

History

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Abstract

History writing traditionally had a link with the art of governing and studying history was considered to be a teacher of prudence in matters political and religious. Critical principles and professionalisation severed the link. Questions remain of what humans do and should remember and they are of contemporary urgency. The argument is identities (group and individual) become impoverished when severed from collective and personal memories.

Resumo

A escrita de história foi tradicionalmente ligada à arte do governo, e considerou-se que estudar história era professar a prudência em matérias políticas e religiosas. Os princípios críticos e a profissionalização separaram esta conexão. As perguntas permanecem quanto ao que os seres humanos fazem e de que devem lembrar-se, e elas têm a urgência contemporânea. Este ensaio argumenta que a identidade (grupo e indivíduo) fica empobrecida quando eles são separados de memórias coletivas e pessoais.

Cicero set the tone for centuries: "History is the witness of the centuries, the light of truth, the soul of remembrance, the mistress of life, the interpreter of the past". He added that the voice of the orator is best to make it immortal;¹ history-writing and noble political rhetoric go hand in hand. The belief that the knowledge of history was the only school in political science led to the revival of history-writing in the Italian republics of the Fifteenth Century, and then more broadly.² Bodin thought philosophy would die of inanition unless vivified by history "Philosophy, which itself is called the guide of life, would remain silent among dead things (...)

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1 *De oratore* I, 33; see M. DESPLAND, *La religion en Occident*, p. 516.

2 D. HAY, *Annalists and Historians*.

unless all sayings, deeds and plans are considered in relation to the account of days long past".³ Machiavelli wrote a *Commentary on the First Decade of Livy* (1513-1520) and Thomas Hobbes translated Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* (1629).⁴ This stately tradition led also to the writings of memoirs by leaders who have been at the helm in great occasions - and try to write without being too self-congratulatory or defensive.

A turn toward the professionalisation of the writing of history started, I think, with the examination of legal or authoritative documents, or texts with great practical authority. Here one always hear of Lorenzo Valla's and his job on the *Donation of Constantine*. Lefèbvre d'Étaples undertook to sort out the various Marys and Magdalenes in the New Testament and show the confusion and conflation of them in some great French sanctuaries. Luther showed how weighty was the turn taken when Jerome translated *metanoëite* (repent!) by *penitentiam agite* (do penance!). He also challenged the authority of the *Epistle of James* on grounds of theological incompatibility with the letters of Paul. Doubts about the mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch spread on the grounds that this collection includes a narrative of his death. Seventeenth Century learned Benedictines undertake to establish the historical truth of the *Lives of the Saints*; many do not survive their careful scrutiny. (Three centuries later, Saint Gudule's cathedral in Brussels lost her name and patron saint.) History writing thus acquired methods, tests, criteria. A body of critical thought and of sifted knowledge was available for those who care to know the truth. But the examination of the historical value of documents crucial for the authority of Christianity did not have as much impact as some might have wished. Nineteenth Century French ultramontane historians strive to prove that Lazarus, Mary Magdalene and others did come to Gaul to establish the Church; at the same time Protestant theologians developed the doctrines of fundamentalism. These historians were more concerned with securing foundations than teaching political wisdom.

Further modern developments moved the discipline of history away from being a teacher of the art of prudence and thereby clearly out of the realm of politics or of religion. More and more detailed economic histories got written. *Histoire des mentalités* attempted to discern the slow but deep cultural changes that occurred over the centuries, to understand the movement of the glacier on top of which act the kings, queens, popes and generals familiar to the old

3 J. BODIN *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, p. 9.

4 Edited with an Introduction by Richard Schlatter (Rutgers University Press, 1975).

national history textbooks. (The *Annales* and Fernand Braudel did not write the same history as Leopold Ranke,) And then much ingenuity was used to write history from below, namely the history of people (men *and* women, now) who never wrote, were never observed by people who write, and thus left no trace, except birth, marriage and death entries in parish records. Complex but reliable analyses of these records establish when the couples of the village of Colyton in England started to practice some form of birth control. The date was the late Seventeenth Century, a time when no reference to such practices and no arguments for or against it were to be found in the learned and the not-so-learned texts of the day.⁵ History has by now made good its claim to be a science. Historians can safely feel that they are members of a reasonable, self-evaluating profession. And the likes of Descartes who in the Seventeenth Century preferred the live practice of natural science to the stirring of dusty archives seem to have won the day. The way is open for the Enlightenment goal of knowledge-based pursuit of happiness.

