nineteenth century.

The application of the new hermeneutics appears compatible, at least locally, with the recourse to procedures arising from the statistical approach. Sometimes it even requires them. In consequence, disciplines such as the history of art, literary history, the history of sciences, the history of philosophy, can no longer be distinguished from history in epistemological terms. This is shown by the new direction of their research programmes. Thus

the history of art now accords much greater significance than formerly to the materiality of the works, and sets at the heart of its concerns relationships between artists, sponsors and spectators, collections, museums, art academies, the circulation of images. For its part, the history of literature no longer sets itself apart from the history of the book, whether technically, economically, socially or even psychologically. At the same time, the history of sciences turns on one hand towards communities such as laboratories, networks of exchange with practitioners, academies and other scholarly groupings and, on the other, towards instruments.

As a general rule, artists, writers, thinkers and scholars are no longer approached as if each one were a disembodied and solitary spirit who, cut off from all practice, drew everything from the sole power-source of his mind. On the contrary, they are treated as corporeal and gendered beings, involved in various hierarchical relationships, engaged in the interplay of power at the heart of institutions, in the pursuit of pecuniary and honorific gratification, in competition for the best commissions, recognition of priority, the greatest number of readers. And who, in the exercise of their activities, are constantly engaged in material realities: with paper, pens, ink, keyboards; with brushes, pencils, scissors, canvas, stone, metal; with instruments of observation and measurement. Literature, art, philosophy, science therefore cease to be purely spiritual and supra-temporal entities; this entails their internal historicization and makes possible a cultural history conceived as one of the metamorphoses of the ensemble of human productions.

### **The new political history**

Economic and social history did not lose its dominant position only as the consequence of exhaustion of the cognitive productivity of its list of questions after a century of intense research. It was also because of the new place taken by culture in developed societies in which services, including cultural activities, have acquired an economic weight that is without precedent. And because of the generalized crisis in ideologies which came to light at the end of the 1970s and expressed itself in the return to power of liberalism with its intent to let the market run, and its insistence on the centrality of the individual. Liberalism is of course also an ideology. But it is an ideology particularly well adapted to the absence of a strong view of the future, capable of mobilizing the masses, such as it was presented by social democracy at the end of the nineteenth century and, after the First World War, by the totalitarian Bolshevik, Fascist and Nazi ideologies. The latter, fortunately, were marginalized. But authoritarian ideologies are in the course of coming to life again in the form of religious integrist movements, in the Islamic zone where they have become powerful, in the United States where they exercise influence in public life, and in Europe where they remain – for the time being? – very much in the minority. The responses that they offer to the identity crisis suffered by all developed societies at the end of several decades of upheavals that have affected the economy, social life and morals in the broadest sense of the term, and which have deprived people of their customary points of reference, set a threat hovering over the future of democracy.

Such is the background to the new political history which has been evolving for the last twenty years, and of which the central questions bear precisely on the emergence of modern democracy out of monarchical absolutism, and on the irruption into the political

field that is either democratic or en route towards democracy of authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies, movements and régimes, after the First World War and the universal crisis of the 1930s. It is to this question that the entire work of François Furet responds, and it is this question which directs the researches of several historians in many countries. They lead to a re-reading of modern history, at the departure point of which figure, from this perspective, the English, American and French revolutions to the extent that they gave birth to the institutions of democracy: to parliament and political parties, the written constitutions, human rights, to an original deployment of powers, to suffrage as it eventually became universal. But the new political history is also that of the State and of law, which looks back to their mediaeval past to draw out variations in their methods of operation. And it is also a history, on one side, of the individual and of society made up of individuals and, on the other, of the nation and of great collective thrusts directed by ideologies in conflict with each other throughout the nineteenth century, and during the greater part of the twentieth century: Fascism, Nazism, Communism.

Several domains, which they explore together, now unite political history with cultural history; sometimes they cannot even be distinguished, as with Alphonse Dupront. When the former sees the State primarily as an organiser of settings for public power in its role of administrator of violence and dispenser of goods, attention is concentrated on the ritual, ceremonial, celebration, solemnity with which the latter is also concerned. And they are approached through the medium of the same sources: images of all kinds, and remains such as the insignia of power or architectural monuments. If the questions are different, depending on the domains, the approach barely differs when it consists in bringing the iconic and material sources face to face with texts in order to reconstruct, as far as reasonably possible, spectacles of power, to rediscover their colours and their sounds as well as the gestures and postures adopted by actors and spectators, to render explicit the significations with which these spectacles were invested by their promoters and their public. This is why political history is interested in artists, scenic designers or even organisers of ceremonies, while cultural history takes an interest in the holders of power and those who recruit artists in their name and give them programmes to follow.

