REFLECTIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF HISTORIOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY

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Abstract

This dialogue with Jacques Le Goff was completed on Tuesday, 25th March 2014, a week before his death. This is his last text. He had celebrated his 90th birthday on 1st January, in full and brilliant activity. As he spoke repeatedly about his professional and personal history, the purpose of this dialogue was to reflect on the last decade of his life and his work. In these years, he has published three volumes and a number of articles, interviews and prefaces. Here he has reconsidered some of his main research topics, among others: the "long Middle Ages", the criticism of the concept of renaissance, the rejection of banal arithmetic periodisation in terms of centuries, the political and social relevance of the European Union and the need for an economy that looks after the needs of the poor.

Key Words

Middle Ages, Periodisation, Europe, Economy, Future.

Capitalia Verba

Medium Aevum, Periodi, Europa, Oeconomia, Futurum.

Daniela Romagnoli (D.R.): Jacques Le Goff, you have just turned 90, and you're still fully active, despite some physical mobility problems. It is enough to think of the two books published in 2011 and 2014 respectively, without counting a good few years' uninterrupted activity like the broadcast *Les lundis de l'histoire* on France Culture, which began in 1968, or your activity in distilling —if I can put it like that— *Annales*. That means you are in a position to have a bird's eye view of the evolution (if indeed it is evolution) of, on one hand, historiography and, on the other, society —two things that are entirely independent. These are the two areas where I would like to ask you a few questions in my attempt not to repeat the biographical details you have already given to Marc Heurgon in his conversation *Une vie pour l'histoire*[1]. I do not want to forget, far from it, the exemplary methodological archievement you have offered by linking your experience of life to your deep motivation for research (and perhaps not only historical research) in your essay *L'appétit de l'histoire*[2]. Nor do I want to forget the moving tribute to the memory of your wife, a tribute which is, at the same time, the work of a historian, because, as you have stressed, it is also the story of a Franco-Polish couple during politically difficult years[3].

I would therefore like to ask you, before we get to the heart of this interview, whether you would like to add a few reflections on the latest decade of your life.

Jacques Le Goff (J. Le G.): I have to say that the last decade of my life has been marked, first of all, by the ineffaceable sadness and solitude of the loss of my wife Hanka in 2004, and also by the opportunity I have had to be able keep on working, carrying out fully my activities as director of a monthly broadcast on France Culture and, working at a greater distance but, even so, having something of a presence in running the journal *Annales*. I think, then, that this last decade has been for me a decade of great, unmitigated sadness but fortunately that has not prevented the continuation of quite serious activity in my field as a historian.

D. R.: After historians opened their doors to the so-called human sciences, notably anthropology and sociology, and after the exciting period of *Faire de l'histoire* and *La Nouvelle histoire*[4], what happened? There was, of course, a return to political history (which does not mean the history of events: let us recall your article *Is Politics still the Backbone of History?*[5]), and the return, or rather restoration, of biography. We are thinking, of course, of your *Saint Louis*.

Do you see significant developments in historiography in recent years?

J. Le G.: History undoubtedly evolves and changes, and historiography is subject to what I would call a reality, rather than a law. During the preceding half century

1. Heurgon, Marc. *Jacques le Goff. Une vie pour l'histoire. Entretiens avec Marc Heurgon*. Paris: La Découverte, 1996.

2. Nora, Pierre, dir. *Essais d'égo-histoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987.

3. Le Goff, Jacques. *Avec Hanka*. Paris: Gallimard, 2008.

4. Le Goff, Jacques; Nora, Pierre, dirs. *Faire de l'histoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1974; Le Goff, Jacques. *La Nouvelle histoire*. Paris: Retz CEPL, 1978.

5. Le Goff, Jacques. "Is Politics Still the Backbone of History?". *Daedalus*, 100 (1971): 1-19.

there was a fashion for the notion of mentality, whose ambiguity I did underline. It seems to me that, for some time, the emerging notion has been the history of feelings, the history of passions, and I have to say that, as I see it, this also presents an ambiguity which makes me, not hostile or defiant but prudent and critical, whatever the contribution this new direction can offer.