As a consequence, the original linkage between history on the one hand, and politics and religion on the other, seems to have completely dissolved. Nevertheless two groups of questions keep arising.

1. What do the humans alive of the surface of earth now remember? What do they want to remember? And what should they remember? How much can be done to improve or reorient knowledge of the past? how much should be attempted to displace accounts that fly in the face of the most simple factual evidence? Perplexities abound when one realizes that, after all the effort spent in not forgetting Shoah, some "assassins of memory" remain at work.⁶ The activities of the South African *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* and the efforts to introduce this kind of national work in other areas where recent crimes abounded are likewise sources of great hopes and sober reflections.

2. Beside the issue of the quality of the memories actually stocked in brains and bodies and which nurture the imaginations of humans and activate their choices to-day, there are also questions about the very role of memory in our civilization. (We move here from the ontic to the ontological.)

5 P. LAZLETT, *The World We Have Lost*

6 The phrase is from Vidal-Naquet.

Three books published in the last decade will help me structure the reflection on this last theme.

After forty years of work as an anthropologist (his field being Africa and his discipline political anthropology) Georges Balandier undertook to write more reflective pieces on our current condition. *Le grand dérangement* starts with the affirmation that in our time humankind acts powerfully on its condition without being able to say what it is going to bring about by doing so. We thus live in time like immigrants, clueless about what is in fact going on in their new environment. The claim is constantly advanced that what is being done is based on sufficient knowledge; the previously accepted limits to what can be achieved are constantly shown (or just said) to be receding. Mankind seems to be like the rapid conquerors of past history, a succession of quick victories fills them with blind enthusiasm and takes them too far from their base.

The analysis lists symptoms which are by now familiar. Politicians are attentive to governance and short-term goals, implicitly acknowledging their inability to control social becoming. Individuals make do with unstable identity references. Triumphant globalization multiplies exchanges but does not civilize. Regional cultures become offensive or defensive bases in the world-wide struggle. Universal communication becomes the rule, vehicles of all kinds are multiplied. Traffic increases but the road plan is unattended to. The borders between reality and fiction become apparently erased and young minds live in an unfocussed world. (We see "cultural studies" unwilling to examine the quality of ideas or their relationship to the real world.) Everything is just a sign, nothing a symbol. All prophecies become possible. The biological basis of human life is more and more successfully manipulated. Political campaigns urge politicians to provide better health care to indefinitely postpone death, and self-medication fringe groups do enormous business. A-mortality is replacing immortality.

Any strong definition of what it means to be human becomes erased. The paths that led the Greeks (and many of us since them) to discover a tragic dimension to life and live with it, are now lost, overgrown trails. The notion of destiny evaporates; anxieties focus on risks - and risk managers offer their services.⁷ Experts rule; politicians follow. And we live separated from our pasts.

⁷ One of the memorable pages of William James argues that it is the right of individuals (and their need) to choose the risks they take: *The Will to Believe*, p. 30-31.

The major modern break, the one to which all others contribute, is the one which dissociates our contemporaries from their collective memory and their personal history.⁸

Absolutely new beginnings are a fraud, and so are governments by experts. History and politics belong together.⁹

The point about what we understand by communication can be further explored with the help of an Italian anthropologist Franco La Cecla; one of his books *Il malinteso* was translated into French. Before the beginning of the book, he gives a quote from Baudelaire:

The world advances only thanks to misunderstanding. It is only through universal misunderstanding that everybody comes to agree. If, God forbid, we were to understand each other, we could never agree.¹⁰

La Cecla takes for granted that misunderstanding is our daily fare.¹¹ I might add that agreements occur (and they do) because individuals overlook, knowingly or unknowingly, some of their own interests.¹² La Cecla proposes to focus upon the resources cultures have to deal with reciprocal incomprehensibility. What makes cultures and people distinct is not just lack of information; there remain areas of impenetrability. How then do cultures manage to keep only some things secret, so that they can still meet with others? How do individuals close themselves to become open? The ghetto, that compendium of all horrors according to the liberal imagination, is for him a model: it permits differences to reveal themselves so that tensions become apparent and solutions can be sought to resolve them. The public spaces where tolerance is practiced (a commendable achievement) is space where superficiality reigns. Universal principles anticipate meetings and encounters. Misunderstanding is not a fault, but the condition of meetings. Every genuine encounter stumbles upon something and wishes to have more time. What passes for communication today sidesteps the possibility of meeting. The model of high human interaction is hospitality.¹³

8 G. BALANDIER, *Le grand dérangement*, p. 116.

9 Ibid., p. 117.

10 *Mon coeur mis à nu*, 42.

