

The Double Responsibility of the Historian

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I am an historian in a country in which it is not only impossible to say what the future will be, but in which the past itself—as someone put it—is susceptible to change. This country is currently going through an unprecedented crisis that has turned both its material and political as well as spiritual life upside-down. The crisis, the roots of which stretch back over decades, has made life virtually unbearable for many of its citizens. Yet for the historian, and for the philosopher and sociologist, this crisis affords an unusual opportunity. As a result of the earthquakes that have shaken the former Soviet Union, formerly hidden layers of history—and the forces that underpin them—have been revealed. Such cases do not often arise. To a scholar endeavoring to discover the secret springs of unfolding events, Russia represents a gigantic and unique “laboratory.” Although it is easier to judge the extent of a cataclysm, to comprehend its deeper import, after the event, this does not relieve the contemporary—who participates in historical events—of the duty of trying to understand, to the extent possible, the nature of the changes taking place.

Our society, so long caught in the iron grip of an implacable ideology, had no conception of the emotions and spiritual conditions that exist side by side with ideas and official dogma, state plans and governmental laws; that in the depths of human conscience there exists a world-view that determines individual and collective behavior. Mentalities, non-official value systems, personal convictions were ignored; their existence was even denied and veiled by the façade of the *apparat*. In this way a misleading image of the people and the State was generated; in this way were formed the false notions of the ideologues, and the historians

among them, concerning the nature of the historical process. And so it happened that all the magma hidden in the depths of history suddenly erupted and became visible in broad daylight, catching the politicians, historians, and scholars unaware. Simultaneously Marxist historiosophy, which had previously subjugated historical thinking, lost all credibility, leaving behind a philosophical void that was filled with whatever was available; from mysticism and occultism to an aggressive chauvinism. This combination of a manipulated historical memory and the nostalgia resulting from the collapse of the Soviet empire caused the picture of the past to undergo the most unexpected and arbitrary reconstructions. Superficially and abusively understood, freedom of thought was transformed into irresponsible indulgence. New myths were created from the bones of old ones—myths that at bottom disguised collective inferiority complexes and a wounded imperialism.

Today's challenge is to create a democratic society capable of participating in our global civilization. However, neither politicians nor historians should lose sight of the particularities and socio-psychological background that has dominated Russian history in the past and that is still present, invisible but powerful, in the consciousness of contemporary generations. Only one hundred thirty years ago Russia was still a country of general serfdom and despotism; the fundamental values of a civil society, such as private property, the rule of law, individual liberties, and respect for the human person were either totally absent or existed very much on the margins of social conscience. We must also remember that soon after the Revolution of October 1917 servitude reappeared in the form of collectivization and the Gulag. As for parliamentary government: it must be recognized that its meaning and role are scarcely comprehensible to the members of parliament themselves and that there is a frequent tendency to confuse parliament with the *veche* of ancient Russia or with the assembly of the members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that almost all of today's parliamentarians participated in a mere three years ago. As Fernand Braudel put it: "Mentalities are the prisons in which the *longue durée* is locked up;" they change extraordinarily slowly. To introduce democracy and parliamentarianism into a country that is ignorant of them is something of a utopian project.

All these circumstances have created new problems for public officials and politicians, which they are in no way prepared to solve. However, this does not mean that the demagogues who deny the possibility of Russia developing according to the democratic model are right. It must simply be understood that enormous difficulties lie ahead and that we must be dedicated to overcoming them.

Can historians who work under conditions that imply a clean break with the Soviet past continue to adhere to positions whose criteria, methodology, and values were inherited from the now-discredited Communist era? Russian society today finds itself at a crossroads. Disoriented, its values shaken, Russia needs new thinkers and new historians. Are we then prepared, if not to solve the new problems, at least to formulate them, albeit in a "preliminary" form? Before seeking an answer to this question, let us take a look at the relatively recent past.

The Historians' Empty Drawer

In the mid-1980s, with the advent of *glasnost* (a period of relative freedom of expression), important literary journals began to publish the works of Russian poets, writers, and philosophers that until then had been forbidden or were totally unknown (in the best cases they had been published abroad and smuggled into Russia). Readers were immediately struck by the spiritual and artistic wealth that had been hidden from them for decades. During the entire period following the October Revolution, Russian literature had lived on. Authors such as Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Bulgakov, Vasily Grossman, Alexander Solzhenitzyn and others had never ceased writing. Moreover, in spite of the Stalinist terror and the obscurantism of the stagnant Brezhnev years, they had made no ideological compromises. The pulse of this clandestine intellectual life had never stopped beating.

