

Clio, Ignorance, and the Twentieth Century

Yves Beauvois and Cécile Blondel-Lucas

Although the historian confronts the question of what is not known in the same terms as does any other researcher no matter his or her discipline, the conditions of the debate are different for the historian because of the problematic nature of the science of history. While practically all the other sciences, including the social sciences, struggle against ignorance by seeking to discover and establish laws that will govern the facts, history must always face, in spite of its ever more sophisticated techniques, the contingency of its materials, which are fundamentally human. The materials of history can not—in spite of what some have asserted—be contained within any single, all-encompassing mode of reasoning that would allow for the creation of constitutive abstract models. In spite of this reality the historian persists, like Sisyphus, in organizing knowledge. Man apparently has no choice but to believe that his activities have some logical basis. The historian therefore collates facts in order to develop cognitive and interpretive structures that will be durable. What gives the discipline of history its epistemological originality is the painfully central role it accords to the question, “What do we not know?” Man wants to know, believes he knows. The ignorance of historians thus seems especially upsetting when applied to our own century. How could the methodological progress of the science of history, along with the professionalization of the historian’s craft, have led to an actual increase of uncertainty concerning a period so close to us in time? Today’s man-in-the-street—endowed only with his memory, which seems so rich in “truths”—finds it hard to believe that any event or structure of the twentieth century could remain unknown. Limiting our inquiry to the twentieth century is not, however, justified

solely by the practical consideration of trying to gain a better grasp of our times. Indeed in this brief article devoted to the relationship between ignorance and the history and historiography of the twentieth century, we will not attempt to inventory all the events, persons, mentalities or economic facts which historical knowledge has until now been incapable of explaining. Unlike the other sciences, whose struggle against ignorance is accomplished by a gradual process of nibbling at the margins of the unknown, the discipline of history must always keep in mind that the masses of granite that form the foundation of History are in fact but a body of statements that can only *aspire* to the status of truth. The aim of our inquiry—without of course claiming to be exhaustive—will therefore be to identify the nature of the obstacles that lie in the historian's path. These problems are of three kinds. The first concerns *access* to knowledge, and is tied—although not exclusively—to problems of the techniques of historical research. The second concerns the difficulties related to *conceptualization* and therefore to the uses of knowledge. There can be no knowing without know-how. Finally, the third pertains to the *lack of permeability* between history and the other human and social sciences, which creates for the historian the challenge of interdisciplinary exchange.

Accessing, Overcoming, Transmitting

Even in the period when “the new history,” reigning virtually unchallenged, compelled the historian to take into account non-written sources such as archaeological traces, iconography, oral traditions, and the like, the traditional documentary foundation of history was preserved. In the beginning was, is, and will be, the archive. But what are—or what should be—the archives of the twentieth century? Does their exponential growth, itself without precedent in human history, signify that from here on *everything* is to be saved and that all of tomorrow's potential knowledge will be held there? This question is reminiscent of the old debate between historians and archivists. The former have an instinctive tendency to believe that all written traces ought to be conserved because it is often impossible—for both the historians themselves and, a for-

tiori, for the archivists—to know, at the time of classification, what will be the future value of a given document. Sorting mutilates knowledge. The archivists' first response to this kind of reasoning is with technical objections: where are we to find a place and the necessary financing to conserve everything at a time when there have never been more administrative structures and more document producers? More substantively, they assert that archival sorting is necessary in order to master the mass of material: only "real information," as opposed to information judged accidental or anecdotal, is worth preserving. In this case the act of sorting is presented as a safeguard to knowledge and the only way of preserving real documentation of the historical process. However, this long-standing debate does not take into account other, more recent, phenomena. Let us mention two of them. First, the threat to the historical knowledge of the twentieth century is based at least as much, if not more, on the atomization of the information in contemporary archives as on the difficulties associated with the conception and practice of intelligent archival activity alone. It is not enough that documents be preserved: they must be as coherently classified as possible in order to preserve the information's density. The diffusion and scattering of information, compounded by the multiplicity of new supports (photographic reproduction, video and audio tapes, etc.) blurs meaning and hinders knowledge. Although computers can, by linking card catalogues and *fichiers*, play a positive role, they can also constitute a threat to the progress of historical knowledge. Indeed, and this is the second phenomenon of which we wanted make mention, the general use of computers by history's actors makes the observation of the genesis of a large number of historical facts more and more difficult: the disappearance of the paper trail that the computer brings, and the ease with which one can erase and correct what is on the screen, disguise the responsibilities of the decision makers who now know not to leave behind the correction-blackened manuscripts of the past—those information-rich rough drafts that embodied the progress of their author's thought. Indeed the computer is causing the decision-making process to become more opaque and even anonymous. An advance for conservation, it may turn out to be a hindrance to knowledge.

