

Modern French Historiography

by Thomas Lepeltier

Twentieth century French historiography cannot be conceived of as a single unit. It has nonetheless been identified quite often with what some called “the *Annales* School”. Founded in 1929 by the historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the journal *Annales* has strongly influenced historiographical production up to the present in France and elsewhere. To speak of a “school” of the *Annales* nevertheless risks obscuring the differences, or even oppositions, between those who claim to represent the ideas of this journal. Of course, not every French historian since 1929 has followed the programme or, more precisely, the successive programmes, defined by the journal. Rather than simply identify French historiography of the twentieth century with the *Annales*, modern historiographical production of France must be analysed in terms of both continuation of and deviation from the initial project of this journal.

The journal *Annales* was born as a self-proclaimed break with what it saw as the “positivist” school of history. In this it did not set itself up to oppose the historians who drew their inspiration from the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte. Rather, it sought to oppose the scholarly practices of the majority of historians of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, that are now referred to as the “*école méthodique*”, in order to distinguish them from the “real”, short-lived, positivist school. The amalgam shows the vehemence with which the founders of the *Annales*, in particular Lucien Febvre, aimed to initiate a new approach to history. But the break they claimed from despised predecessors was less radical than it might first seem, concealing strategies of conquest. As for the aim expressed by the two founders of the *Annales* – to follow the example of the dynamic new social sciences –, it was shared by a good many historians for years. Within these limitations, and once it is understood that 1929 was not an absolute break, one can nevertheless see it as an important symbolic step.

The strength of the *Annales* – of which the complete name was originally *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* – lay in successfully building an alliance between historians, sociologists, economists and geographers. Taking into account the methodological contributions of these disciplines, historians were able to rethink their approach to the past. By centering their research on social and economic aspects, historians thus began to give priority to regular and mass phenomena rather than to contingencies linked to individual destinies. More precisely, instead of a focus on famous men, battle fields and political events in general, this new history substituted the examination of past ways of living, working, or thinking, and the slow processes that reflect deep social transformations. Toppling the three idols of the “*tribu des historiens*” – the political, the individual and the chronological – which were denounced in 1903 by the sociologist and economist François Simiand, the *Annales* also sought to sever the link between historical discourse and the cult of the Nation. Under the Third Republic, historical discourse had often been used to maintain national memory. The founders of the *Annales*, in marked contrast, thought that historical facts, and in particular the facts of French history, should not be considered as data to be listed, but as constructions to be interrogated. History was no longer to

serve patriotism, or indeed any other end apart from that of answering the questions that the historians themselves might ask. With the idea that history did not lie in the passive observation of the past, the two founders of the *Annales* thus preached a history which saw itself as raising problems, questioning assumptions and working out interpretations. In short, history was to be, in Lucien Febvre's words, a "histoire-problème".

While Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre succeeded in making their approach relatively well accepted, and the quality of their work was widely recognized, this did not mean that all historians were going to forsake diplomatic or political history in favour of social or economic history. That was never to be completely the case, since historians like Pierre Renouvin, a specialist of international relations, would maintain the continuity of this kind of history in French academia (see for example his *Histoire des relations internationales*, 1953-1958). However, after the Second world war, the *Annales* more or less dominated French historiography. This success can of course be explained by the increasing fame of the review and of the historians who were associated with it, such as Camille-Ernest Labrousse and especially Fernand Braudel. They had both published works which were going to be used as models for at least forty years: *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII^e siècle* (1933), and *La Crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'ancien régime et au début de la Révolution* (1944) for the former; *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949) for the latter. Moreover Fernand Braudel was to lead the review after the death of Lucien Febvre in 1956 (the latter having directed it alone since Marc Bloch had been obliged to stand down as director in 1941 because of the anti-Semitic laws of the Vichy government, before being executed by the Germans in 1944). But the success of the *Annales* can also be explained by what some have called a true strategy of conquest. With Camille-Ernest Labrousse at the Sorbonne and Lucien Febvre, then Fernand Braudel, at the Collège de France and at the head of the Sixth section of the École pratique des Hautes Études, central stronghold of the *Annales*, the representatives of the ideas of the *Annales* occupied prestigious institutional positions and had great influence in the world of publishing, which would allow them to attract and to inspire a new generation of historians.

