

History

(Problem with)

Michèle Riot-Sarcey

If the philosopher's role is to forge concepts, the historian's function is to provide proof of their pertinence. However, this presupposes that the historian uses the concept correctly, taking into consideration the conditions that formed it. A truly transdisciplinary approach makes this possible, thanks to its rigorous method, whereas an interdisciplinary approach is merely a juxtaposition of approaches drawn from various disciplines.

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France on 1 December 1950, Fernand Braudel announced a radical renewal of the writing of history. Everything had to be rethought after the patent failure of the philosophy of history, in which the writing of the past had strayed for so long. Not only had the contribution of other disciplines become a necessity, but the perspective of global history meant the historian had to give up his solitary labour by overhauling historical methods as part of a team built at the international level. Braudel said that he no longer believed that history could be explained by this or that dominant factor. To his eyes, the past unfurled itself in all its complexity: like life itself, history appears to us as a fleeting, moving spectacle, made up of the interlacing of inextricably entangled problems. It can by turns take on a hundred diverse and contradictory faces. How is one to tackle this complex life and divide it up so as to grasp at least some part of it? The numerous attempts that have been made might discourage us in advance.¹

In principle, this ambitious programme for the reconstruction of the past opened the doors of history to new analytic tools. To reconstruct the long span of civilizations and 'the broad forms of life',² social and economic history in particular had to call on the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, which were already very close to the new history. The event had long been valued but had been reduced to factual certainties, as its meaning could not be understood. And whilst individuals – a simultaneously moving and stagnant mass – remained an abstract entity, the ideas that weighed on collective destinies were only

apprehended in their relation to everyday life, to social structures and to the depths of the civilizations whose existence had, until that point, appeared only in the form of a barely conflictual backdrop to history.

In Braudel's lecture, the becoming of historical research was questioned and problematized to the point of envisaging this 'immense question of the continuity and discontinuity of social destiny'.³ Braudel's thinking, far removed from structuralism, had a great influence on historians – including Marxist historians. Following Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, Braudel introduced a form of epistemological rupture that was echoed in the review *Annales ESC*.

But was this transdisciplinarity? If we admit that transdisciplinarity presupposes the mastery of different concepts borrowed from other disciplines, concepts that are then put to the test of historical sources, so as to enrich the questioning of the past by renewing it, it is not certain whether French historians have integrated even the idea of transdisciplinarity into their methods. After the catastrophe of the Second World War, it no longer seemed possible to think historical becoming in terms of progress. The impact of structuralism led historians to value synchrony over diachrony, enabled researchers to place emphasis not on social changes, but rather on what is permanent, or even points of resistance. At the same time, the attachment to historicism prevailed. And if individuals are neglected, if the narratives based on the major events that made France are reserved for the most renowned historians, those not suspected of 'positivism', then the history of social groups, of collectives, from which all chance has been evacuated, arises from a comprehension of structuralism that analysts limit to historical determinism. The actors of history are no longer anything more than simple agents of history, and *what happened had to happen*.

From a Braudelian perspective, the long term and structures consolidate the dominant position of history. The short term is reserved for the other disciplines. Social history becomes an all-encompassing history,

of which the review *Les Annales* represents the most accomplished direction. Gradually, under the influence of anthropology, explanatory history faded in favour of a simple description of functioning. *Les Annales* continued to trace out the path for research, but history lost its claims to hegemony. It was no longer in search of a global explanation beginning from a determinant social or economic factor. Yet although the concept of paradigm is borrowed from structuralism – from Kuhn in particular – it does not enable historical matter to be investigated and understood. Instead, it hangs over history and is only an explanatory factor. From the economic paradigm to the cultural paradigm that underlies the current development of history, the choice of paradigm is a determining element in the explanation of history as an object, rather than a theoretical tool that helps in questioning, not merely retracing, the past. From that point, ‘historical science’ – as it is called by its disciples – appeared fragmented, even shattered. Beginning in the 1970s, ‘history no longer claims to offer a global explanation of society and does not cultivate events, but a scattering of objects [selected] by each [historian] at whim’.⁴

History, with concepts

In fact, the idea of thinking history with conceptual tools, which was so explicit with Marc Bloch, has not been substantially developed by historians, despite the numerous references to the author of *The Historian's Craft*. The attachment to structures and to social movements prevailed over the theoretical debates around linguistic or discursive constructions. The history of ideas, put back into perspective by historians, resisted in turn any questioning using the concept. Applying the concept as a means to think history was considered a method inherited from metaphysics, for which Hegel was the paragon furthest removed from positivist methods. And yet, as Pierre Macherey so rightly underlines, ‘to begin from the concept so as to write history is to choose to start from questions’.⁵