All these challenges to the archivist's job, with their obvious philosophic dimension, are complicated by the political stake that each nation's past represents. Any State, from the most totalitarian to the most democratic, is tempted to use archives to its own ends. How better to obscure a page of history judged to be too much in contradiction with the reigning ideology, or believed to be a threat to national unity, than by blocking—either openly or deceitfully—the historian's access to the archives? Equally, *a contrario*, how better to destabilize an opinion than by suddenly throwing open a long-closed archive to journalists and a general public that often lacks even the most basic understanding of the methods of historical inquiry? In the hands of an unscrupulous government, the opening and closing of archives can become a powerful weapon, whose first and impotent victims are historians. Yet it can be argued that the politician's will to create obstacles to historical knowledge is ultimately illusory and doomed to failure. The attempts made by the authorities in former popular democracies seem to offer a textbook case. Although it was impossible for historians to carry out research on certain episodes of their national history, and in some cases they were forbidden even to allude to or mention them, these unknown—for the moment—objects of historical knowledge, these hidden facts, remained quite present in the collective consciousness and were designated, for example in Poland, by the expressive term of "blank spots." One knew that one didn't know; and that was enough to know that one would know one day, because the feeling or intuition of ignorance fed the ideal of truth. Thus the obstacles created by politicians seem, at least in the long run, to be Pyrrhic victories, capable only—though it is something—of causing delay.

The problems associated with archival activity are obviously not the only obstacle to the production of historical knowledge. There are other hurdles to overcome—hurdles perhaps more pernicious because less visible. Myths are of this type. Whether regarding a person, a period, or an analysis, myths are especially dangerous because they pervert the historian's quest for objectivity by offering an apparently indisputable form of knowledge. Such myths can be solidly rooted in an international framework—one thinks of Yalta—or in the extremely structuring myth of the

Nation. Is there in the world, and especially in Europe, a more completely mythological construct than that of Nation? Although seemingly full of knowledge, the idea of Nation is but the product of a consensual substitution. Like their Greek predecessors who helped advance the discipline of history from being an expression of collective myth to the disinterested search for pure truth, the historian of the twentieth century is obliged to uncover the factitious knowledge on which he himself was raised. What makes this task especially onerous is that any myth is a closed system, with its own internal logic and social function. Moreover, the historian is not immune to an error of judgment, to which the desire for notoriety—a notoriety that results from having challenged a myth—can sometimes lead. Once the myth has been objectively circumscribed, the historian must then attempt to reconcile the serenity required to prove his assertion with the inevitable polemical dimension that the work can not fail to arouse. At this point it is difficult for the historian not to enter into political debate, although this can then interfere with his cognitive activity.

The resistance, as much in the general public as in the community of historians, to analyzing the mythical aspect of recent national history clearly reflects the weight of memory. Is memory by definition an obstacle to historical knowledge? Some think so, especially those for whom the discipline of history is a conceptualization of the past, an introduction of order and sense. For them memory, whose principle source is personal testimony, is nothing more than the individual expression of a supposed collective consciousness and which, as such, is a deforming prism, the reflection of a temporal standpoint that banishes all chronology. Between *Clio* and *Mnemosyne* there is not merely incompatibility but antimony. The mother against the daughter. However, some events of the twentieth century, notably the various colonial massacres and the Holocaust, seem to argue in favor of a permanent “duty to remember” as an indispensable auxiliary to any constructed representation of the past. The current interest in “the history of present time”—with its direct links to the extremely empirical “immediate history” of the nineteen sixties—bears witness, by its contributions, to the fact that memory can be one of the operational tools of the historian without being a threat—by a radical relativization—to

the fundamental role played by traditional archives. Used judiciously memory can, on the contrary, bring renewal to historical knowledge by reintroducing, after the long reign of the *Annales* school, the accidental, the short term, and the contingent.