In 1946, the title of the review was modified to become *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations*. This new title, in which the order of the three terms of the subtitle was intended to reflect the heuristic order that made it possible to achieve a global knowledge of historic phenomena, represented an evolution of the project of the review. The implicit idea was that from the study of the economy one would be able to move up to society, then to civilization. In other words, reflecting the obvious influence of Marxism, the idea was that through economics one touched the central mechanisms that oriented the destiny of human societies. This new conception explains why for many years, until approximately 1970, economic history was broadly dominant. More specifically, this was an economic history that privileged long-term processes over temporary crises and drew on the developing field of historical demography. Fernand Braudel's article, "Histoire et sciences sociales. La longue durée", published in 1958 in the review, can be seen as a manifesto of this new orientation of the *Annales*. This period saw the emergence of historians like George Duby (*La Société aux XI^e et XIII^e siècles dans la région*

mâconnaise, 1953), Pierre Goubert (*Beauvais et les Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730*, 1960), and Emmanuel Roy Ladurie (*Les Paysans du Languedoc*, 1966). It is however difficult to say if the idea of committing themselves to the study of the long time-span (*longue durée*), in which societies are seen as evolving slowly, explains the attraction of a significant number of French historians towards rural history before the industrial revolution, or if the reverse was true. In any case, it was the great period of quantitative history, where historians began to calculate everything and to believe that historical works had above all to rely on numbers. This use of quantitative means not only gave these historians the illusion of making history a scientific discipline, like the natural sciences, but also pushed them to interpret everything in terms of economic determinism. It was only outside the *Annales* movement that one could find historians, such as Roland Mousnier for example, who criticized the systematic recourse to this type of interpretation.

The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s saw economics lose its primary role. It is probable that the social changes of the 1960s-70s, as well as the social protests which accompanied them, encouraged the revival of an interest in the lifestyles of traditional societies. It was no surprise to see historians return to history of *mentalités* (mentalities) which had been brilliantly practised, more than twenty years earlier, by Marc Bloch (*Les Rois thaumaturges*, 1924), Lucien Febvre (*Le Problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle*, 1942), or George Lefebvre (*La Grande peur de 1789*, 1932), but which had since then been largely abandoned. In any case, this history of *mentalités*, which must be understood as a history of collective representations rather than a much more abstract history of ideas, remained close to social history since it intended to restore ideas to the social context in which they appeared. This new history of *mentalités* would however innovate thanks to the influence of a branch of the social sciences that had been somewhat neglected until then: anthropology. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who personifies the increasing influence of structuralism on the social sciences, undoubtedly had an important influence on the new history of *mentalités*. But while structuralism found some favourable echoes among the historians who forsook the superficial phenomena of individual lives in favour of the constancy and regularity which appear at the level of the *longue durée*, it nevertheless had an ambiguous relationship to history, since the idea of structure entered into conflict with that of historical change. Despite such tensions, it was because it intended to historicize the traditional topics of anthropology that the new history of *mentalités* often adopted the expression "historical anthropology". During this period, from the beginning of the 1970s to the end of the 1980s, which corresponds to the peak in the influence of the *Annales*, any subject seemed potentially the object of history. The histories of food, clothing, housing, sexuality and childhood were, for example, established. History of *mentalités* thus gave new life to the old *histoire des mœurs*. It should be noted that this reorientation did not entail a rejection of the primacy of the paradigm of quantification, as one can observe in Michel Vovelle's pioneering work which undertook vast calculations based on legal records to study dechristianization in the eighteenth century (*Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIII^e siècle*, 1973), or the somewhat naïve, and, it now appears, erroneous, prediction of Emmanuel Roy Ladurie according to which historians had to

become programmers if they did not want to disappear in the future (*Le Territoire de l'historien*, 1973).