On the historians' side, it would have been reasonable to expect the publication of formerly-hidden manuscripts on which historians had worked during the decades of reaction. Yet nothing of the kind occurred. The drawers of the historians were empty. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s nothing, or almost

nothing, emerged to enrich the historical sciences in Russia, except for the publication of archival documents and various works designed to fill in the "gaps" of the history of Soviet Russia.

A rare exception to this was the research done by the eminent specialist of Russian history, Alexander Zimin. In several of his monographs Zimin courageously—given the conditions of the period—suggested a new way of viewing a whole range of problems associated with fifteenth and sixteenth century Russian history. He was the first to raise the question of whether there existed a possible alternative to Russia's actual historical development; that is, whether the political unification of the country could have been centered not in Moscow but in some other center of princely power. His works have only recently been published, ten years after his death. However, and once again, the case of Zimin is practically unique.

Although *perestroika* allowed for the introduction of new materials and freed historians from the obligation of referring at every turn and without relevance to the opinions of the "classics of Marxism-Leninism," Russian historians in fact continued to adhere to previous methodological assumptions. In the new socio-political and ideological atmosphere, Russian historical writing did not make any qualitative progress. It was unable to benefit from the freedom it had been granted. What is the source of the scholarly timidity and theoretical impoverishment of the majority of historians?

The Historians of the 1960s

Let us now go back in time some three decades, to the intellectual and moral awakening of the late 1950s and decade of the 1960s. This awakening was in part a result of the lively methodological debates that followed the denunciation of the (Stalinist) "cult of the personality" at the XXth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. One cannot overestimate the liberating and stimulating effect that these debates had on intellectual life. The dogmatism of the Stalinist period was finally, in large measure, abandoned or at least called into question. New hypotheses and scholarly ideas were being advanced. Without doubt, the historians of the 1960s did

much to prepare the ground for a freer analysis of the historical process. But the "thaw" did not last long, and in the second half of the 1960s, notably after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, there occurred a new and durable ideological "freeze." To be sure, not all the gains of the beginning of the 1960s were lost, but generally speaking historical writing lapsed into lethargy.

Furthermore, the historians of the 1960s did not, in my view, address the central methodological questions. In fact, as I review today the debates of the past thirty years, I realize how one-sided and narrow they were. This was, of course, inevitable and understandable. Although rejecting or calling into question many of the broad generalizations of the Russian Marxist Vulgate (whose dominant theme was the "new and more profound reading of Marx"), the historians of the 1960s did not touch upon the latent epistemology of Marxism, which Marx had borrowed from Hegel and that rejected the Kantian problematic and its neo-Kantian formulation. Convinced of the omnipotence of scientific knowledge, the Marxists were not inclined to analyze the limits of the conceptual apparatus they were using. Equally, Hegel's and Marx's panlogism, with its disinterest in the complex relationship between the inquiring subject and the object of knowledge, accorded perfectly with the positivism of Russian Marxist historians. Unfortunately, this doomed Soviet historical thinking to a methodology based on the discoveries of late-nineteenth century science. This lag and stagnation were aggravated by an almost total ignorance of contemporary historical thought beyond Russia's borders. This lack of knowledge created a certain intellectual provincialism that in fact endures to this day.

The danger of remaining aloof from the neo-Kantian theory of knowledge was well understood by eminent Russian historians of an earlier period. At the end of the 1920s, for example, the medievalist Dimitri Petrushevsky underscored, in the introduction to one of his books, the enormous importance of the ideas of Heinrich Rickert and Max Weber for historical research. Unfortunately, the most important result of this courageous demonstration of intellectual independence was his being immediately silenced. His declaration had as much of an effect as a cry in the desert: all subsequently published Soviet works on philosophical

and methodological subjects continued to reject, and denigrate neo-Kantian thought. Until quite recently no one in Russia had objectively studied the “sciences of culture” that the neo-Kantians had proposed at the beginning of the century. Consequently, the supposed “Marxist historical science” became in the end nothing more than positivism dressed up in Marxist phraseology.

