

WHICH HISTORY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

How should we approach the knowledge of the past at the beginning of the 21st century? In recent decades, this was done by trying to reach places and perspectives until then unexplored. Now we must concern ourselves with the form of the content of our research at a time when ideological changes have carried away many supposed certainties. Calmness and meditation should be the foundation for the historian's work, far from the productive urge and the *Manichaeism* that history partly took on in the seventies and eighties of the 20th century. In Spain, and to an extent in the other country in the European Mediterranean area, efforts must be made to reject prejudices against the narrative, to search for a balance between local and general history and to place an precise value on the forms recently arrived from the United States, such as *formalism*, *deconstruction* or *post-structuralism*. An especially we have to overcome the aversion of determined academic circles to the permanent opening of new ways to reform and combat the bureaucratisation of the university system.

KEY WORDS

Historiography, Thought, Teaching, Ideologies, Ideas.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Historia, Opinio, Doctrina, Ideologia, Nociones.

I know that fascism meant the end of clear thought and the triumph of irrationalism. I know that, without realising it, I have spent all my life embroiled in a political struggle, in which I was fighting against these things amongst shadows. From now on, I will fight in the light. (R. G. Collingwood, *Autobiography*)

For some time now, we have been asking ourselves what the history the 21st century will be. However much conservatives may deny it, each new epoch has always had a different way of viewing the past from the previous one, neither better nor worse, only different. This, as I have stated in a book on the subject, is where the challenge for the historian lies.¹ Is it the task of the current historian to investigate what his or her predecessors have not done? It is undoubtedly so, but that is not all. We witnessed this attitude in the mid-seventies when new formulas were proposed in what became known as the “new history” that, sheltering behind the French school of the *Annales*, took an interest in territories little or not frequented until then, ranging from private life to mentalities, rejecting the study of events and politics.² This is not the way I prefer, as, in fact, I am not motivated by either scorn or aversion for the facts, intrigues, political games or biography, but rather I consider them to be themes related to my work. What concerns me most is the form of the contents of our research.³ This should worry the young historians who eagerly approach a doctoral thesis or their first monographic piece under the guidance (no doubt necessary, and nowadays more than ever) of the masters who carry the experience of years of debate in the field of historiography. I invite you to deposit the knowledge reached since Lucien Febvre began his famous “combats for history” down to the latest observations in this field by Reinhart Koselleck, a true leading light in this discipline over the last thirty years;⁴ and to do so with the conviction that history has more sense than ever in a world dominated by globalisation, the difficult situation of the planet’s resources and the challenge from information technologies that, through Internet and others, has made instant access possible to works that would otherwise have taken months, if not years to obtain.

I belong to a generation trained to study history on two basic principles. First, there was absolute conviction that the vital world of our youth would cease to exist in our adulthood. In the Spanish case, this attitude was a liberation from the political environment of the time, too rigid and oppressive for the dissidents who a living society, logically, must always have. We were also aware, and herein lies the second principle, that the effects of the cultural changes of the seventies, with the access to the popular values of Rock, Pop and other movements, would end up affecting universities and academia. However, these institutions remained distant

1. Ruiz-Domènec, José Enrique. *El reto del historiador*. Barcelona: Península, 2006.

2. Carrard, Philippe. *Poetics of the New History*. Baltimore - London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

3. In the line anticipated by White, Hayden. *El texto histórico como artefacto literario*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2003.

4. See Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futuro pasado. Para una semántica de los tiempos históricos*. Barcelona: Paidós, 1993.

from this for a time until the spirit of the age invaded the lecture halls like a gust of fresh air where before there was only fear and an excess of bureaucracy. The historians put themselves at the head of these two principles, and analysed them in detail, especially when the great history fell on us all at the end of the nineteen-eighties, to show us how chance sometimes shapes the destiny of a society. While we were arguing about study plans or the qualification of a field of knowledge, the Berlin Wall was falling and smart bombs were dropping on the streets of Sarajevo. We realised that the happy tale that Europe would never again see wars only referred to part of Europe, and not to our nice neighbours, our friends and relatives, who were thrust into desperate situations. How did these events contribute to cast light on the way of making history? We only remember the debate about the end of history generated by Francis Fukuyama,⁵ that had a courteous, elegant and calm reply from Lutz Niethammer in a book first published (in German) in 1989, the same year as the fall of the Wall, and I do not believe by chance, had a resonant query as a subtitle, *Posthistoire. Ist die Geschichte zu Ende?*⁶ The end of history and the end of historians stunned by the weight of the media in those years and searching for the lightness of study in some research laboratory. However, history is made in the street, amongst the people, living their experiences, knowing how to respond to the problems of each epoch. Imagining. An intellectual, not scientific, task; one that responds to the demands of a *metier* as Marc Boch would say, always there in our proposals for transformation and progress, to principals of moral conduct that make the criticism of the sources a necessary, essential task.⁷ It is not a job for innocent spirits, or the dogmatic, nor people who lean towards esoteric sects or ideological coteries. It is a task that demands that one frees oneself of the gremial temptation to help a friend rather than the competent, the best prepared. And it is, especially, a task that requires time.

