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HISTORY AND HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

“A foreign culture is not revealed in its entirety and its depth except by its view of another culture [...] A meaning is revealed in its depth for having encountered and come into contact with another meaning, a foreign meaning: between the two something like a dialogue is installed which because of the closed and one-sided nature, inherent in the meaning and culture taken alone [...]

The dialogue of the meeting of two cultures does not bring about their fusion, their confusion—each of them keeps its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched.”

Mikhail M. Bakhtin¹

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

* This text is part of a communication made at the seminar of historical psychology of the *Scientific Council of History of World Culture*, of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. (May 1987).

¹ Translation of a passage from *Esthétique de la création verbale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, p. 348.

The dialogue that we contemporary historians try to have with past cultures is at the same time imperceptibly the beginning of a dialogue with coming generations.* The historian of culture in fact has a double and heavy responsibility. On the one hand, his mission is to “resuscitate” the past. His period requires him to do justice to the culture of vanished peoples, to bring life to their thoughts and feelings, even though he knows that a complete and adequate reconstruction of their spiritual universe is only an ideal, a utopia of the scholar. It is in this sense that each scientific reconstruction can only be a modern reconstruction.

But on the other hand, future historians will judge us according to our interpretation of history, according to the degree of scientific and moral probity we bring to the realization of our task as historians. By reconstructing the man of the past, we contribute, independently of our intentions, to the elaboration of an image of the modern researcher such as will be presented to the historiographer of the 21st century. By creating the cultural dossier of the man of the past, we unintentionally create our own dossier, we furnish material for judgements of our own culture. Can we remain indifferent to future judgements of our intellectual probity and the depth of our scientific analyses? The work of the historian is always an important source for the evaluation of the culture that engendered it. We willingly and easily judge the historians of other times, just as we judge those of our contemporaries who belong to other scientific and philosophical currents than our own. But these evaluations, as well as our own historical constructions, are monuments of our culture. The historians who come after us will give their verdict on our ability to understand the past; they will also pronounce on the spiritual, intellectual and moral instruments that we used to study history. What will they say of the tendency of some of our colleagues to zealously rewrite history, not beginning with new knowledge but trying to satisfy conjunctural considerations? Orwell’s “Ministry of Truth” comes to our mind here, and it is to be feared the contemporary historians furnish too many of these oppressive testimonies for the generations to come...

Historical anthropology is a discipline that has an immediate rapport with the moral in human sciences. It is the inevitable and foreseeable result of the evolution of history, the nodus of the

problems that our discipline must face today.

Socio-psychological methods are necessary because of the difficulties of historians to explain historical phenomena and solve the problems they present.

If we look at the evolution of the principal themes of modern historical research, we see that the process that exclusively favors political history and events has been gradually replaced, or at least balanced, by an increased interest in social and economic history. Seeking the profound reasons for social and economic events, historians have come to understand the need to study economic, commercial, industrial and agrarian history, the history of cities, prices, salaries, industrialization, etc., as well as the social processes. Modern historical science would be unthinkable without the constant attention given to the fundamentals of social evolution. In any case, this attitude is at present common to the most diverse historiographical currents, including those that are far from being Marxist. The study of social and economic history, properly speaking, was the foundation of the development of history as a science. This conquest of historical thought remains unshakeable, however our science evolves.

The innovating nature and importance of the evolution of historical science of the 19th and 20th centuries, an evolution which has greatly enriched it and given it a new impetus, are obvious and have been appreciated by historiography. On the other hand, there is another aspect of the problem that has been neglected. Following the stress put on sociological and politico-economic questions, man, the real actor in history, has been set aside to the profit of impersonal forces and processes, or even completely forgotten. His fusion with sociology and political economics has led to the dehumanization of history.