D. R.: Do you think your work has been able to suggest approaches and open up common perspectives for other sectors of research, beyond the Middle Ages?[6]

J. Le G.: Quite frankly, I don't know. I think my works, which are, of course, as you have just emphasised, essentially devoted to the Middle Ages, have, behind the Middle Ages, a greater ambition, if I might make so bold a claim. The essential theme is time and my reflections and research could, therefore, perhaps provide clues —I wouldn't say more— to the history and historiography of other periods before and after the Middle Ages. And I have also recently tried to place the Middle Ages in a much larger historiographical task: the general division of history into periods. I have therefore, if I might make such a claim, opened up medieval paths to the past and to the present.

D. R.: Your "long Middle Ages" does not seem to have been successful enough, despite the words of the medievalist Jean-Philippe Genet: "Nous sommes de plus en plus nombreaux à adherer, avec plus ou moins de nuances, au long Moyen-âge de Jacques Le Goff"[7].

Unless the abolition of the concept of the Middle Ages —another rarely practised approach— ultimately runs in the same direction. In the second part of the 20th century there were historians of different educational backgrounds and schools of thought, ready to deny that there had ever been such a thing as the Middle Ages: Lopez, Barraclough, Guenée, Cardini...[8] Moreover, an Italian medievalist who you know very well and I think hold in high esteem, Massimo Montanari, has abandoned the concept and even the words "Middle Ages". In his works they are not to be found, they are not a historical reality, but a concept first negative, then positive, then the two together, but always

6. The meeting in Cambridge in 1994 (cited in the Introduction to this interview) of numerous medievalists from various countries did an extensive overview. See also: Rollo-Koster, Joëlle. "Jacques Le Goff (1924-...)", *French Historians 1900-2000: New Historical Writings in Twentieth Century France*, Philip Daileader, Philip Whalen, eds. Oxford (UK): Blakewell, 2010: 371-393.

7. Genet, Jean-Philippe. "Être médiéviste au XXI siècle", *Être historien du Moyen-âge au XXIème siècle*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008: 9.

8. "Vien da chiedersi se il termine Medioevo abbia ancora senso": Roberto S. Lopez, 1951; "There never was a Middle Ages": Geoffrey Barraclough, 1955; "Tout médiéviste sait aujourd'hui que le Moyen-Age n'a jamais existé, et encore moins l'esprit médiéval": Bernard Guenée, 1980; "Il Medioevo è sempre altrove": Franco Cardini, 1988; Heers, Jacques. *Le Moyen-Age. Une imposture*. Paris: Perrin, 1992; "There is no such thing as the Middle Ages": Alexander Murray, 1996; all cited in: Romagnoli, Daniela. "Il medioevo: la lunga strada di un concetto storiografico", *Le vie del medievo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Parma 28.9-1.10 1998*. Milan: Electa, 2000: 434-439.

nothing more than an idea[9]. Is this, perhaps, a type of choice that would be in line with your long Middle Ages? What do you think?

J. Le G.: This is clearly a complex problem. I think there is a distinct period between the relatively far-off periods we call Antiquity —but which, I think, should also be looked at more closely— and the period known as the modern age. What I question among the currently most widely accepted periodisation—accepted not only in the West and in Europe in particular but, I think, in the scholarly and intellectual universe throughout the world— is the notion of the Middle Ages. Personally, the notion itself does not bother me: the essential thing is to respect reality and, I think, getting rid of the Middle Ages is not a good way of doing this. I'm not going to hide it, I regret that a historian whom I hold in such high esteem as Massimo Montanari should be getting rid of the Middle Ages. The period that corresponds to the Middle Ages is there. Why not carry on calling it the Middle Ages? Firstly, the expression is established by habit and, secondly, it indicates that, despite everything, the role played by the period is, to some extent, one of passage. Curiously, for me, the expression Middle Ages means the opposite of what it might have been expected to say. People have wanted to see it as a period which, if not dark, as in the English expression "the Dark Ages", is a period that cannot be given any principal characteristic other than the fact that it lies between two periods which would have richer significances. However, I believe the Middle Ages does have that sense of passage, that sense of transition and, therefore the term expresses very well what the Middle Ages have, in fact, been for me: a period of progress that dares not speak its name. Curiously, the Middle Ages hid its progress under the notion of renaissance. When they made progress, they thought they had to attribute this, above all, to the survival or new life of a past which was undoubtedly rich in values. Therefore, to express their awareness of what really can be called progress, the Middle Ages resorted to a kind of fear of the future and concealed it under the term renaissance. I am, therefore, quite happy with the Middle Ages and, although the "long Middle Ages" have not, it is true, succeeded in winning a place in the normal periodic division, I will continue to argue for their recognition.