This renewal of historiography corresponded to a change in the leadership of the *Annales*. In 1969 Fernand Braudel had transmitted the direction of the review to the medievalist Jacques Le Goff, the early modernist Emmanuel Roy Ladurie and the contemporary historian Marc Ferro. His departure from the Collège de France and from the direction of the Sixth section of the École pratique des Hautes Études in 1972 (which would become the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, in 1975) thus marked the end of an epoch. The new period was to be marked by history of *mentalités* (or of historical anthropology), but a certain number of other changes were to appear decisive a few years later. Primarily, the early 1970s saw a rehabilitation of the event and a return to political history: two topics which had been disparaged by the *Annales*. Now, not only did historians critical of the *Annales* find an ever-increasing audience, these topics were also taken up by the successors of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. An article by the historian François Furet, published in the *Annales*, which made a virulent attack on the social interpretation of the French revolution, adapting instead the logic of political action, is in this respect symptomatic of this reorientation (“Le catéchisme révolutionnaire”, 1971). This political and factual history was even going to be found a few years later at the heart of a new national history — another topic also held in contempt by the “founding fathers” — published by the representatives of the *Annales*. For example, in the *Histoire de France* (1987) written by George Duby, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, François Furet and Maurice Agulhon, the authors state their intention to concentrate on politics and to place events back at the heart of their analysis. Moreover, Fernand Braudel in person returned to national history in his unfinished work *L'Identité de la France* (1986). And finally, with the publication of Marc Ferro's biography of Pétain (*Pétain*, 1987), which met with Fernand Braudel's approval, it seemed as though some sort of reconciliation with what was once termed the “idols” of “la tribu des historiens” was now taking place.

Were these apparent disavowals a sign of the exhaustion of the historiographical model? It is hard to give a definite answer to this question, since it is always more or less possible to detect the influence of the *Annales* in these new historiographical practices. For example, in the new histories of France, the identity of France sometimes appears less as a given than as a problem which needs to be analyzed, in the spirit of “l'histoire-problème” preached by Lucien Febvre. Similarly, the new political history can sometimes be seen as closer to political anthropology, extending Marc Bloch's work on the symbolics of power as it appears in *Les Rois thaumaturges*, than to traditional political history. What can more definitely be affirmed is that the 1970s saw the abandonment of the project of establishing a global history, as it is defined in Braudel's program. Admittedly, historical anthropology intended to approach societies in terms of a complete environment: ecological, technological, emotional and symbolic. But, at the same time, the 1970s saw a dispersal of historical research which reflects the disappearance of global explanations, general models and great syntheses. *Faire de l'histoire* (1974), directed by Pierre Nora and Jacques Le Goff, and *La Nouvelle Histoire* (1978), directed by Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier and Jacques Revel, offered both

assessment and manifesto of the “new *Annales*”, illustrating this fragmentation of the object of study and a new methodological eclecticism. While this “dispersal of history” could be seen as a sign of vitality, it could also be seen as a loss of ambition which was perhaps linked to the fact that certain doubts were now being expressed about the relevance of the approach developed by the *Annales*.

Influenced by the epistemology of the historian Paul Veyne (*Comment on écrit l'histoire*, 1971), and, still more importantly, of the philosopher Paul Ricœur (*Temps et récit*, 1983-1985), and of some foreign historians who had a certain impact on French historians, in particular Lawrence Stone (“The Revival of Narrative”, 1979, published in French in 1980) and Carlo Ginzburg (“Spie: radici di un paradigma indiziario”, 1979, published in French in 1980), historians dared to reaffirm the narrative dimension of history. It once again became legitimate to write history in continuous chronological order. It was even admitted that a historian’s work was closer to that of a judge searching for clues to obtain an indirect knowledge of the past, than to that of a statistician seeking to establish general tendencies throughout the centuries. In short, it was almost as though the failure of quantitative history and its alleged explanatory virtues was being acknowledged, and the model of the natural sciences, cherished by a generation of historians, was being questioned. It was not the end of social history, nor of history of mentalités: it was simply a reorientation. Maurice Agulhon’s thesis played a significant role by showing that studying the concept of sociability made it possible to write social history without being under the influence of economic history (*Pénitents et francs-maçons de l'ancienne Provence*, 1968). But to a great extent it was the works of certain foreign historians, sometimes far from recent, that played a decisive role in the 1980s. Edward Palmer Thompson (*The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963, translated into French in 1988) for example; Norbert Elias (*Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, 1939, translated into French in two parts, in 1973 and in 1977); or Carlo Ginzburg (*Il formaggio e i vermi*, 1976, translated into French in 1980). Thompson’s work demonstrated that social history could escape economic determinism and take into account notions such as the construction of social identities. Elias’ work underlined the need to approach social groups through their interdependences in order to understand how social redistribution took place. Lastly, the work of Ginzburg, and of Italian micro-history in general, moved the centre of historians’ interest towards small communities that were sometimes more representative of historical phenomena than the great masses cherished by some representatives of the *Annales*. These new orientations had a direct effect on social history, since they aimed to historicize social categories. They also generated a significant transformation of history of *mentalités*, which was already under attack because of the ambiguity of the concept of “mentalité”. But given that it was no longer possible to start from fixed social categories, historian of mentalités recognized that he or she had to study cultural practices themselves in order to define social configurations and not vice versa. From a history of mentalités one passed thus to cultural history, of which the historian Roger Chartier is certainly one of the most eminent representatives.