Despite the resistance to the use of the concept, from micro-history to the linguistic turn, historiographical reflection has been the subject of numerous debates. But transdisciplinarity was not the emphasis. Paradoxically, in this arena for debate and confrontation, following 1968 political history remained isolated from the theoretical upheavals for a long time. In effect, few historians endeavoured to reassess the event itself, the stories of which still held a trace of the positivist, historicist heritage. Thus we might still agree with Deleuze that the event escapes the historian: ‘What history grasps of the event is its effectuation in states of things or lived

experience, but the event in its becoming, in its own consistency, in its auto-position as concept, escapes from history.’⁶ And while micro-history met with a certain success in France, the upheaval introduced by the linguistic turn, which had considerable influence in the UK, for example, had only a slight impact in France. Historians of books and publishing are one exception, such as Roger Chartier, who is perhaps the French historian most receptive to transdisciplinarity.

The true historiographical revolution was introduced by Michel Foucault. By shifting the focus to the exercise of power and subjectivity, Foucault not only enabled politics to be rethought, but radically overturned the thinking of history. By analysing power as a mode of action, Michel Foucault, who considered himself a ‘historian of thought’, contemporary of feminist movements, has had a substantial influence on gender theorists. The field invested by Michel Foucault, his political analyses of modernity, and his view of the dispositifs of power were far removed from ideologies; they opened a critical pathway that numerous researchers have taken so as to work with Foucauldian concepts.

First and foremost, Foucault rejected the givens of history, particularly the social categories that are so dear to historians. His analysis thus revealed an entire apparatus of subjectivation of individuals. An apparatus that ‘classifies individuals into categories, designates them by their own individuality, attaches them to their identity, imposes on them a law of truth that they must know and that others must recognise in them. It is a form of power that transforms individuals into subjects’, which are submitted to the other and ‘attached to their own identities’⁷ at the same time. By shifting the focus to the practices of power, away from the empiricism of the human sciences, Foucault cast light not on the freedom of the sovereign subject but on the ‘modes of objectivation that transform human beings into subjects’.⁸ Subjects are submitted to the other and struggling for a new subjectivity at the same time.

With Foucault, the historian is no longer working in interdisciplinarity, but truly in transdisciplinarity. Because it is no longer a matter of borrowing concepts from other disciplines, but of the historian actually ‘working’ with the concepts so as to understand the past. It is a question of method and a new way of thinking history. We attain historicity at last. Applied to the historical concept of liberty, for instance, we discover who speaks of liberty, and on behalf of whom. By concentrating on the meaning of the concept, at a given moment, according to who articulates it, we grasp not just the meaning of the word, but also how

it is reappropriated over the course of its usage and/or instrumentalization. This reappropriation is infinite, to use the term of linguist Henri Meschonnic. Thus, over the past two centuries, liberty has proven extremely narrow in its scope, enjoyed de facto by only a privileged few. Viewing liberty through the lens of historicity, applied rigorously, leads us to this irrefutable conclusion.

The lesson of gender

In Foucault's approach, identities and social roles are classified as historical formations, and the construction of sexual difference does not appear as a specific apparatus of the social order. Subject and power are nevertheless the two essential mainstays of his analysis. From *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to *The Care of the Self*, these two objects were used to understand the life of human beings, most of whose actions take place 'between relations of power and strategies of confrontation'.⁹ Oddly, though, gender remains a concept foreign to Foucault's analyses; foreign in the field of differences, but strangely close to the problematic opened up by the use of the concept. In effect, if we consider gender to be a conceptual tool that can be used to think the forms of power that are exercised over the mode of being of women, the link appears patent. Particularly as the concept helps 'deconstruct' the social hierarchy, one of the bases of which rests on the historically constructed identities (feminine/masculine) to which individuals are attached, most often in the dual sense of the term.

The modern world, which was Michel Foucault's particular focus, is chiefly characterized by constraining rules exerted on individuals that are 'free' but nevertheless made subservient by an array of dispositifs. The apparent paradox becomes intelligible when the methods of historicity are applied to a fundamental contradiction of contemporary 'democracies'; the formation of democracy is thus deconstructed. Since the French Revolution of 1789, few regimes have been able to call into question the principles (Liberty, Equality) that became the reference for the modern world. Yet most governments are faced with social inequality, which they perpetuate through the construction of so-called natural differences. Each individual is called on to respect the identity that designates him or her and assigns him or her to the functions that the social order commands. Society, thus constituted, can then reconcile equality of principles with actual inequality. This is why the system's effectiveness is derived not from constraint, but from the free consent of individuals, who slide into the identitarian envelope that is imposed

on them.¹⁰ Foucault's great merit is to have clarified precisely how individuals are subjectivated to rules of functioning that surpass and imprison them at the same time. Indeed, for a long time, a few particularly lucid men (and women) grasped this state of things, but were met with a wall of silence and incomprehension. Their resistance could not be understood, because the state of things and people appeared to fit so closely with the laws 'of nature', in harmony with traditions, respectful of culture and suited to mentalities. The interval between words and things seemed obvious when nature was cited to justify the hierarchy between human beings. The reference to natural determination is particularly effective as it is the substitute for divine law in our modernity. This reveals a unique vision of the universal, whereby the use of freedom is reserved for the privileged categories, while excluding categories considered inferior, in particular women.