The attention of historians being fixed on the supra-individual and the social, and not on the individual and the human, the tendency has prevailed to replace history by political economy and living individuals by abstractions. The custom of seeing the producer "from behind", bent over his cart or his machine, keeps the historian from looking this simple man in the face and interesting himself in his thoughts, his feelings, his beliefs, his moods, his views on nature and society and finally, on himself. A simplified interpretation of the idea of material well-being de-

termining the conscience of man caused the disappearance from view of historians of the conscience of these men, to the degree to which this conscience was that of the “man in the street” and not that of a thinker, a poet, a storyteller or a “hero” of history.

It would be of value to think of the words of the Marxist historian Michel Vovelle: for a long time there has been a sort of gentleman’s agreement between Marxist and non-Marxist: the first limited themselves to socio-economic history and the history of class struggle, while the second were given the problems of collective consciousness and mental attitudes. Vovelle vigorously protests against this division of functions: the Marxist historian must have the courage to say that the history of mentalities, with all its specific difficulties, is also his domain.²

The passing from the center of gravity of historical research on man toward the “abstract” forces has had a direct bearing on the structure itself of the explanation. Since, in the study of the working classes the dominant attention was fixed on the methods of their exploitation and the forms of their economic or personal dependence on the nature of their income and the amount of their salaries, it is through the dynamics of these categories that it was thought possible to explain their participation in religious, political and other movements without too much difficulty. The relationships between socio-economic structures on the one hand and collective behavior on the other could then be only direct, group behavior being explained by laws of “social physics”, neglecting the analysis of all the heterogeneous factors that determine human acts at a precise moment in history. In the same way the rapports were simplified between the sphere of material interest and the life of the mind which was integrated, wrongly in my opinion, into the Marxist concept of “superstructure” when Marx himself only integrated law and political institutions into the immediate service of the dominant socio-economic order.³

² M. Vovelle, “Y a-t-il un inconscient collectif?”, *La Pensée*, 1979, No. 205, p. 136.

³ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Oeuvres*, vol. 13, pp. 6-7. The idea of “correspondence” of the forms of social conscience with social structure must be interpreted in a more open and more dialectic manner. See. V.J. Kelle, M. Ja. Kovalzon, *Théorie et histoire*, Moscow, 1981, p. 232.

What can we say about this structure of historical explanation? It should instead be called sociological, since it serves only for the summary presentations of the macro-processes or for the elaboration of general models; it is hardly adequate for concrete historical facts in which real persons participate. An individualizing method is replaced by generalization, a *tableau vivant* of history by a general schema. This explanation overlooks the “infinitesimal” greatness that today is called the “human factor”. We have forgotten Marx’s thought, “The social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual evolution, whether they are conscious of it or not”.⁴ All the motives of historical movements: increase in price or decrease in pay, augmentation of the norms of exploitation, discovery of new commercial methods or markets, invasion of the enemy, natural calamities, famine, plague, are above all taken into account by men; first evaluated by them, they arouse their emotions and once integrated into their psyche, they can weigh on their reactions and behavior. In other words, all these exterior motives are only followed by human actions when they have become factors of social or individual consciousness.

This transformation is extremely complex. The incitements coming from the environment are treated by the consciousness according to its own laws and according to its view of the world. When these incitements are dealt with they are often unrecognizable. If we want to understand human behavior, we must know its exterior material conditions as well as the difference between the “potential” incitements of man’s social behavior (stimulations coming from the environment) and the “actualized” sources of events (concrete impulses determining human acts). It is the latter that become the facts of human consciousness, since they have been filtered and are subjected to psychic transformations; it is they that will incite individuals and groups to act in such or such a way and not otherwise. But in this case the totality of human moods, beliefs, convictions, values and moral judgements must be integrated into the structure of historical explanations. Man is not the mainspring of the mechanism of history but an actor in the historical process. His objectives may prove false;

⁴ K. Marx and F. Engels, *op. cit.*, Vol. 27, pp. 402-403.

the results obtained by man in the pursuit of his objectives are occasionally far from those expected, when they are not simply contrary, and the “irony of history” never ceases to appear in human actions. But we must understand them precisely as human actions, in which thoughts and emotions play an active role and become the integrating motives of all historical events. We are thus led to the problem of rapport at the heart of the history of historical laws at different levels: law and liberty, necessity and the possibility to choose, alternations in the directions of historical evolution. This is not the place to examine these particular and complex themes, but it must be firmly pointed out that they are of great actuality and have not been widely elaborated;⁵ because the mystification of the historical process linked to the fetishism of historical laws simplifies historical reality to excess, falsifies it, which damages historical consciousness.