Thus, during *glasnost*, the historians proved to be more timid and ideologically docile than the poets and writers. How is this difference in behavior to be explained? Was it perhaps that the historians, being closer to the centers of power, were easier to control? To be sure, writers had not been free to write whatever they pleased; still, they were not constantly obliged to refer to the “Fathers” of the Marxist church, while the historians could not rid themselves of this ritual. It must however be added that the majority of them in fact needed these ideological “crutches.”

The “Ideal Type” and the “Socio-Economic Formation”

During the 1980s an eminent French historian asserted that the ideas of Marx and Lenin were not at all “an intellectual strait jacket” for Soviet historians, but rather useful instructions to help them in their research. There is no doubt that Marxism has deeply influenced contemporary historical scholarship. However, is our honorable French colleague really correct? Marxist historiography urged historians to illustrate general historical laws—laws formulated by Marxist historiography itself—by forbidding historians to diverge from an all-inclusive framework provided by successive stages of “socio-economic formation.” This concept of “formation” was thereby viewed as an objective reality. The convenience of this system lay, among other things, in its extraordinary simplicity. The hypothesis that the material-economic “base” determined the ideological and political “superstructure” offered a kind of practical “master key” for a simplified explanation of a society’s spiritual life.

On the other hand, Max Weber’s “ideal type” does not pretend to be more than an instrument of knowledge, a scientific model (a “utopian ideal” of research), which the historian can make use of

in the study of historical phenomena. This model does not “crush” the concrete evidence to which it is applied. On the contrary, the model itself can be modified and, when necessary, thrown out by the historian if it contradicts the concrete evidence. It is precisely the divergence between the actual data and the “ideal type” that allows for fresh insights and even new generalizations. By stressing the influence of religion and other spiritual structures upon social life and production, the author of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* placed man—the thinking, feeling, and acting being—at the center of historical research. Not politico-economic abstractions but man became the basis of historical analysis.

The contrast between the reified abstraction of the “socio-economic formation” (“means of production”) and the “ideal type” is striking and intractable. By submitting to a dogma that was imposed upon them, Soviet historians deprived themselves of their freedom as scientists. For a good number of them this lack of intellectual independence was combined with a palpable cynicism.

For hundreds, if not for thousands of Soviet historians, the “critique of bourgeois historiography” became a means of subsistence. How many of them really believed in the much-vaunted “superiority of Soviet science,” and how many were merely cynics and opportunists? God only knows. To give but one example: at the time of the publication in Moscow, in 1973, of Marc Bloch’s *Apologie pour l’histoire*, one of the pillars of official Soviet historiography said bluntly: “The translation of *Apologie pour l’histoire* is a political error ...”

How many times did I hear my colleagues complain that they were not allowed to write what they wanted? “Censorship constrains us,” they said. This was no doubt true, since government censors and the bureaucrats in charge of ideological surveillance kept a close watch on our writings. However, this reasoning is also an extreme simplification of the actual situation. In reality, the majority of authors of historical works practiced self-censorship, which meant that the works they submitted for publication did not actually risk official disapproval. Moreover, who forced them to publish works that were contrary to their own convictions?

Let us be wary, however, of tarring all Soviet historians with the same brush. They were in fact a very diverse group—the young generation of historians especially needs to understand this. Some years

ago, during a seminar I conducted, a young historian, who had analyzed in his paper the methodological premises upon which the works of Soviet historians were based, ended by rejecting them as scientifically inconsistent. To the extent that these premises were extremely narrow and one-sided, he was no doubt right: the less-than-satisfying results produced by this kind of historiography are proof. Indeed little of value remains, it is now largely a corpse. However, the same young man did not take into account that the drama of ideas reflected in their works—ideas that have been so criticized and are today rejected—was also a drama of men, of scholars, who found themselves in an intolerable situation. Under such conditions, Soviet historians could not, except in a few rare cases, fulfill their role as mediators between those who once lived and their own society. This situation was the same for the whole of the socialist camp, except perhaps Poland, which represented a happy exception.

History and Society

At the beginning of my career, historical works addressed two categories of readers: on the one hand, a narrow circle of specialists and, on the other, the censors and controllers of ideology. Between the historian and society there existed no “mutual relationship”—a relationship natural and essential for both sides. This connection had been ruptured, and as a result the discipline of history was both sterile and ineffective. Can today’s historian continue to ignore this connection?