How is one not to compare what Foucault says about the processes of identification of individuals with what is seen by Flora Tristan, who, in her time, deploras the 'logic' of her contemporaries:

I know of nothing more powerful than the forced, inevitable logic that follows from a principle posed, or the hypothesis that represents it. – Once the inferiority of woman is proclaimed and posed as a principle, see what disastrous consequences result, for the universal well-being of all men and women in humanity.¹¹

Historicity

Foucault's influence was real on the frontiers of politics. If it has been particularly effective on the topics of sexuality or the discipline of the body, it has however remained ineffective on political history or the history of ideas, which have not integrated Foucault's reflections on power and governmentality. While in principle, transdisciplinarity is not entirely disregarded by historians, in reality they seldom make the detour via theoreticians. From Walter Benjamin to Michel Foucault, from Michel de Certeau to Paul Ricœur, references are plentiful and often punctuate the narration of a historical experience. Borrowing conceptual tools from 'historians of thought' (to use a phrase of which Foucault was fond) is especially useful as historical sources do not speak for themselves. However, it is well known that to follow the logic of a theoretical construction, one must first understand its meaning, beginning with thorough knowledge of the œuvre of reference. Hence the metaphorical conversion of the œuvre into a 'toolkit'¹² seems an oversimplification. Seeking the processes of concept formation is a prerequisite for



Richard Paul: Made in GDR

critical reflection on the writing of history, and the historian's subjectivity must be engaged – if only to understand an event in its contemporaneous context. How can we hope to gain knowledge of the past in its presentness – re-creating the past as it was experienced by those that lived it – without being fully aware of our own present reality?

In my view, this way of rethinking history by integrating transdisciplinarity is identical to the quest for historicity. In effect, the concern for historicity presupposes an attachment to the meaning and specific challenges of a period, challenges which we investigate using our contemporary tools as a starting point. It is impossible to think the historicity of a historical object without referring to research in linguistics, as well as anthropological and psychoanalytic discoveries, among others. Henri Meschonnic, for instance, a linguist, translator and poet, has dwelt on the question of historicity: historicity is not simply the inscription of values in history. That would only be their historical character. History consists precisely of the illusion that meaning is limited to the conditions of production of meaning, the illusion that the knowledge of meaning is nothing other than the knowledge of its conditions. This is the positivism of historians, to the extent that their certainty about science makes them deaf to the theory of language. But historicity unites these conditions, and, at the same time, the capacity to transform the conditions of seeing, feeling, understanding or reading and writing, unforeseeably, in such a way that this transformation, which is the activity of a subject, is communicated indefinitely to other subjects.¹³

However, the historian may be destabilized by Meschonnic's affirmation with regard to the non-subject whose historicity turns out to be un-representable. Taken literally, the idea seems right; however, its implementation makes the writing of history almost impossible. I deduce from this that the historian is assigned a twofold task when he or she seeks to escape from the givens of history: both to question how meaning is constructed and to investigate the subject that conveys this meaning.

This is why the field of experiences may be the locus for discovering the processes that make history: experiences during an event, for example, which in most cases is ultimately interpreted in a way that negates the subjects caught up in the movement of history. In its linguistic forms, an experience is grasped, in its present as in its becoming, through semantic conflicts that are visible in texts and perceptible in the traces left by contemporaries. But the traces are not all equally accessible: the founders of the historical 'fact', with its continuous markers (such as liberalism), have a substantial advantage over the attempts of those who use terms the meaning of which remains foreign to the common meaning of words, particularly political terms. For instance, the population of Paris rose up in 1848 in the name of the *democratic and social* Republic, not simply in the name of the Republic. The revolutionaries called out for 'real liberty and equality'. They rose up to demand 'truth in words'. Yet the moderate meaning of the term 'Republic' has become the only common meaning; *democratic* and *social* fell to the wayside. There, a multitude of unaccomplished hopes and ephemeral understandings are lost to history. This is especially true as the passage of time widens the gap between memory and history. At the core of experience, a complete and unified ensemble is unveiled, on condition that nothing is neglected, from writing to the dream, from fantasy to compromises, from constraints to resistance: knowledge of each of these domains requires proper use of analytical theories explored by different disciplines. Transdisciplinarity is the prerequisite for properly exploring experience as it was conceived by Walter Benjamin, based on his knowledge of Proust and Baudelaire.