As can be seen, the attainment of knowledge requires a surmounting of various kinds of obstacles and hesitations. However, whatever these difficulties, historians have not only remained committed to the ideal of true historical knowledge (as imperfect and multiform as it may be), they have even asserted, on social grounds and sometimes because of political necessity, that certain kinds of knowledge are essentially irrefutable. How does historical knowledge reach the status of irrefutability? Let us mention here one of the ways in which it occurs: the creation of school textbooks. By what criteria are the functionaries who determine school curricula chosen? How much freedom are the editors and writers granted? How are pedagogical, cultural, and moral aims—such as an understanding of past achievements, a sense of criticism and relativity, etc.—reconciled with the rigor of historical science? Although these questions do not call into question the basic need to hand down and transmit historical knowledge, they do demand from us modesty and critical vigilance: in order to be “authentic,” historical truth must be limited.

Naming, Conceptualizing, Thinking

Exterior obstacles are not the only source of the difficulties encountered by the historian who tries to establish or transmit knowledge: these difficulties are also a function of the means that the historian possesses to overcome them. Among the tools at one's disposal the most important is his or her *language*, which often clashes with the language of the texts to be analyzed. How indeed can an historian formulate an analysis that is both precise and avoids anachronisms, using a vocabulary that is preexistent to its scientific usage (that is, part of daily life)? Unlike the mathematician or chemist, the historian does not have at his disposal a conventional symbolic system that is internationally accepted and understood. The problem becomes terribly concrete when one

notes the polysemy in the vocabulary of historians of the twentieth century—and not only as a function of nationality or due to the vagaries of translation. Witness, for example, words as emotion-charged as “bourgeoisie,” “fascism,” “nationalism,” or “Europe.” What reality do we secretly associate with each one of these words? Historical knowledge suffers mightily from this lack of pre-defined terms and a regulated nomenclature.

Along with the definitional drawback associated with words inherited from the past, there is the additional problem of nominalism that arises as a result of the creation and reutilization of historical concepts. These concepts are, of course, a necessary part of historical discourse; for even if history often takes a narrative form, it is no less an analytic discipline. It is by engaging in conceptual thinking that the historian first becomes aware of various forms of already extant falsifications: false theories, stereotypes, cultural clichés, collective prejudices, etc. Additionally, by systematizing scattered variables that hitherto yielded no meaning, conceptual thinking brings to light new realities. However, even if their utility is not to be doubted, how are we to make use of these concepts? The conceptual panaceas so frequently advanced often prove to be syllogisms. A good example of this widespread tendency is the still current and abusive use to which historians have subjected the nebulous and woolly idea of “public opinion”: public opinion is the opinion of the largest number, the loudest voice is the voice of the largest number, therefore the loudest voice is public opinion. Thanks to the progress of the science of history, we can now fashion a cognitive tool out of this concept—as we can with other concepts—by rationally examining its component parts instead of using it as a convenient shortcut which, in the final analysis, deprives it of its essence. Along with the unwitting use of poorly mastered concepts, a certain indeterminacy in the language of historians is also observable. The extensive use of brilliant but tautological neologisms, by transforming the narrative of history into a metalanguage, makes it unsuitable for any real analysis and, *a fortiori*, for the transmission of knowledge.

The historian’s work is not limited to questions associated with narrow measurement, like the example discussed above. It can also be concerned with encompassing much vaster systems of

relations in order to identify the complex structure of certain kinds of knowledge. How can we succeed in locating, then disentangling inextricable networks of interdependencies? The specific problems associated with the study of the history of international relations demonstrate the importance of the question. Although historical study has retreated from a narrowly diplomatic point of view, which has allowed it to take into account not only the struggles for security, power, and prestige in the Chancelleries but the “deep” forces embodied in economic and social life, the vast influence of ideologies, mentalities, and of emotions (notably in regard to the definition of the “other”), it remains extremely difficult for the researcher to contain, or even circumscribe, the international reality. The obstacle presented by language—multilingualism rarely being the historian’s first priority—does not fully explain the situation. Without in any way disparaging the accomplishments of historians, we can not avoid the question of whether their frequent recourse to bilateral studies—in which the researcher’s own country is almost always one of the two subjects—has not undercut the will to think through the complexity of international relations in their innumerable and contradictory manifestations. The progress of knowledge can also be hindered by an unquestioning reliance on out-of-date and hence factitious frameworks. In such cases researchers, without even a moment’s pause to observe the facts with critical distance, are prepared to accept certain entities and structures as eternal totems around which research must be organized. For instance, there is currently a tendency—far too widespread—among historians to neglect the component parts of the ex-Soviet Union. Having fallen once more into a Russo-centric point of view, these historians attach little importance to nations prey to a new form of Russian imperialism. International relations, like many other networks of relations, demand a pluralistic approach from the historian.