More than elsewhere, the reciprocal links between political history and cultural history are visible in the importance that both accord to this new privileged object of research, developed over the past twenty years, which is memory, both individual and collective, with its mechanisms, institutions, means of transmission and all its variations, as a function of the challenges that those who are its bearers must take up now, and of their notions of the future. Hence the great international fashion for studies of commemorations, ceremonies and festivals during which memories of the past are revived, of the rituals which regulate them, of the sites of memory both material and immaterial: anthologies of songs and landscapes, mental divisions of natural and social space and cemeteries, archives and symbols. The very distinction between political and cultural history becomes in this domain irrelevant, because of the identity of the objects that they study and the treatments that they apply to them.

It is probably at this point that the affinity, both thematic and epistemological, between the two branches of history, is best revealed. The appropriation by the latter of the memory which it has now made its object – what is it, in fact, but a study of events, people, beliefs, institutions and ideas on the basis of their reception: of images which have been retained of them and which were taken up again by one generation after another, not without

undergoing changes along the way. Or, better, an integration into history of the recollections of the past and of the effects that they exercise, often up to the present day. This presupposes that we set out from the present and proceed to remove one layer of memories after another, before ending with the phenomena lying at the origin and lifting out of it, if possible, the original meaning in order to establish the extent to which it has affected all those with which they were invested subsequently.

### **History of the present time**

The move to the front of the stage of cultural and political history has gone hand in hand with a shift of the centre of temporal gravity of history. Until the nineteenth century, the Antiquity and the Middle Ages were held to be privileged periods in history, the study of which advanced historical scholarship as a whole. Diplomatic history, which came to the fore under the influence of Ranke's affirmation of the *Primat der Aussenpolitik*, concentrated on the first modern age (sixteenth–eighteenth century) of which archives became accessible during the nineteenth century, at dates which varied according to country. And it is always the Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the first modern age that have been privileged by economic and social history, although it concentrated on the latter, as was manifest above all after the Second World War but already perceptible before it and dictated by focussing on the genesis and metamorphoses of capitalism.

The promotion of cultural and political history to the rank of guiding discipline of historical scholarship has been accompanied by a displacement of the centre of interest towards the nineteenth century and the history of the present time. The latter became thinkable from the moment when the present ceased to be incapable of being grasped except by perception and when it became possible to make of it, as with the past, an object of knowledge through the agency of sources, that is, from the advent of social sciences. But the history of the present time has only been able to assert itself fully as the result of the opening of archives which, in several countries, made the study of the inter-war years, and even of the first decades of the post-war period, possible from the 1960s. And so, over the last three decades, expansion in the history of the present time has made it the most dynamic and innovative section of historical scholarship. It is the history of the present day that has launched itself into the production of sources, making extensive use of oral accounts that are easy to record with the use of the lightweight and inexpensive cassette recorder. And it is the history of the present day which has applied itself to using images to an enormous extent: posters, photographs, film documentation, video recordings. Such a wide range of virtual sources has enabled social categories to speak which, even in the days of mass literacy, produced little written material capable of direct representation of their ways of seeing, of thinking and of living.

In this way the history of peasants and workers has undergone a revival and a completely new domain has appeared, women's history. But even political history and the history of sciences, for example, have benefited from the use of new sources, to the extent that it is now possible to obtain evidence on precise points from the original actors and to offer the opportunity to speak to those who hitherto were rarely heard: the grass-roots militants, technicians, family members, etc. Today the history of the present time is also the most controversial area of history, as can be seen in German *Historikerstreit* and the

international debates surrounding the books of François Furet, Daniel Goldhagen and Eric Hobsbawm, or around the *Livre noir du communisme*.

Nothing surprising here. What in fact is the present time, if not the period when generations still living have themselves lived and are in the course of living? Life expectation has extended so remarkably in developed countries that people who were already engaged in active life half a century ago are still with us, and the delays before the time when archives become accessible have almost all been reduced to thirty years, apart from certain particularly sensitive files. A confrontation therefore becomes inevitable, between on one hand the works of historians of the present day and, on the other, memories that are still painful and ideological standpoints capable of mobilising strong passions. A dramatic confrontation, for history cannot be reduced to setting down memory in writing, which immediately opens a conflict between the two approaches when they deal with the same objects – and because the role of a historian is not to adopt the victim's point of view, however much he may sympathise with it. His role is first to establish the facts in conformity with the rules of historical criticism and then to attempt to understand them; this inevitably leads him to adopt a point of view different from all those adopted by the protagonists of the events that he is studying, and thus provoke a general discontent.

It would however be reductive to retain from the history of the present day only burning political topics. For substantial works have approached the economic history of the twentieth century, demographic changes (migrations, the ageing of the population), the social upheavals that it has seen appearing, such as the end of the peasantry, the new morals which are in the course of becoming rooted – intergenerational relationships, the status of youth, the family – institutional transformations, notably the European construction, sciences and techniques, finally the arts and their place in contemporary life. Because of the skills that it demands in its practitioners, the history of the present time is less than any other the monopoly of professional historians. Among the significant publications of recent years, several have come from sociologists, from economists, or from journalists. The frontiers between historical scholarship and the other domains of scholarship have lost the sharp definition that they once displayed, and the recombining of their reciprocal relationships is far from being complete.

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(translated from the French by Helen McPhail)