Time, that is the question for the historian. In the world of emotional intelligence, it is said that a physicist in his or her thirties is at the end of his or her career, and that a historian, in contrast, has not even begun it. Think about the age of the great historians when they wrote their great works, Johan Huizinga when he wrote *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, or Georges Duby on writing *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* and so many others.

Time and calmness. Time to transform research into one's own unmistakable language, and that language into a tale about the past. Time to repair the errors of an excess of theory, of ideological matrices or school prejudices, or even, unfortunately, of harshly bowing to the herd instinct. Time to forge the imagination as a constructive element for the data that accumulates in the slow research in archives or in the field. Time to find answers to an infinity of questions thrown at the sources, which, inert, show their immense irony at our perplexity at not knowing how to make them

5. Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

6. Niethammer, Lutz. *Posthistoire. Ist die Geschichte zu Ende*. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1989. See the English version: *Posthistoire, Has History Come to an End?* London-New York: Verso, 1992.

7. Mastrogregori, Máximo. *El manuscrito interrumpido de Marc Bloch. Apología para la historia o el oficio de historiador*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995.



speak more and better. History is a task that is done in the solitude of the study: it thus needs calmness in order to find the right words, the precise notes, the way.

Thus, although nobody, not a single person in all the world wishes to listen, the historian would be obliged to ask the question of why we have reached this situation, and even more obliged to answer it, even if in doing so he or she discredits themselves before their friends and neighbours. We live in interesting times, they say, but the historian knows that all times are interesting. Is this epoch more intense than Mozart's, or that of Chrétien de Troyes, or Caesar's, or Asurbanipal's, or the times of Moses? We must beware of "presentism", the historian's great sin.

François Hartog knew this when he wrote an excellent book whose conclusion can be considered a starting point for everything good about this discipline: rigour, relation, openness, ingenuity, prudence.⁸ But any young historian without prejudices also knows it: what we still need to learn about the past is infinitely greater than everything stated or misstated until now. The task has just begun; it needs a fresh push to make it attractive in form and serious in content. Open yourself to the future world, which is fascinating, despite the terrible auguries with which some like to announce it. We do not believe in the metaphor of the decline of the Roman Empire nor the barbarian invasions; they are excellent ways to see personal tragedy, but have little, or nothing, to do with the profession of historian. We believe more in the intelligent observations by the medievalist Kathleen Biddick.⁹

This leads me, naturally, to the question that may be expected after the above considerations: What can the historian say about the past that has not yet been said, and which nobody except him or her can say?

In Spain, and I am unsure up to what point in other nearby countries, in Italy, Portugal, France, or Germany, this question leads through our possible answers to the three imperative demands at the start of the 21st century, three warnings of the method that, if not overcome, would constitute a serious obstacle to the development of the historians' profession and their involvement in the social and political processes of the future.

1. Suppression of the prejudice that considers narration as a negative element in access to the study of the past; delimit the criticisms poured on attempts to approach the real world of other epochs through this modality that we call narrative history.

2. Precise setting of the balance between local and general history; let it be well understood that proximity is not a principal of excellence, nor should the warmth of administration support be promoted.

3. Intellectual commitment to delimit the precise value of formalism, reconstruction, post-structuralism and other recent fashions from the university campuses in the United States.