Within the framework of this outlined approach, the study of the psychology of man is primordial and strictly necessary for historical interpretation in general. Formerly the accessory of historical research, the lively animation of its most “serious” and fundamental subjects, socio-historical psychology becomes a necessary aspect of research and furnishes data without which we will not understand anything about history, if we want to be exact and work in depth. One of the most pressing central tasks of present historical research is to see how the interactions of the material and the ideal are produced and how “subjective factors”, that is, the intellectual life of active, thinking and sensitive living individuals, find objective expression in their historical actions.

The evolution of historical knowledge during the last two centuries has naturally and inevitably ended in a greater differentiation of its various branches. Economic history and social history, the history of science and technique, the history of social thought and the history of religions, the history of diplomacy and international relations are autonomous disciplines. They are completed now by “cliometry” (quantitative history), historical demography, history of childhood, of woman, of sex, of festivals, etc. Specialization is inevitably reinforced. But “the specialist is

⁵ See P.V. Volorouiev, *Le choix des voies du développement social: théorie, histoire, modernité*, Moscow, 1987.

like a flux”, and the tendency to integration is the necessary and correlative counterpart of this differentiation. In the end, the historians of economy, literature and the arts study the same men and their varied and multicolored life in its concrete manifestations. A thorough research into a specific subject must not obscure for the historian the real historical totality of which he isolates for analysis only one fragment or one aspect. What are the bases of integration, where do we look for the keystone of “total history”? This is where the problems of human consciousness at all levels, theories and ideas of daily human emotions and subconscious psychic processes, acquire a primary importance. I do not see any idealism of subjectivism in the words of Marc Bloch, who says that the historian observing the evolution of the most diverse social phenomena, economy, social structure, beliefs and political events, grasps the way in which they converge in the consciousness of men to form a giant cluster.⁶ Historical facts are psychological facts to the degree in which history is made by a man whose behavior is socially and culturally determined, by the material conditions of his existence and the structure of his intellectual life.

To face the totality of the problems posed by historical anthropology would allow historians to attain at least two objectives at the same time. We would learn to propose more global, flexible and less schematic explanations of historical events that would be more convincing. We would not apply ready-made conventions but look for explanations in concrete and unique reality. We would lose, to a degree, the habit of transposing models capable of explaining the facts of modern times by past epochs. To give an example, the idea of the object of property in which the object is understood as an inanimate thing is not often appropriate when the historian studies the rapports between the owner and the possession in archaic or medieval societies, where the possessed object incarnates a part of its possessor and where it is invested with magical properties. The object then was bearer of “luck”, of “success”, of its holder; treasures were buried, sunk in the marshes and rivers not to be used later on earth but so that no one could impair the success of a man who would keep his

⁶ M. Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire*, Paris, 1949; Moscow, 1986, p. 89.

wealth even after his death, in his funeral mound. To display his wealth, spend it in the sight and knowledge of people was sometimes considered more an advantageous and prestigious means than to use it as an economic and rational placement for gain.

We could say that all that is known. But it still happens today that we explain, for example, the thousands of hidden treasures in Scandinavia at the time of the Vikings by referring only to modern economic categories, without inquiring why the Vikings hid their silver coins and never dug them up. Did they not intend to use them in this world? Is it legitimate to examine magic, religious beliefs, the representations of human nature, with the eyes of economics historian? Such an interpretation shed no light on the mentality of the Vikings. The Middle Ages is the epoch of the domination of rituals, conventional acts full of meaning, the word that conjures or blesses, rigorous ceremonial in all social acts of man. What did it mean for the contemporaries of such symbolizations, what "subjective reality" could fashion social reality? We must carefully and wisely read the "hieroglyphics" of a foreign culture. All the categories of historians, "property", "wealth", "power", "state", "religion" and others must be applied adequately by reflecting on the specific traits and singularities of the time, the societies and stages in social evolution.