Huizinga considered history to be one of the ways by which a society acquires self-knowledge. To this end historians implicitly rely on the concept of “the other,” by means of which the men of today can compare themselves to men of the past. In the course of history humanity changes; today’s human is not yesterday’s; his view of the world and social behavior systems that are influenced by it evolve too. The “other,” the man of the distant or recent past, is an enigma that we can hardly “solve,” but that we must nevertheless try to elucidate. The historian’s greatest sin is when he tries to present men of another period as identical to himself and his contemporaries. However, “other” does not mean “stranger.”

This "other" resembles us in many ways; but it is particularly important to render the differences intelligible. "Alterity" is a basic postulate of historical understanding.

There exists a dialogue between us and the people of the past. The questions we ask of men of other cultures and civilizations are questions that preoccupy us, that are related to our own culture: we cannot ask any others. Each era brings with it fresh questions concerning the past, we never cease questioning the people of the past. This is the way that historical knowledge advances. The notion of dialogue is not a metaphor. It must, I believe, be taken literally.

During the 1950s, having learned from my teachers analytic methods applicable to the socio-economic conditions of medieval Germany and England, I decided to apply this same methodology to investigating medieval Scandinavian sources. However, I quickly ran into difficulties. Although I had many and diverse texts before me, they remained mute, gave no answer to the questions I had put to them concerning the exploitation of peasants, the structure of peasant communities, and other topics of this kind that were traditional to a Marxist analysis. My difficulties continued until I finally began to listen to the voices of the people who had actually written the texts and to those for whom the texts had been written. They spoke to me of a different matter: of the representation of a world that was as much related to nature as to social existence, of man's place in the world, of his beliefs, passions, behavior; of the magic of rituals, of imagination, pagan gods and belief in another world. When I finally began to understand the meaning of the messages contained in the sources, I became convinced that my questions concerning material life and social structure had meaning only within the framework of this general context. This lesson, taught to me by the Scandinavians of the Middle Ages, had considerable methodological significance for me.

The Historian—the Only Intermediary Between the Contemporary World and the Past

In order to play this role, the historian must appreciate the deeper intellectual needs of the society to which he belongs. He

contributes to the formation of the historical consciousness of his society. This is an enormous responsibility, and it is crucial that he be fully conscious of his mission as a mediator between different cultures.

The picture he draws of the past depends on the angle from which he views it. Depending on whether the focus is on social contradictions and class conflicts, upon the links between production and property or, alternatively, upon ways of conceiving of the world and the forms of human behavior (the context of which throws fresh light on the socio-economic structures themselves), the entire picture of the past undergoes modification and the approach to history itself changes. The character and contents of the historical knowledge of a given society are dependent on the ways in which history is conceived and represented by historians under the pressures brought by of outside forces. Until recently history was presented to children in Soviet schools exclusively from the angle of class struggle and revolution, a succession of forms of workers' exploitation. Consequently, spiritual life was relegated to the second rank and man was eliminated as a subject of the historical process. The future teachers themselves, that is, university students, received corresponding instruction. From childhood to adulthood, Soviet man was educated in a spirit of class hatred. Today we can see the fruits of that "education."

Only now do we have the opportunity to rewrite school history books, freed of the dogmatism that killed living history. The ideological struggle has been extended to a struggle over the intellectual development of our children. In other words, the perspective that a society adopts to analyze its past depends on its conception of the present and the idea it has of its future.

However, the question is not limited to the responsibility that the historian has toward his contemporaries. He is equally responsible toward those who have already sunken into the waters of Lethe, toward those who speak to us from the historical sources. There is no return from the past for them. The task of "making them alive" (to use Michelet's expression) has fallen on the historian. The historian alone can engage in this risky operation—by remaining fully conscious of the relativity of his efforts.

A Crisis of Historical Science?