The renaissance, as you know, has two moments of victory and two creators, if I can put it like that. The first is Petrarch, in the 14th century, who moreover invented not the notion of Renaissance but that of the Middle Ages, which leaves room for the notion of Renaissance. It seems to me full significance is not given to the fact that the Renaissance was actually born in the 19th century, created by Michelet. And it is the well-deserved glory of Michelet —a great writer, a great poet more than a great historian— that has led the renaissance to an easy triumph over the rather unpoetic, uninspiring "long Middle Ages". But it's there for me. I'll give you what, at my age, is almost a final message: I would ask that the notion of the long Middle Ages should be retained.

I have just published a little book on the division of history into periods in which I indicate how the important aspects that define a new period in history are not

9. Montanari, Massimo. "L'invenzione del Medioevo", *Storia Medievale*. Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2002: 268-279.

fulfilled in the West until the mid-18th century. I would like this finding to be well studied and adopted. Periods, of course, have sub-periods and, as there is a habit of using the word renaissance for the sub-periods of the Middle Ages —as we have talked about the Carolingian renaissance and the 12th-century renaissance— why not talk about a great Renaissance within a long Middle Ages. I do not deny that there were changes in the 15th and 16th centuries; I do not believe them to be far-reaching enough to provide a change of period, but they do bring about a sub-period whose importance I would not deny either. I think that, taking advantage of the fact that the expression Middle Ages invited the discovery of "modern times" starting quite early on, Michelet, with all his panache, was able to impose that notion of renaissance which I think is among many brilliant and attractive follies he put forward in his work.

D. R.: All this raises supplementary questions for me which I hadn't thought about to start with. There could be, let's say, something of a semantic problem: the Middle Ages are understood as something between two other periods —the one which came before and the one which came after. But there is no period that is not in the middle between the past and the future, except, for believers, the first day of creation and the day of the last judgment.

Of course, I also thought of Petrarch and the fact that he spoke, or rather wrote, a word that has marked the negative judgment on what we call the Middle Ages in order to express contempt for contemporary artistic and literary values, guilty as they were of being too far removed from the splendour of Antiquity: *tenebrae* or darkness. But there is also the need to exalt the "new" culture, perhaps for less noble —or rather political— reasons, stressing the exit from darkness thanks *to* and for the benefit *of* patrons. This led to the consequences you were talking about just now.

Division into periods is a kind of classification which in itself is always a means rather than an end and, as such, it can or sometimes it mus, in fact, be changed. In terms of the Middle Ages, how can we talk about a "transition" when it was a transition that would last centuries?

J. Le G.: This is, in fact, a complex question because I can see at least three separate questions combined in it. Firstly, there is the notion of passage. I will take the liberty of absolutely opposing the opinion you have put forward about any period being a passage, a transition between one period and another. It seems to me that this point of view, which is a point of view involving the banal arithmetisation of time, is almost entirely insignificant when it comes to understanding the evolution of the world and humanity over time. As I have just said, the way I see it, the Middle Ages also mean progress, but progress that does not want to declare itself. This, in a way, confirms its character as an enriching period of passage, which includes innovations but does not want to impose them. We need to wait until the mid-18th century — the period which, once again, for me is the end of the long Middle Ages— for the beginning of a new period that we could call modern times, with the arrival of the notion of progress, which did not manage to emerge during the Middle Ages.