Furthermore, by using the categories and methods of historical anthropology we will bring our intelligence of history to the needs of society. A reflection having a bearing on states, classes and formations, a typological reflection having a bearing on general laws, is incontestably useful when it is a question of the historical process in its totality. Once historians have lost man in history, they have also lost their reader. Now, history, a scientific discipline, will not fulfill its social mission unless it questions the culture of the past on the subject of profound and vital problems of its epoch.

For a very long time our historical research has insisted on concentrating on the problem of historical laws, social formations and their supersedence, it was "overwhelmed" by political economy and sociology; these two elements were the reflection of a certain way of thinking, the product of social quietism and the tendency to suppress and eliminate the individual, the personal to the profit of the exaltation of an infallible general law. By listen-

ing to the solemn and powerful march of multitudes without distinguishing the ordinary man, History was no longer the *science of man* for which it lost all interest. In losing its moral charge, it has ceased to be a *science for man*.

History is a process in which liberty and necessity are dialectically mixed; we often think of it *sub specie necessitatis*. Historians give precedence—within this two-headed unity of necessity and liberty that must be understood taking account of its contradictions—to the aspect of necessity, determination, fatality. We see no other possibilities than those realized, teleology comes in surreptitiously in the presentations of social evolution that the historians give, those “prophets who predict the past”. However, there is a “field of the possible”⁷ of which only a part becomes reality. From the philosophical and moral point of view, the importance of posing the problem in this way is obvious.

If we put an end to the mystification of historical laws, if we do not see there a transcendental force that rises above history and man, we will be led to recognize that these laws develop during the process of human activity, that they are the sum of activities of man. These latter are not subject to determination in themselves. But the fact that they are determined by a given state and inherited by society, by all the structure of existence, does not bring with it a simple repetition, the mechanical reproduction of the state of the economy, social structure or culture. Historical determinism does not exclude, on the contrary it implies a more or less important “degree of liberty”. In no matter what situation, be it the most stagnant, an individual can innovate, proceed in a new way, contradict what was done before him; he lets himself be carried away by his own liberty, however narrow the confines in which this liberty is exercised, given the historical circumstances and the type itself of the dominant mentality. To learn how to cultivate a crop, domesticate an animal, invent a tool, create a sculpture or compose a magic incantation, prayer or song, to call for insurrection or set down the rules for a guild, in a word, a scientific discovery, are manifestations of the free will of the active man, the individual or social group. Historians, archaeologists and ethnologists state the novelty as a fact,

⁷ P.V. Volorouiev, *ibid*, p. 23.

but we must recognize behind the first step the voluntary act of a pioneer who has broken with tradition. Any beginning is utopian, lacking a precedent, but approved by society, accepted, put into practice, the innovation loses its unusual character. Historians are sensitive to the novelty announced by a philosopher or poet but lose sight of the fact that daily life, economy, practical life, also bring innovations.

The development of productive forces is at the base of the evolution of society. But why do these forces develop if not because human activity is deployed, because it is the result of rediscovered human liberty? Is this not the fundamental difference between social evolution and evolution in nature: the latter is blind, while the former combines human acts, intentional and not intentional, automatism and the liberty of individuals, manifestations of the will and respect for necessity? Will we not recognize that historical laws are also formed beginning with concretized and socially approved human initiatives without excluding other components? The sociologist has to deal with laws that are already formed, while the historian must be able to seize a phenomena at the moment of its appearance, as potential of a new movement, while the choice is yet to be made and a real initiative is not excluded, a barely visible tendency has not yet "hardened" to become an inalterable law. It seems to me that the tendency, more and more seen in historical science, to consider man as a capital factor in the movement in history is a reaction to certain phenomena of modern history and the vulgarized sociological and mechanical interpretations of Marxism, whose substance is deformed.