It is indisputable that historical scholarship in Russia is in deep crisis. Still, it must be recognized that this crisis, in one way or another, has also impinged upon historical writing around the world. However, it is my opinion that this crisis is akin to a growing pain. Could it not even be regarded as the normal state of the sciences? In fact, an absence of crisis, controversies, and doubts would be a symptom of stagnation. As Jan Romein put it, "History is perpetual controversy." In his *Apologie pour l'histoire* Marc Bloch emphasized that History as a scientific discipline is still young and still *in situ nascendi*. The problem involves not simply the array of techniques used by the historians, but more importantly the fact that the science of history has freed itself from the millstone of philosophy only relatively recently. The universal systems, be it the providential and symbolic theory of the medieval historians or the systems of Hegel, Marx, Spengler, or Toynbee, were like Procrustean beds on which historians were required to "lay down" their materials. Today, historiosophy, whatever its stripe, has been fundamentally discredited (or at least we may hope so); historical science has ceased being the prisoner of *a priori* teleological and metaphysical constructions. The historians have issued their declaration of independence. To be sure, it would be stupid to deny the considerable role that philosophical theories have played in the historian's intellectual development, since ignorance of philosophy and a helpless eclecticism would only doom the historian to theoretical inconsistency. However, the topic of "the historian and philosophy" is beyond the framework of this article and we cannot examine it here.

Starting with this declaration of independence, history must acquire a new intellectual charter and elaborate its own theory of knowledge. Unlike philosophy, sociology, and political economy, history is a science not of general laws but of the concrete, the individual, the unique and the unrepeatable. Nonetheless, historians use concepts and categories that are furnished by their culture and language. When we use the notions of "society," "civilization," "city," "revolution," "economy," etc., we do not study them in terms of

general sociological and economic categories: we study a city in a defined period, a particular civilization, a given and concrete revolution. The emphasis is on the unique and on the unrepeatable.

Let me illustrate this hypothesis with an example. For a long time there was a marked tendency among Soviet researchers to compare cultures from different regions in order to call attention to recurrent phenomena that were supposed to reflect universal historical laws. Scholars sought to discover a renaissance in Japan, in Central Asia, in Transcaucasia, and then without further ado they would "assimilate" it to the occidental European Renaissance. From superficial coincidences that in fact veiled fundamental differences, one proceeded to pervert completely the meaning of the concrete historical notion of a "renaissance." Have the historians who sought a ubiquitous feudalism—from Assyria and ancient Babylon to the Roman Empire and Kiev Russia, and even Africa—not committed the same error? Comparatist scholarship can serve ends that are totally opposed to one another. It can bring together phenomena that are totally heterogeneous, and under the pretext of likeness arrive at commonplaces that are devoid of meaning. By contrast, when Marc Bloch compared feudal society in France to the traditional social system of Japan (the two structures indisputably present a certain resemblance), he sought to discover the deeper specificity and uniqueness of the two objects being compared. The comparative method reveals its full efficacy as a working tool when used to bring out divergences and particularities, or to put it differently, when it can demonstrate what is characteristic about an individual historical event.

A Reorientation

After Einstein and Freud the rethinking of the historian's craft and its cognitive foundations has become inevitable. Historians can no longer limit themselves to ideas that have been formulated solely in a rational manner, neglecting emotional and irrational psychic phenomena that are not expressed clearly (however I do remain skeptical concerning the possibility of applying the procedures and concepts of psychoanalysis to the study of the past and notably to

the distant past). This questioning of the rational also arises because of the Gulag, Auschwitz, and Hiroshima. The notion of an ascent of humanity has broken down, and the question of "giving meaning to the absurd" (an expression of Theodor Lessing's, used to define historiography) has a different meaning today than it did at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

The science of history is slowly liberating itself from the weight of politico-economic and sociological abstractions in order to become what it must become in the modern world: a science of man as a social being. To be sure, history in the past was also a science of man; but the men on whom the historians focused were those of the "first rank" —managers, politicians, military leaders, great thinkers, writers. In other words, the heroes of history were historic personages who had left their mark on the development of history. The mass of society, the anonymous participants in the historical process, formed a kind of impersonal background similar to the choir of an ancient Greek tragedy. Today the inadequacy of these approaches has become more and more clear. Great men do not act in a vacuum; it has become indispensable to take into account the society in which they live—not as a grand abstraction, but as a collection of large and small groups into which those whom we call "ordinary people" are organized. The historian cannot, and in general does not, know their names and biographies; but he cannot ignore that they existed and acted and that their life and activities were organized within a specific framework that was defined by the culture and mentalities of the time. The worldview and forms of behavior of ordinary people left their mark on the actions, ideas, and public statements of great men.