The historian’s difficulties in conceptualizing analytic tools and in outlining an overall point of view represent a stimulating challenge. To respond to it the historian does not stand alone, since in most cases research is carried out within the context of a School whose convictions and objectives constitute a reassuring and solid support. However, the very existence of historiographic periods,

to which the succession of Schools—not to mention their inner squabbling—bears witness, seems to pose a real problem to the legitimacy of the knowledge established by any given school of thought. If a dominant School, which has defined the boundaries of normative thinking for its contemporaries, established a hierarchy of facts, conceived and imposed the “only” methodology capable of selecting, evaluating and providing a truly critical method, itself declines, what value can be attached to the new rules introduced in the next cycle of knowledge—the one that replaces the old—and whose own dominance, we know through experience, will itself be temporary? It will be said that this is the case in all the sciences. However, unlike the Newtonian and Copernican revolutions, which definitively disproved the theories that preceded them, historical Schools seem never to disappear completely; they survive their own demise and even return to fashion. The fact, for example, that the decline in influence of the *Annales* School has brought with it a resurgence of political history, which itself was an offshoot of the Positivist School, or that certain forms of Marxist analysis continue to be practiced, suggests that, rather than falling into an destructive and despondent relativism (like the “deconstructive” mode overseas), historical study might be better served by defining itself as an archipelago of competing means and aims amongst which, for better or worse, knowledge is broadened and refined.

Communicating, Overlapping, Opening Up

The various limits encountered by the historian, which we have described here, lead to an inquiry into the question of whether a greater collaboration between history and the other human and social sciences might not, in some cases, be a partial answer to the problem of stagnation in historical knowledge. What makes the inquiry even more pertinent is that history, like the other sciences that make the human element its subject, has gone through—and continues to go through—a tumultuous period in regards to its self-definition, legitimacy, and the questions with which it deals. In the final analysis it is of little importance whether the need for a

widening of history's field of inquiry is due to changes in lifestyle or public expectation, or to the progress of scientific thought itself. The fact is that the emergence of new areas of inquiry in neighboring sciences, and even the creation of completely separate disciplines (ecology, futurology, semiotics, etc.), is sometimes taken as a threat to the future development of history.

Interdisciplinary studies, which are intellectually desirable and so often postulated, currently pose problems for historical studies: communication between disciplines is difficult, the collaboration itself uneasy, and the discovery of new approaches is often met diffidently. Historians are alarmed to see their science, which was chronologically first and until now the master explanatory system of society, encroached on by other disciplines; disciplines to which history is now often subordinated and at times diluted, which threatens its once well-defined territory. In the name of preserving historical knowledge, history is seeking to reclaim this territory. This is why we are currently witnessing a revival of certain traditional areas of study, such as politics, biography, and historical events, as well as the narrative form of history writing—a return that can be taken as a negation of (or at least a very severe limitation on) interdisciplinarity.

Should historians alone assume the responsibility for the dysfunction of interdisciplinarity? Along with the problem of intellectual laziness, which is an impediment to the acquisition of the knowledge and methods of other disciplines, the sister sciences too manifest hesitancy and fears—they too are impeded by their own problems of self-definition. This may help explain the persistence of certain areas of ignorance and why the interdisciplinary debate is so often reduced to superficial and sterile disputes, concerned only with the jealous and philistine preservation of each discipline's zones of influence. Yet we have witnessed fruitful collaborations, in both the past and present, that have developed valuable matrices of knowledge, some of which deserve mention here by way of example.

Sociology, both Durkheim's and Weber's variants, helped historians—particularly thanks to the utilization of the sociological method by the *Annales* School—discover new ways of advancing knowledge. By restoring the historian's interest in the human ele-

ment (as opposed to an exclusive interest in events), by showing them the profit to be derived from studying the interactive mechanisms that regulate group activity, by inspiring them to discover new methods to use as analytic filters, such as typologies and quantification, sociology demolished the compartmentalization that had obstructed the horizons of some fields of knowledge. This profitable and enriching relationship has today run out of steam: from a probably too systematic and massive application of sociological methods, the relationship has now turned into one more akin to complete disregard. The qualities of sociology that were formerly praised by historians are now perceived as constraints: sociology is seen as too abstract and dogmatic, its methods criticized as being based more on experience than rationality. This exaggerated judgment clearly needs to be corrected, especially since sociology itself has changed, no longer disdaining analyses of individuals in isolated processes. For our purposes this change has the advantage of allowing for a fundamental inquiry into relations that transcend those of history and sociology: should interdisciplinary study be an organized process—assuming that it can be organized—or can interdisciplinary research only be the result of empirical inventiveness?