Then, the second problem involves the way this form of periodisation which suggests, for instance, the Middle Ages, as it suggests Antiquity or Modern Times, is particularly linked to an essential event in intellectual history and, I would almost say, the history of societies: the transformation of history from a simple recital into a subject of knowledge. In my latest little book, I insist on the extreme importance of the transformation of history into a subject for study in universities and schools, which we can say —and this was put forward in particular by the great French philosopher Marcel Gauchet— was practically achieved, if not imposed, by about 1820. The Middle Ages therefore find their place more easily and significantly in teaching than in the other sector of history. Finally, while the division into centuries, which dates, as you know, only from the 16th century, works very well from around the 17th century onwards, this is another type of periodisation. It does not replace the division into periods like the Middle Ages, but it is added to it to provide an additional tool for history teaching and, therefore, the number of centuries a period can have is not fixed in advance. I think, as I have tried to show in my latest little book, that a period has to be defined by a far-reaching change in the economic sphere, in the intellectual sphere and in the social and political sphere. So I recognise the end of the medieval period with the end of famines in the rural economy, the birth of the industrial economy, the emergence of free thought, as opposed to religion, in the great Encyclopédie, and the social and political upheaval of the French Revolution. The Middle Ages can, therefore, be the long Middle Ages for intrinsic reasons.

D. R.: When you talk questions proliferate, and it is difficult to stay on the track one had imagined! I'd like to return for a moment to the subject of the Renaissance, the one with the capital R, invented in the 19th century by Michelet. Where does Burkhardt and his *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* fit in?

J. Le G.: The place given to Burkhardt and his great book, whose interest, richness and quality I would stress, has been, I think, an error of vulgarised, bad historiography. The Renaissance did not assert itself with Burkhardt, but with Michelet, and Burkhardt's renaissance is not, moreover, a Renaissance opposed to the Middle Ages like Michelet's. Instead, it is a diverse, rich renaissance, absolutely interesting and enriching the historical reflection contributing anything decisive about the frontiers between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. One final remark: for Burkhardt the Renaissance does not have a capital R, it comes with a small r: it is the renaissance of the arts in Italy, but not a great period (the Renaissance) coming in.

D. R.: One more question, still linked to the meaning of history. History is change. Historians may, or, on the right circumstances, must, alter their points of view and conclusions: is this the case with your thinking about Michelet, a person you have spoken and written about on repeated occasions in terms that have been at very least positive or even admiring?

J. Le G.: I am not ashamed to say that my thinking about Michelet has evolved, in particular since the relatively recent publication (1995) of his courses at the Collège de France. I've seen two aspects that have destroyed the admiration I had for Michelet. His championing, which I see as inappropriate, of the Renaissance, and his terrible anti-Semitism. And I am now convinced that this contributed to the spread of anti-Semitism in France in the 19th century. I continue to think that Michelet is a top class writer —passionate, original and brilliant— but I must say that, from the point of view of values, I wouldn't trust him very far, not as a historian or in considering societies made up of those —all of us— who Lucien Febvre has described as being half-breed[10].

D. R.: Your last three books —which I must say in passing show that in 90 years laziness is something that is completely foreign to you— deal with sacred time, money, and periodisation[11]. Is there a single approach here, or are these reflections that are absolutely independent of one another?

J. Le G.: I think a true intellectual worker doesn't have separate thoughts or research. So, I confess that you can find some of the same themes there, the same obsessions that have marked my work since a long time. There is them there in a reflection on time stimulated, if I can put it like that, precisely by the Middle Ages and its original nature, I repeat, as a historical period: the Middle Ages is unique. Then, in the already large area to which I restricted my research, which is Europe —the West— there is a very important event which I have been interested in since the beginning of my research, as I published a little book on the merchants and bankers of the Middle Ages[12]. This is the appearance, spread and development of money, which raises essential problems from the economic sphere to the moral and religious sphere. I was also already interested in this problem, which has also followed me throughout my intellectual life: money and life[13]; and the breakdown into periods also comes into this perspective from a very particular point of view because I started thinking about the problem of links between the Middle Ages and the renaissance, while at the same time, I realised it was an essay for setting out what was important in history. What are the areas where the essential changes occur allowing us to talk about the move from one period to another? Moreover, although I hadn't sought to deal with this essentially historiographical aspect, I rediscovered the importance for me of the thought of Karl Marx, because I saw there the fundamental role of the economy and, at the same time, the limits of that role which I think oblige any historian worthy of the name to go beyond the economic sphere.