The historian must therefore find new ways of studying his subject; ways that will help him gain an understanding of society's anonymous masses. A fresh reading of the sources is necessary in order to grasp the consciousness and behavior of "ordinary men" in a given period. To use Jacques Le Goff's terminology, the historian should not only be concerned with Caesar's intentions but with the mood of his legionnaires; he should be concerned not only with the plans of Christopher Columbus but with the expectations of the sailors on his ships. One could say the same of Clovis and of Charlemagne. We cannot rely merely on the biographies that

Gregory of Tours and Einhard have left us; we must also analyze the *leges barbarorum*, the capitularies and cartularies, the archaeological remains, the "Lives" of the saints, the penitentials and other evidence that might help to illuminate the social relations, ways of life, beliefs, and ethical norms of ordinary Franks.

History "from above" is in itself insufficient; it has to be linked to history "from below." Here it is not just a matter of studying solely what has been called "popular culture" (a concept as indispensable as it is imprecise and even ambiguous). We must also make a study of different kinds of consciousness; along with the articulated thoughts of individuals, historians must also learn to penetrate the secrets of mentalities, the latent strata of collective conscience.

Studying History "from the Inside"

An essential stage in the development of the historical sciences will be the adoption of a point of view "from the inside," that is, the exploration of the immanent situation of the participants of the historical process; their relationship to life, their mentalities, and their value systems. Obviously the historian can not avoid applying his own concepts to his objects of study; nor can he avoid developing generalizations from his observations based on contemporary theories of knowledge. Nevertheless, this does not give him the right to ignore the vision of the world of the people whose history he is studying. If he did so the historian would end up depicting them as will-less automatons, subject to the play of abstract socio-economic forces.

At the same time traditional approaches to historical research, such as political history, the history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*) or socio-economic analysis, should not be abandoned. However, in the clear light of this new perspective, they must inevitably acquire a different meaning, that is, they will cease being self-contained. In this connection it seems appropriate to me to attach particular importance to the notion of "historical context." When an historian sets himself a problem he delineates a set of questions to study; but, having done so, he must clearly see which vital links have been severed—and will hence lie outside his analytical framework—by this

delimitation. On this point we can refer to the example I gave above concerning my own difficulties in dealing with medieval Scandinavian sources. The new questions I had to pose were oriented toward the real value system of those Scandinavians; toward their religious and occult images, toward the importance they attached to gold and silver, which for them reflected not so much forms of economic wealth as the tangible manifestations of the "success" and "luck" of certain people. It was only in this new, broader context that the deeper meaning of these social links were revealed.

In traditional historical writing, culture and society were studied in isolation, as distinct subjects without links or as merely mechanically united within the framework of a "base/superstructure" model. Perhaps the most glaring example of this dichotomy, yet one that brings out the essential unity of history, can be found in scholarly textbooks where the chapters devoted to cultural history are presented as appendices outside the main text. Yet if the historian were to ponder the notion of "culture," and if he were to make use of way it is applied by cultural anthropology (that is, as a way of perceiving and understanding the social and spiritual world: symbolic systems applied to the world through consciousness and reorganized in its own way; forms of behavior—economic, political, religious, artistic—that are determined by those systems), the historian's approach would inevitably change, and he would perceive the internal connections between the cultural and social aspects of human activity. Culture and society are two sides of the same coin; it is the historian's thought that opposes them. In fact, culture and society are inherently an indissoluble whole. This is why the development, within the framework of traditional historiography, of historical anthropology (the more cumbersome term of socio-cultural anthropology would be more appropriate)—a field that has clearly taken shape during the past two or three decades and that is known as the "New History"—is perfectly legitimate and even essential.

History in the Anthropological Vein

Historical anthropology does not aspire to replace the other genres of historical research; rather it offers a novel and larger context

within which the past can be studied. By its nature historical anthropology adds a new dimension to our vision of history—a dimension without which history will lose its vigor and probing force. Historical anthropology focuses on the study of images of the world, semiotic systems, and basic aspects of human behavior that are latent and therefore without explicit expression. It is based on the idea that all historical existence is the concrete expression of the languages of culture that have created it; to decipher this language requires a penetration of the deeper layers of consciousness, both of the author of the document and of his and or her milieu.¹

The historical document is therefore not a well from which the historian can freely draw facts; nor is it an open window to the past through which one merely has to look in order to see the past “as it really was.” The first task of the historian is to endeavor to understand the language of the period under study (language in the semiotic sense of the term) in an attempt to discover its specific meaning. At the same time the historian cannot shirk another task; he must subject his own analytical instruments to constant analysis, since these instruments carry contemporary meanings and therefore run the risk of deforming the picture of the past.