Historicity presupposes particular attention to temporality, to conflicts and to the different potential meanings that these conflicts create. It is no longer a question of pausing on the effectiveness of an event, but of examining its possible becoming, starting with the contradictions that the multiple significations indicate to us. This supposes a twofold rupture with, on the

one hand, historical continuities, and, on the other, the illusion of a factual reconstruction of a period. As a function of historical analysis, the quest for historicity allows us to reveal semantic constructions whose meaning had been obscured over the long term by the dominant meanings that made history intelligible. From my point of view, thinking historicity in the discontinuities and in the long term is quite simply a means to help decrypt a process of making history via the conflictual experience of putting into words an experience that participates in the ‘conditions that make history possible’.¹⁴

Rancière: yes, and no

But rare are the historians who, like Jacques Rancière, have dared to reconsider social categories, as he did in *The Nights of Labour*. In the ‘games of subjection and resistance’, he seeks to discover ‘the dream of another labour’, among the proletariat of the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Far from the given of ‘class’, at a distance from the myth of the worker, attentive to the necessities of life and to the ideals proper to these artisans not yet dispossessed of their tool of labour, in a way, Rancière gives a history lesson to historians, by lingering on singularities, through the extensive correspondence on which he draws. Here, transdisciplinarity is undoubtedly at work in the particular attention given to the whole life of men and women, more or less linked to Saint-Simonism. Rancière’s work on the working-class ‘subjects’ who express themselves, resist, go astray, hope or dream, reconstructs a whole swathe of life that was forgotten or rather buried under the debris of precisely the history of ideas that Foucault had denounced.

Conversely, to my mind, in *Disagreement*, it is the philosopher who takes the upper hand. Still with the concern of bringing back to life ‘the speech of workers’, Rancière reconstructs the field of democratic debate by placing workers on an equal footing with their ‘dominant’ interlocutors. Taking from Claude Lefort the definition of democracy as the ‘empty place of power’, the ‘have-nots’ then acquire their full place in the confrontation, since political ‘community’ ‘only exists in division’. However, neglecting the historicity of this conflict, he glosses over the stakes of the significations of the moment. In effect, the perspective is limited and does not allow for any dissonant definition. From sovereignty to representation, passing via the universal, the single dominant meaning has already won out when the debate unfolds, particularly in 1848. Rancière rejects the idea of the incommunicability of language. From his point of view, ‘Political interlocution has always mixed language games and regimes of

phrases, and it has always singularized the universal in demonstrative sequences made from the encounter of heterogeneities.’¹⁶ Yet, to use the example of Jeanne Deroin’s candidacy in the legislative elections of 1849, which was disavowed by Proudhon and ridiculed in the caricatures of the day, Deroin’s lucid, particularly clear demonstration failed to be heard. Her words were unintelligible in the democratic space, which was already locked into a single way of understanding the political. Women, reduced to the category of the feminine, had no public place to be heard or understood. Only in a moment of discontinuity, when other women become conscious of the exclusively masculine nature of the democratic construction, in their own actuality and era, can Jeanne Deroin’s words be understood.

Transdisciplinarity – as used so well by Nicole Loraux, a historian of Antiquity who is attentive to historicity, who works with psychoanalytic and philosophical concepts, who is adept in the analysis of Greek theatre and who quite rightly claims to call into question the certainties of the past – helps us to think the historicity of the object and its becoming; on condition that history is rethought as something other than a linearity that is constantly being rebuilt.

In the manner of Benjamin, in a way.

Notes

1. Fernand Braudel, *Écrits sur l'histoire*, Flammarion, Paris, 1969, p. 20.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
4. Antoine Prost, *Douze leçons sur l'histoire*, Seuil, Paris, 1996, p. 232.
5. Pierre Macherey, *De Canguilhem à Foucault, la force de la norme*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2009, pp. 54–5.
6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill, Verso, London, 1991.
7. Michel Foucault, ‘Afterword: The Subject and Power’, in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Brighton, 1983, p. 212.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
11. Flora Tristan, *Union Ouvrière* [1842], ed. Danie Armogathe, Editions des femmes, Paris, 1986, p. 91.
12. This notion is borrowed from Claude Lévi-Strauss and very widely implemented by French historians.
13. Henri Meschonnic, *Politique du rythme*, Verdier, La-grasse, 1995, p. 142.
14. See my article ‘Tout s’oublie et rien ne passe’, Rh19, *Le Temps et les historiens* 25, 2002.
15. Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labour: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1989.
16. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans., Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999.