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10. Febvre, Lucien; Crouzet, François. *Nous sommes des sangs-mêlés*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2012.

11. Le Goff, Jacques. *Le Moyen Age et l'argent: essai d'anthropologie historique*. Paris: Perrin, 2010; Le Goff, Jacques. *A la recherche du temps sacré. Jacques de Voragine et la Légende dorée*. Paris: Perrin, 2011; Le Goff, Jacques. *Faut-il découper l'histoire en tranches?* Paris: Seuil, 2014.

12. Le Goff, Jacques. *Marchands et banquiers du Moyen Age*. Paris: Publications Université de France, 1956.

13. Le Goff, Jacques. *La bourse et la vie. Economie et religion au Moyen Age*. Paris: Hachette, 1986.

D. R.: That makes me think of the fact that vulgar Marxism, as you have called it long time ago, belongs to those who have never read Marx's *Das Kapital*, a work in which he deploys clear historical sensitivity and is not rigidly schematic —for example in the succession of the production methods— and in which no form of crystallised theory can be found. I think also of the great Marxist historian Witold Kula and his studies of the economy of the feudal system where he introduces a coefficient into the analysis of the revenues of Polish feudal lordships which, in his view, is an essential one: the coefficient of human patience[14].

J. Le G.: Yes. I've had the chance to meet two great and very intelligent Marxists: Witold Kula, with whom I've been linked by deep friendship, and Pierre Vilar.

D. R.: Now we'll move on to the second part of this discussion.

> *Un mouvement de progrès et d'espoir, avec ce qu'il faut d'imaginarie pour que vraiment un phénomène historique soit réussi. S'il n'y a pas du coeur, de la passion, du rêve, ce n'est que la petite monnaie de l'histoire.*

That's the way you spoke of your memories of the formation of the Front Populaire in 1936, when you were just 12 years old[15]. And here is one of the fundamental principles of your life as a historian: your civic passion, your participation in the life of your times, your rejection of an unlikely ivory tower in which a historian would isolate himself to achieve an objectivity as chimerical as it would be dishonest, and opposed to the exercise of comprehension and transmission of collective memory, which is basically the historian's task.

You have therefore experienced, and not merely as a spectator, decades of events and changes as radical as they have been rapid. You have also sometimes expressed your opinions in articles or press interviews, not only in France, on specific problems but always drawing on more general issues.

I think that we resume this reflection starting from Europe at a moment when the worst spectres are materialising (let's think of the Nazi organisations appearing almost everywhere) and when some believe that the solution to the general crisis lies in rejecting the Euro and leaving the European Union. What do you think?

J. Le G.: I think that would be a catastrophe because, in a world that is said to be in the process of becoming globalised —something which, as I see it, should not be exaggerated because, while it is true there is increasing and closer communication between the different regions of the world and the different civilisations, diversity still remains the most important reality— it is true that blocks of a kind are forming

14. Kula, Witold. *Teoria ekonomiczna ustroju feudalnego. Próba modelu*. Warsaw: Pánstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1962.

15. Le Goff, Jacques. *Une vie pour l'histoire. Entretiens avec Marc Heurgon*. Paris: Editions la Découverte, 2010 (1st ed. 1996): 25.

which have differing degrees of influence on Europe and the world. This is already true of the United States and it is true of the Middle East, particularly with China; Africa is in the process of trying to establish a kind of unity, and the emerging countries like Brazil and India are also in the process of gathering international strength. Under these conditions, if Europeans remain divided into nations they will be increasingly dominated, and the European nations will lose a large part of their strength and influence. For me, a united Europe is almost a lifebelt also because it is founded on common elements in the areas of economy, intellectual life, education and politics. I think, then, that we should instead speed up and strengthen the European Union and, as the current situation probably requires nations to be maintained, this Europe of nations must have common political institutions that are more efficient and solid.