11 Ethologists point out that dolphins communicate quite effectively and show no signs of having misunderstandings among themselves. They talk dolphin; humans don't talk human.

12 Jacques Rancière argues that dissensus, not consensus, is the daily stuff of politics, *La mésentente*; see M. DESPLAND "Tradition" In: *Historicizing "Tradition"*, pp. 19-32.

Unlike communication as currently understood¹⁴, hospitality is time-consuming; it also requires some gift and some work.¹⁵ We are being lured away from this labor by prospects of instant communication and instant information. (Some of our students think they can do most of their research paper by downloading from the Net.) So I propose that the contrast at the beginning of this paper between history and science should give way before a lesser know contrast, a more difficult and conflictual one, that between quick and slow knowledges.¹⁶ (We already have quick and slow food.)

At this point, Paul Ricoeur's last book becomes of great help, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* is made up of three distinct, but related parts. The first follows the husserlian method and analyses the relationship between memory and imagination. While Plato makes of imagination part of memory (and thereby constrains its flights), Aristotle sees memory as part of imagination (and thus tends to deny its epistemological significance). Ricoeur prefers not to focus on the deficiencies of either, rather to consider the happy workings of each. To be sure imagination can make memory unreliable and memory at times may be a burden to the imagination; too much memory is as bad as not enough. Remembering should not stop the labors of history. To cultivate memory must include the work of mourning. Ever since Augustine philosophers explore the link between memory and personal identity. But people need others to remember. Their ordinary language draws from both individual and collective memory.¹⁷ (Since George Herbert Mead some sociologists keep in mind the distinction between social symbol and individual meaning.¹⁸)

The second part offers an epistemology of historical sciences and analyses the path that goes from what a memory (or a group of memories) asserts to what the historian maintains

13 *Le malentendu* p. 130.

14 The qualifier is important. What Kierkegaard meant by indirect communication was a slow and dialectical affair.

15 G. HARVEY, Guesthood as ethical decolonising research method. In: *Numen*, pp. 125-146.

16 The unique achievement of science lies in the cumulative process born of each of its advances. Countless people can quickly, easily, use the results without having any idea of the thought processes and experimentations that established them. Practising scientists however know that knowledge grows slowly.

17 M. HALBWACHS, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

18 Quoted in J.R. HALL, Social Interaction, Culture and Historical Studies. In: *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, p. 23.

when all his work is done. The paths the historian opens are those of expansion and criticism; the cognitive and pragmatic deficiencies of memory are corrected. Ricoeur goes on privileging the constitution of personal identities and social bonds. The look at various historical schools focus on an issue of moral import: Ricoeur takes over the distinction of Pascal between the discourse of force and that of justice; in fact they overlap and are entangled (through ruse, or just "naturally").¹⁹ And here the discourse of the historians either distances itself from that of the historical agents or continues it. This enables Ricoeur to shift to his third part, a hermeneutic of the historical condition of humans which analysis the numerous quarrels modernity has with history. In the last analysis he sides with De Certeau: writing is a burial rite, language is death-calmed; it enables us to live with the memories of the worst, most cruel and unjust evils, and to stay alive until... Yet we were not born to die, but to innovate. So the book ends with a meditation on forgiveness. It is not an imperative and cannot ever be a duty or a right. It can only remain a wish. It is the role of citizens to give a continuation to the events of the past, and to give body to a memory which is not that of quarrels. Thus a politics of just memory emerges as this author's testament.