The problems of the rapport of liberty and social law of initiative and historical necessity must, I repeat, be the object of a special and thorough examination on the theoretical level as well as on the level of concrete research. I have recalled this problem only to throw this into relief: the study of the psychological and anthropological aspects of historical life is closely linked to the discovery of the very essence of the latter.

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The thoughts expressed above are intended to show that the an-

thropological approach to history is a question of principle: to follow this approach is to open up new perspectives in the knowledge of the past. To introduce socio-psychological analyses is to remodel the entire field of historical research. It is to introduce new parameters into this research, and it is also to rethink the supposed acquisitions. It is not a matter of adding another appendage to the already existing edifice of historical science but to rebuild the entire edifice from its foundations up. The themes that even recently seemed of little importance in historical research have today acquired a new essential meaning for the comprehension of history. What was relegated to the periphery is now central. With the study of mentalities and spiritual life—which reveal themselves in logical and considered intellectual creativity, or in blurred images and unconscious reactions—new problems are forcefully entering the field of vision of the historian.

The characteristic view of the world of a given human community, submitted to a natural differentiation according to classes and social strata is an absolutely essential component of any social system. Everything that stimulates man in his behavior with regard to his peers in their economical, political, cultural and creative activities passes through his consciousness, is transformed and receives a specific coloration. Once again I emphasize that everything is not in clearly formulated doctrines and theories having received expression by means of thought: beyond this verbalized and rational stratum is hidden a magma of habits, thoughts and emotional complexes, unformed, unverballed and yet—or perhaps because of this—extremely tenacious and stable. Historians have been accustomed to studying the systematized thought of intellectuals, while the consciousness of vast strata of the population has remained outside their attention. But at present, the social consciousness of the “man in the street” is making its entrance into the historian’s field of vision.

As for sources, the historico-anthropological method is making a profound reevaluation of the meaning of their various categories and shows a new interest in monuments that were neglected until a short time ago. For example, in studying the religious psychology of Europeans of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modernity, a particular importance must be given both to theological treatises and official documents of the Church,

to documents addressed by parish priests to their flocks, according to the principle of feedback, which reflect the attitudes and views of those congregations. The “inferior” genres of medieval literature which were not esteemed by historians of literature are in return at the center of the interest of historians of mentalities, because it is precisely these genres that quite particularly, though indirectly, present the specific elements of popular religion and the world view of the uneducated people. In the study of scholarly treatises of demonology, it is by moving the center of gravity of the study from demonology and witch hunts—which Europe knew in the 15th and 16th centuries—to that of the many dossiers of justice and concrete lawsuits—each of which conceals authentic human destinies and tragedies—in which we have seen the important aspects of the problem and discovered precise elements of the popular culture in the period of transition to modernity.

The modifications of the methodology are no less important. Historians no longer trust in the direct testimony of the people of the time, which is subjective and thus suggestive; they prefer indirect testimony, implicit valuations, involuntary views and representations, that is, the aspects of the perception of the world coming rather from the “level of content” than from the “level of expression”. The historian of mentalities is particularly concerned with the cases in which the culture he is examining “gives up” the secrets of which it is not even aware. Let us recall Bakhtin’s words: “Of a foreign culture we ask new questions which it did not ask itself [...] and the foreign culture answers us, unveiling its new aspects, its depths of meaning”.⁸

This method of penetration into the “unconscious” of a culture has already been productive. We have been able to recognize images of childhood, death, space in the perception of medieval man, and also to recognize the paradoxes of medieval mentality that clarify the medieval conception of time and eternity, the insensitivity of the collective subconscious, the ties between religion and profane beliefs.⁹ The new methods used in

⁸ M.M. Bakhtin, *ibid.* p. 335.

⁹ See A. I. Gourevitch, *Problèmes de la culture populaire du Moyen Age*, Moscow, 1981.

the study of well-known sources have proved that these sources were really inexhaustible: in fact, everything depends on the art and talent of the historian who investigates them.