The nexus of scholar and the past is exceptionally contradictory. The historian studies history through an extremely complex, deforming prism. This prism absorbs the rays that the scholar is emitting at the same time as it incorporates the signals sent by people of the past. The historian then synthesizes them, each time in a new way. In other words the historian, using the historical sources, applies his own conceptual framework to the information to be analyzed. This framework is based on contemporary standards of the human sciences, which themselves reflect the intellectual norms of the society at large. Ought we not then conclude from this that the historian’s encounter with the period under study occurs in a temporal locus which is as distinct from the present as it is from the past? It is a unique temporal locus created by the historian.

It seems to me that all these considerations imply the necessity of elaborating an epistemology specific to history. In contrast to *historiosophy*, which is now discredited, the specific epistemol-

ogy of history suggested here need not create a single universally-applicable framework. Instead of a single system applied from without to the infinitely varied materials of history, we suggest an *ad hoc* hermeneutical method that will develop within the process of research itself. This method should be based both on the particular historical sources being studied and the analytic methods being used.

Toward a New Synthesis

Numerous critics of the new trends in historical writing, notably those of the “New History,” have spoken of the destruction of the generalized picture of the past. What we get instead, they say, is unconnected bits and pieces. Is this criticism justified? If what we get instead of an overall picture of the historical process is a mere description of disparate aspects of mentalities, considered independently of the analysis of social structures, then this criticism is well-founded. On the other hand, if these socio-psychological aspects of history can be integrated into an overall socio-cultural system, then they can be seen as component parts of an historically concrete whole. In this case we are not then witnessing the “collapse” (or “explosion”) of the science of history but rather a search for fresh approaches to historical synthesis; and synthesis is the only direction in which history can tend today. The study of particular mentalities is merely the means by which our understanding of man’s nature—as it was during a certain period of history, shaped by the culture and the society of his time—is deepened. Actual historical man: this is the central concern of socio-cultural anthropology as it relates to history; mentalities are no more than the particular episodes in this process.

The Ideal Historian of the 21st Century

I have tried to differentiate between the two aspects of the problem of the “responsibility of the historian”: his responsibility toward the society to which he belongs, and his responsibility toward the peo-

ple of the past whose history he is studying. However, to separate them and to examine them individually is difficult if not impossible, since they overlap. The historian's equitability as far as his own epoch is concerned simultaneously requires that he be equitable toward people whom he tries "to bring back to life." Obviously, since we are talking about a "rebirth" of generations that have disappeared, we can not allow ourselves to be carried away by the Romantic fantasies of Michelet's age; nor should we attempt to "live," "to feel" the psychology of the people of the past, as Dilthey would have it. This kind of endeavor is too subjective. What concerns us here is the development of verifiable research procedures that will provide the historian with the necessary material to reconstruct in a scholarly fashion the world-view, value systems and forms of social behavior of men of a given period.

The model historian of the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century (a kind of ideal, a desideratum) appears before my eye as a scholar who ponders the past maturely and attentively, while always continuing to perfect his own cognitive instruments. He constantly reevaluates his thoughts and never forgets to examine critically the premises from which he started, his analytical methods and the kinds of generalizations with which he works. This is neither Ranke's "grand eye-witness," nor the grim positivist slave to historical texts (let us remember the eccentric scholars described by Anatole France), nor the undiscerning collectors of all available and imaginable facts. Rather he is a thinker who compares his own world-view, as well as the world-view of his own milieu, with the world-view of the people whom he is studying.

This historian has irrevocably rid himself of the illusion that the progress achieved through science moves it ever closer to a truth that has remained immutable through the ages. He understands clearly that scientific truth, which generalizes the attainments of contemporary knowledge, is conditioned by the questions that preoccupy our society; for this reason it is historically concrete and will be revised simultaneously and proportionately to the evolution of socio-cultural circumstances. He is open to the dialogue between cultures; indeed the social significance of his work is a result of this dialogue. The discipline of history, so constituted, is better prepared to resist the emergence of false new historical

mythologies that try to transform history into a servant of politics, of a dominant ideology or of vulgar prejudices circulating among the public—all of which can only shake the confidence in a discipline in which we must believe.

Notes

1. See A. I. Gurevich, "History and Historical Anthropology," in: *Diogenes* 151, 79–94.