The record of atrocities perpetrated in the Twentieth Century by humans against members of their own species is faced squarely in some parts of Ricoeur's book (and not far in others). How institutions deal with guilt is a part of his trajectory. Brooding over his discipline as an ethnologist in 1955, Claude Lévi-Strauss who has just met some tribes about to become extinct, wondered whether the Western world had not produced ethnographers because it was tormented by remorse.²⁰ What can explain the determination of some to leave their own world, he asks, to put some distance between themselves and their own thoughts, and travel far away to study some other society with a patience and dedication they do not have for their own society? What makes them cease being agents to become spectators? He alludes to a dream frequent among modern travelers, that of going to the extreme end of the "savage world" and find there some natives never before in contact with our world. But he promptly

19 *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* p. 343-358. Ricoeur refers to Louis Marin, *Le portrait du roi* (Paris, Minuit, 1981) and to fragments 44, 81, 87, 91, 185, 828 of Pascal's *Pensées* (Lafuma edition).

20 *Tristes Tropiques*, ch. 38.

sees the fallacy of this romantic vision: there are no humans that are not human.²¹ Everywhere one meets humans involved in a same business, make a livable society.

As an ethnologist of the Americas, Lévi-Strauss is highly aware of the crimes committed in the course of colonial history.²² He writes disenchanting pages (that remind one of Plato) about the invention of writing, in which he sees the only important innovation since the Neolithic revolution. He minimizes its importance as a way of preserving knowledge and rather sees its main usage as an instrument of rule. It did more, he writes, to facilitate the exploitation of humans than their enlightenment.²³ There is however an alternate view and it may shed some light on the haunting ghosts of a guilty past.

In 451 bce the Romans proclaimed a code of laws applicable to all and independent from the body of religious laws harking back to Numa, and they carved it in large letters on wood, the *Twelve Tables*, and later on cast in bronze. The idea was to make the law public, accessible to all (not dormant in the minds of an ever-alert elite of judges) and thus both stable and not subject to *ad hoc* manipulation. Through the centuries they took pride in the excellence of their laws and their patriotic adherence to them. They gladly yielded to the Greeks superiority in matters of science, art and philosophy. The law has a formal quality: it can govern all transactions; so among all civilizations existing then, the Romans were best at transmitting.²⁴ They could go to the borders, live there on boundaries and strive to maintain peace. They had a central rocky hill in Rome but did not develop a fortress mentality. When the Capitol fell in 410 ce, there were enough cogent arguments in the head of Augustine to show that, while this was sad indeed, it was not a cosmic catastrophe since it was the way of all empires. There is no sacred spot on earth immunized against history. The relationship to what the Romans were was tempered by their relationship to what they knew they were not. Roman troops did pillage and burn but it seems to me that they (and their adversaries) did not make of wars tiresome repetitions, but developed carefully recorded and reasoned accounts: written histories, testimonies about events and discussion of causes. Writing thus made it henceforth possible for posterity to be more lucid, more honest, more just than their fathers -

21 Ibid., chap. 31.

22 The discovery of America was the greatest test in Western history; *ibid.*, chap. 8.

23 *Ibid.*, chap. 28.

24 R. BRAGUE, *Eccentric Culture*, chap. 2.

should they so care. History is not a closed space. It can become acknowledged, as a contemporary put it, that time is subjectively and socially constructed and that it is meaningful action and interaction that give time its shape.²⁵ So we can become aware of time as an interaction between powers. The slow-moving glaciers and the strutting monarchs can enter into the same story. Time is not just a box we live in. It has the shapes humans give it in their power plays. Cicero put it in strong terms: "Salamis will perish before the memory of the deeds performed at Salamis".²⁶

Hannah Arendt reminded us that readers of Augustine should consider humans as natals as well as mortals. They have imaginations and they have memories which can become chastened about the use of power in the past, and, to some extent, now. Without keeping track of memories and laboring them, politics are just the repetition of crime-prone power routines. For the labors of memory are also a slow travail on the self. To the old and familiar contrast between cyclical and linear history (a contrast usually credited to Jewish messianism and Christian eschatology) should be superimposed that between those who don't and those who do want to remember. Dante was familiar with the old Greek mythology. As the souls go into his Paradise they first cross the river Lethe and drink its water that gives oblivion. But then they are stopped by another river, which is found only on Christian imaginary geographies: Eunoe; there they drink of its water and it restores the good memories.

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25 J.R. HALL, Social Interaction, Culture and Historical Studies. In: *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, p 19.

26 *Tusculan Disputations*, I, 26. The killing and the dying was transformed by oratory. Lévi-Strauss puts it in a more disenchanting vein, speaking of his difficulties and fatigue in his journey, he writes that adventure becomes exciting only when made into a story. *Tristes Tropiques*, chap. 4.

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