The old dilemma of having to do one thing or another, linked to the excuse that, instead of the barricade, there was scientific history, and other more or less sound speculations should not and cannot now count. They were part of the Manichean

8. Hartog, Françoise. *Régimes d'Historicité. Presentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Seuil, 2003.

9. Beedick, Kathleen. "Bede's Blush: Postcards from Bali, Bombay, Palo Alto", *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*, John Van Eggen, ed. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994: 16-44.

environment of the seventies and eighties, with their proclamations in favour of research without direct contact with other related disciplines, such as anthropology, literary criticism, sociology, psychoanalysis or hermeneutics. Nowadays, in the first decade of a new millennium, and after twenty years of hard debates, this posture, like so many others that arose in the pop heat of the May '68, has been dispelled. It is worth taking a look at them, evaluating their exact meaning, not only as an analysis of a historiography, which, on one hand, is required in the modern study plans, but also, and why not, as an expression of the personal experience of those authors who struggled against its hegemony, these faces of the history who forged the way to accede to the past of the 21st century.¹⁰ My aim is not to annul this twisted crepuscular form of doing history; I only wish to show that there are other ways, other approaches. Freedom consists of this, of preventing that other ways, with which one does not agree, also cease to exist. I will defend them here and anywhere (even in an entrance committee for university teaching staff) although I am convinced that they are obsolete forms whose procedures and objectives must be improved. However, I do not wish to do to them what was done to us thirty years ago, to kindle the bonfire on which the books and, even more so, the manuscripts in search of publication were placed.

How many times in this country, a vast ambitious approach to the past, that includes not only the objective world that it attempts to analyse, but also the viewpoint of the writer, was sacrificed for having sinned against the narrow academic canon based on the bare data without relief? How many times was the bonfire lit under a proposal for renovation that perhaps went too far but which never earned the right to be debated under equal conditions with the rancid comments of what has always been said about a specific question? To renovate the profession of historian is a form of optimism; only nostalgia is pessimist, the idea that excellence was only possible in the past is an affront to the creative imagination; and the criticism should start right here at home, not because there are more problems here than elsewhere, but rather because the historians' commitment should start with their own, with those who still believe that the good intentions of politicians will save the future of their discipline. It is not enough to complain that each chair of history that becomes vacant in a university is transformed into a chair of electronics or engineering, we must also examine our own limitations in depth. The success of the great works of history among the people, even amongst the politicians, offers an image of the past. They are books about other times, written by historians who retired before the appearance of personal computers, Internet or the debate about the limits of scientific knowledge. But even so, there has also been selection in this territory, and not following the universal laws that the fittest should triumph and the most incompetent should be relegated. In history, convention, interests sometimes triumph, not skill.

10. Ruiz-Domènec, José Enrique. *Rostros de la historia. Veintiún historiadores para el siglo XXI*. Barcelona: Península, 2000.

At the lowest levels of these approaches, levels we are unfortunately accustomed to in this country, my ears still ring with rhetorical questions from other times that contain their own answer. Listen to one that I heard from a famous historian from this country, whose name, if you do not mind, I do not wish to remember. "What can we do except burn this latest little book (sic) by Georges Duby (he was referring to *William Marshal: The Flower of Chivalry*) a vulgar novel without a scientific basis?" This, over time, gave rise to universal maxims: Simon Schama does not know how to write, Natalie Zemon Davis invents the situation of her characters, Jacques Le Goff is a populariser, Peter Brown does not even exist, Paul Veyne is confused and retrograde, and thousands of other cases that prevented great history from entering the classrooms by the front door. Instead, it had to filter through the corridors, through cloisters, through the cafeterias to scandalise the mandarins who could not bear its success and tried to counterattack the publication of these works with the creation of a network of sinecured readings where gremial rights took preference over quality.

Nowadays, does anyone doubt that the historians mentioned above, and many others in the same line, are those who described the past with more imagination, commitment and truth and favoured the possibilities of history continuing to survive in our country, which tends to promote the esoteric ways with public financing? The fact that they stood up to an epoch of bitter inquisition is a cause for hope, given that it means that their testimony will also prosper in times of confusion and discouragement. I place a great deal of hope in our country's young historians although I also distrust the impostors who wander around university institutions to slip through the loopholes left open by a completely bureaucratised recruitment systems that does not take the function candidates are called to fulfil into consideration. How can it be that a *curriculum* of local research enables a young person to teach a full programme of medieval history stretching from Iceland to Syria without a solution of continuity? Would we leave the university explanation of lung cancer in the hands of a dentist? We must keep things straight. We must trust that common sense finally wins the day. I expect it will. I am, at least, optimist.