As for the new problematics, it suffices to evoke the recent one of popular, not official, religion. Seen from a broader perspective, it is the problem of the real content of Christianity in medieval Europe. The Christianity of the "silent majority" was quite different from the Christianity of the theologians and high clergy, the dogmas and practices were widely divergent, and today there is no longer need to preserve the illusion that the religious behavior and conception of the world of the elect allow the judgement of Christianity of the parishioners in their entirety. We begin to see simple people and uneducated masses in the lineaments of "alternative religion". We today examine with new eyes the problem of the rapport of the elite culture and the culture of the ignorant masses. If the "elitist" historians essentially see the extension of the cultural models appearing in the "upper" social layers into the broader layers of society, the historians of mentalities are forced to substantially change the angle of approach: they equally testify to the influence of the religious and cultural need of the masses in the official religion of the Church.

Traditionally the history of social thought essentially consists in analysing the views of the ideologists, thinkers, to establish the ties between stated ideas in different periods and their evolution. Now, historical psychology turns toward "the social history of ideas", that is, toward the transformations of ideas brought about by their penetration into certain social *milieux*. How are the views of a philosopher received in such or such a *milieu*? An idea becomes a material force when it reaches the masses, but what is the mechanism of its penetration into the minds of men, how do they take hold of it? What is it that affects the idea in the course of its diffusion in the masses? Ideas are not limited to their divulgation, they are subject to mutations, they receive a new content. Medieval Christianity, if we understand it not as an ensemble of beliefs, texts and rites inherited from earlier times, but as the concrete content of the spiritual life of the people, is definitively quite a different thing from the initial evangelical doctrine or official theology. The meaning of the doctrine continues to evolve through small touches depending on the period, the so-

cial *milieu* in which it is diffused, the needs and level of comprehension of this *milieu*. We must recognize that the study of the real history of medieval Christianity of the affective and intellectual life of the broadest strata of the European population will constitute a study for future historians that is already established.

Such is the destiny of all ideas which exceed the bounds of the narrow circle of ideologists and commentators. "The social history of ideas" is still little developed but it is of very great interest as much from the point of view of the history of public opinion and that of the ideology of the everyday as from the point of view of the behavior of social groups which appropriate some of them. Historical anthropology makes new aspects of ideology accessible. It could be said that it puts intellectual constructions, fruit of the imagination of theoreticians, to the test by questioning the perennality of their social value and efficacy. The history of social thought from then on becomes a part of social history. Theory and practice thus at this point become one.

Finally, at the level of method, the need for inter- or pluridisciplinarity has never been more important than in our age, rightly given the problematic of historical anthropology. Whatever the work, the attitude towards property, artistic or affective life, ecological and biological bases of existence or, finally, religious enlightenment and liminal psychic states, no aspect of human existence escapes the competence of historical anthropology. It is for this reason that history cooperates with linguistics and geography, ethnology and the history of the arts, literary history and biology, sociology and history of the sciences and technique, history of law and of psychology. The contribution of psychology is specially attractive but it is not easy to achieve and requires the elaboration of theoretical groundwork.

We are faced with a contradictory situation of the highest order. On the one hand, to simply be a historian who is able to satisfy the requirements of historical anthropology is extremely difficult, even impossible. We cannot grasp everything but we must be able to find our way in the most varied sectors of knowledge. On the other hand the modern historian cannot but be a historian of culture and mentalities. He must keep himself continually and extensively up to date. To limit himself to the traditional framework of the historian's profession condemns him to intellectual

provincialism, insensible to all new knowledge, just as to inability to put forward new scientific problems in an adequate way. It is in this field of humanistic studies that we are most aware that the formative system for historians, passed down from former times, might be outdated and rigid: this method teaches them neither open-mindedness nor courage in research.

If I am allowed a prospective reflection here, I would suggest that historical science of the future will be a knowledge of psychological and cultural orientation above all. This opinion is based on the study of the most recent and promising currents of present-day historiography. Without doubt research will continue and will be thorough; it will, above all, be theory-based. History will truly become a science of man.

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