The often cool and unenthusiastic relations between history and linguistics bear witness to the pertinence of this question. Furthermore, even more decisively than with sociology, the relations between history and linguistics tend to show that a well-conceived interdisciplinary approach ought not to make a pan-logical methodology its objective, even on a theoretical or ideal level. Linguistics, through an application of its own methods to syntax, distribution and vocabulary, can reveal the logic of texts to historians who, without it, would have to work with their factual content alone. However, linguistics is incapable of going beyond the internal organization of the texts and of their ideology; nor can it reveal their social function or historical relevance as a whole. This practical and potentially rich area of study is left open to historians. Paradoxically they have reacted to this with skepticism, asserting that linguistics proves nothing but the obvious. However, even if this were the case, why should history reject a discipline that provides a solid scientific foundation to an area that quite often is grounded only in the probable, the generally agreed upon, or the

empirical? Is not logical demonstration one of the basic roles of interdisciplinary activity?

The heuristic function of interdisciplinarity is surely another of its benefits: to advance knowledge of the other not so much by the direct contribution of its own knowledge as by tracing the other's point of view and revealing structures and paths hitherto unnoticed. However, in order to carry out this project, it is not enough merely to proclaim the benefits of interdisciplinarity and put the two sciences in contact. The mixed results of the collaboration between history and psychoanalysis are revealing on this point. In the 1960s psychoanalysis was the subject of a virtual infatuation, more marked in the Anglo-Saxon countries than in France. The relations between the two disciplines seemed quite close. Today, however, while psychiatry has begun to make use of history's methods in order to describe itself, history has remained hesitant in regards to the use of psychoanalysis. History is skeptical about how psychoanalysis, which is the domain of the individual *par excellence*, can yield elements of knowledge about the collective, or even tangible and verifiable knowledge for biographically-oriented research. It is true that the dialogue between the two disciplines is impeded by the division of psychoanalysis into competing cliques whose main business is internecine quarreling. Thus the use of certain psychoanalytic theories, particularly those adapted to the collective, such as Jung's, remain in a disorganized state, perhaps to the detriment of historical knowledge.

Anthropology has not and does not suffer from the same ostracism as does psychoanalysis. Moreover, its interest in historical knowledge is even less in question, since the heuristic and demonstrative functions of interdisciplinarity have been fully developed by anthropology. The relevance of the fields that anthropology has opened up for history—such as the body, with its sexuality and senses or sensibilities, the subjects of fear and attitudes toward life and death—has allowed for great advances in historical study. The importance of these timely discoveries does not, however, prevent us from inquiring into how to reconcile *durably* an interdisciplinarity between two sciences, of which one strives to be a history of Mankind and the other a history of men; when one favors so-called primitive societies and the other, quite often, is

occidental-centric. Should an institutionalization of interdisciplinarity be the goal? What viable form could it take? The progress of historical knowledge may to some extent depend on the answer to these questions, particularly as regards the complex interpenetration of metropolitan, colonial, and autochthonous cultures.

* * *

In inquiring into the limits of historical knowledge, we had no illusions about the possibility of being able to construct an actual cartography of ignorance. However, by pointing to certain obstacles that stand in the historian's way, by outlining some of the traps that he lays for himself, and by inquiring realistically into the possibility of interdisciplinary activity, we have found that at the heart of the question of historical knowledge lies the problem of the identity of the historian and the definition of his profession. The knowledge one has of others is filtered through the knowledge one has of oneself; thus the flourishing of ego-history at this century's end. This need for self-discovery is especially relevant to historians of the twentieth century, since their works—as opposed to most other scientists, who rarely express themselves in narrative form— attract the passionate attention and vigilance of a public whose thirst for knowledge is virtually unquenchable. The call from the present compels historians to inquire into their own motivations. Is their work a making of history for history in the positivist mode, in order to ensure erudite instruction that will ultimately generate other instructors, or is their aim to be a sort of social mediator who uses his or her expert's authority in order to stand as a credible interpreter of the past, refusing to let profit and loss determine what is to be omitted? Although there are probably as many answers to this question as there are students of contemporary history, the boundaries of the historian's community are nevertheless marked by two basic tendencies: the imperative to establish a controllable knowledge, and the humility imposed on the historian by the awareness of the attainability of a composite vision of the past and the knowledge that an indivisible one is beyond reach.