D. R.: You have talked about the economy —the crisis. Don't you think that it was, I wouldn't say desired, but at least profitable for all kinds of financial powers? Or should we be thinking of the somersault of a kind of capitalism that has no future and, as such, must change or die?

J. Le G.: First of all, what is clear is that we are in a particular phase of capitalism marked by financial domination, and I think this shift towards finance which is translated into the dominance of the banks is at the origin of the crisis. Not just in Europe but in the whole world, we have not yet come out of it. I think we need a re-evaluation of capitalism and, in particular, for the banks to be placed under surveillance.

D. R.: At the end of your self-history essay which I have already referred to, you wrote that "l'historien ne maîtrisera jamais le futur, même s'il doit s'y préparer et y préparer les autres". In the light of everything you've just said, are you still convinced of this? And how do we prepare such a future?

J. Le G.: I am now more than ever convinced that no-one knows the future, including historians who, although we might call them specialists in time, cannot predict what is to come. Futurology was briefly a kind of false human science, but it contributes nothing to humanity. Nor do I think that there is any meaning to history, but there are clues, because history consists of creations and innovations based on heritage. We must therefore get ready to pass on inheritances to the men and women of the future, rich heritage, honest inheritances and, the most egalitarian possible. And, in particular, I believe that one of the activities destined to prepare a better future is the fight against poverty. I note with satisfaction that the latest statistics given by the international press show progress in this struggle against poverty.

D. R.: There is also a reflection to be made on the search for firmer moral and cultural basis for society, as well as on wich means and in which directions schools and the education of young citizens can be reorganised and improved, because I believe you still think there is something fundamental there.

J. Le G.: There's no doubt about that. School is something fundamental and we can easily also see that in countries we might call in inverted commas relatively backward, when schools do come into operation this ensures the basis of a better future as we see, for example, in Africa. Schooling must therefore make progress throughout the world, because it is the basic principle, together with a degree of economic growth and progress of democracy, for a better future. I repeat: the three bases of a better future seem to me to be the progress of democracy, the spread of schooling and economic growth.

D. R.: Economic growth however raises perhaps some problems of general principles. Can we think of a society founded on unlimited growth, where we continue to super-produce and super-consumer?

J. Le G.: First of all, I don't think we are in a society where we super-produce and super-consume, except perhaps in certain limited areas. The essential thing seems to me to equalise economic growth so the countries which are behind can catch up with the economically more developed countries. The expression "emerging" —emerging countries— and the reality of growth in these countries is also based on the increase in such economic growth. But for that to happen the essential thing is a reduction in inequalities. Just as in political and educational areas, equality in the field of economic growth is a necessity for the general progress of humanity.

D. R.: We could close this discussion here. I will however take the liberty of highlighting that, at the age of 90 and after going through and actively experiencing a long, very tumultuous and certainly not an easy period, you are, despite everything, prepared to end on a hopeful note.

J. Le G.: I'm an optimist, so I think that being hopeful almost forms part of the nature and of the destiny of humanity. I also see that there is some progress. One of these elements of progress particularly strikes me and that is the progress of Europe. Of course it is less than we might hope, but when the Nobel peace prize has come to reward the almost certainty that internal wars in Europe have been eradicated, I believe that the Nobel committee has noticed real and capital progress. I think, then, that hope is not only necessary, it is based on reality. However, we must not ignore the fact that there is still a considerable amount to be done. I repeat: there are problems of poverty that must still be reduced and war is sometimes almost endemic. When I look at a really warlike situation, like the one in Syria, or a situation I would call a "cold" —but worrying and unjust— conflict, such as, for example, the division between South Korea and North Korea, I think that there is still a great deal to be done and that the men and women of today and tomorrow must cultivate, promote and improve progress. They must also not only pay great attention to, but be ready to fight situations of injustice, turmoil and violence which are still too numerous and too serious in large parts of the world.