The *Annales* review took note of the rupture with its old paradigms and tried to redefine its position, in particular in 1989, through a reflection initiated by the historian Bernard Lepetit,

who spoke of a “tournant critique”. The risk that a quantitative history would reify social categories was underlined, the concept of mentalités was abandoned and replaced by that of cultural practices, and the primacy of the longue durée over average or short durations was criticized. Through these reorientations, the *Annales* sought to escape from the anthropological confines of the previous years, and more specifically to resume a dialogue with all the other social sciences which, in contradiction to the structuralist paradigm, put the individual back at the heart of social processes. This reorientation was reflected in 1994 by the review’s new title: *Annales. Histories, sciences sociales*. But by then it was outside the *Annales* that the new orientations of French historiography were outstanding. The return to politics and to events, which had begun in the 1970s, began by the 1980s to undermine the hegemonic role played by the *Annales* which remained wary of political history. The foundation of the Institut d’histoire du temps présent in 1978, and the launch of the review *Vingtième siècle* in 1984 marked the growth of this alternative approach. These organisms set out to study recent political events and to build on the old historiographical network established around the Fondation nationale des sciences politiques. And in 1988, René Rémond published his manifesto, *Pour une histoire politique*, which marked the end of the *Annales*’ prohibition of political history. Admittedly, for René Rémond, the “resurrection” of political history was not a return to conservative tendencies of historiography, because the new political history sought to integrate the most fertile contributions of economic and social history. But the rupture with socio-economic determinism was confirmed: there was no longer any question of considering political choices as the mere reflection of tensions between social categories. This change of orientation, which restored the actor to politics, testified to the waning of structuralism and the progressive retreat of Marxism in the social sciences. In any case, by claiming that politics dominated society as a whole, dictating all the other levels of social reality, the promoters of this new political history seemed to want to occupy the spotlights of the historiographical scene. It was they who now assumed the ambition of writing global history. Whether this claim was justified or not, it should be recognized that in its effort to analyze, over and above political events as such, the concept of political culture, which can be defined as the set of the representations that weld a human group together, this new political history was also a cultural history (see for example the work directed by Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli, *Pour une histoire culturelle*, 1997).

This cultural history met the new national history, rising in importance since the 1970s, in the form of the emergent history of memory, of which *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984-1992) directed by Pierre Nora is the emblem. Having accepted the idea that there is no exact correlation between French history and national memory, this project sought to list the places, in the broad sense, where the national memory had selectively been embodied. Thus, the various authors analyzed the symbolic elements in which the French recognized and identified France and its past. Articles on emblems, monuments, institutions, commemorations, famous texts and other French specificities were written, with the aim of questioning the division between history and memory. So it was possible to show to what extent memory itself had a history: it was not solely used to tell history, becoming instead an object of history in its own right. Nevertheless, Pierre Nora’s work was fundamentally ambiguous. By choosing to analyze

a necessarily selective and arbitrary memory, *Les Lieux de mémoire* perpetuated the very image of France which they claimed to observe critically. In other words, wanting to deconstruct the representations of national history, *Les Lieux de mémoire* ended paradoxically by building a monument to the glory of the French identity. Nevertheless, this work marks a significant stage of French historiography: it embodies what some called the historiographical moment, in the sense that the end of the 1980s saw a multiplication of historiographical studies, as if history as a discipline now sought to include knowledge of itself. A reflexivity which certainly contributed to feed the vague feeling of a crisis of history.

It is difficult however to affirm that recent historiography is in crisis. Admittedly, the new generation of historians does not seem dynamized by a great collective project. And the traditional divisions between economic, social and political histories, although still present, have become less well-defined. But is this a problem? Why should these current recombinations end in a single model of history? Although the history *du temps présent* is no longer looked at with suspicion, it would be imprudent to try to define which of the main trends of French historiography emerging at the moment will survive into the future.

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Further Reading

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