

The work of the historian: to research, summarize, and communicate¹

O trabalho do historiador: pesquisar, resumir, comunicar

El trabajo del historiador: buscar, resumir, comunicar

Le travail de l'historien: rechercher, résumer et documenter

Giovanni Levi

I would like to begin by explaining in what sense History is a science. It may seem childish to start by defining what History is, but I think it is essential to explain why 95% of jobs in the area are uninteresting and only 5% are interesting. That happens mostly because many people have a false idea of the sense in which history is a science. My definition is: history is the science of the general questions, but of the local responses. We cannot imagine a generalization in history that is valid. In other words, we can ask what fascism is, but there are different fascisms in Italy, Spain or Portugal. Therefore, we must preserve the peculiarities and the place — here understood as a specific situation — in the works of historians. To work on the general, but a general that is always set as questions, and not as answers.

Let me give an example that is not historiographical (but still useful). When Freud talks about the Oedipus complex, he poses a good general question: everyone has the Oedipus complex, but none of the complexes is generalizable. The fact that we all have the Oedipus complex tells us nothing. It is a relevant question, but it will have different answers for each of us.

The idea that we can generalize conclusions has produced a lot of bad history. For example, when we are writing a biography, we should not seek something typical. We cannot say the life of each of you is the typical life of young Brazilians the 21st century. That is not possible, because each life is a life. We cannot imagine the typicality of an era. Often, historians have made this fallacy: they set out from the idea that a life is typical of a circumstance, and this is false. Daniel Roche, a well-known French historian, wrote the

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biography of Jacques-Louis Menetra,² a master glassmaker who wrote an autobiography of 250 pages, absolutely wonderful, telling a hyperpersonal life, without anything typical. What does Daniel Roche do in his big introduction? He selects everything that he considered typical of master glassmakers of the 18th and 19th centuries. This is more than a fallacy. It is a useless procedure, because it means renouncing the practice of history as a science. History as science poses general questions that arise from the circumstance and should always have different answers.

A second feature of the historians' work is that this is done at three different stages. The first one is investigating. It is possible to spend years in the archives as many of you are doing, searching things, erratically, because the documentation is not organized by the historians. For a historian, it is a considerable amount of notes and information with many problems. Then, you should turn this into something communicable, which can be reported to the reader. And, before, it is necessary to summarize thousands of pages of notes, taken in files, in 200, 250 pages. There are three tasks: to research, to summarize, and to communicate.

The three stages of our professional activity involve major modifications. First, the work in the archives. I consider it is very similar to the work of anthropologists, because we are in an imaginary place, in a room of the archive where there are documents, in which we often do not find meaning. It is just as anthropologists do when they are in the field. At a given moment, the documents start to reveal some meaning. Like enlightenment, God or an angel says what it means. Therefore, the more interesting documents are not the ones that are everyday, banal, and evident to us, but those that say something that is immediately incomprehensible and mysterious to us, because they suggest alterity in comparison to what we study. However, at the same time, there is something we must interpret and find coherence with the other evident and banal documents, since they tend to anachronism, because we understand them just as if they were current documents. Before the "incomprehensible" document, we comprehend that there is something to be reorganized. This is similar to the work of anthropologists. They go to a Pacific island and spend days without knowing anything really. They look, listen and, at some point, start to notice the logics. But the logic must remain local and cannot be general.

There is a curious episode in the history of anthropology: Clifford Geertz, a great anthropologist, went to Bali and wrote a book on Balinese society;³ 20 years later, another anthropologist, Frederik Barth, went to the island and said that everything Geertz had written about the rules that organized Balinese society did not exist, that he had not found them. It might be that in 20 years everything has changed, says Barth ironically, but in fact those rules did not exist. Why? Because Geertz worked seeking the general rule of the place, while Barth was

²Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Jornal de ma vie*: Jacques-Louis Ménétra, compagnon vitrier au XVIII^e siècle. Edité par Daniel Roche, Paris, Montalba, 1982.

³Clifford Geertz, *A interpretação das culturas*, Rio de Janeiro, LTC, 1989.

seeking a dynamics, general questions that would produce local responses, which is what Barth has called generative models.⁴ General questions provoke endless answers, he said, and we should see something in the local situation that suggests a general generative question.

The second moment of the historian's work is to summarize. This is one of the most difficult tasks. There are books with thousands of totally useless pages, and I read little history. But, when I read, I know that the first two lines of each phrase say everything, and that it is useless to continue reading the other 50 lines. The historians' rhetoric is like this: "all men have two legs", and then: "Two legs can be understood as the instruments men use to walk...". In other words, we can finish a book in half an hour, reading only the first two lines, because there was no effort to find the essential. It is hard to find it. A personal episode. This morning I received an email about the translation of an article into French. The translator said he would suppress a sentence because it was difficult to translate and it was useless. In this case it was not, it was very useful, but it may be that we, historians, write many useless words. The effort should be to summarize until you can handle the material. And, by following this procedure, we produce a communication effort, because we must transform all

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the documents into something summarized that says the same things. We think, for example, that if we include all the documents that we have used in the work, we are less likely to be disputed, because the reader sees everything. Then, we create summaries, tables, graphs — things that try to condense the information. This compilation is the part where historians generally make the most fallacies. I think about the history called quantitative and know that, with percentages, we can show whatever we want, and we can manipulate the numbers as we please. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a period when quantitative history seemed more scientific. The numbers are more impressive, and, therefore, we sought to quantify things. The problem of history is not to quantify, but formalize, which is very different. It is to find a scientific way of communicating things and not turning everything into apparent positivist scientificity.

Finally, the communication, which is a very complicated thing, since is linked to the narrative. How can we tell our stories? Which techniques do we have to convince? Not in the negative sense, but to clearly state what we mean. There are many techniques. I will use as an example of someone who, to me, is a great writer before being a good historian, Carlo Ginzburg. He has the ability

⁴Fredrik Barth, *Balinese worlds*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993.

to say on page 200 what he meant. Generally, we say in the first line what we mean. “This book will demonstrate that ... etc.” Not Carlo Ginzburg. He guides the reader in 200, 250 pages through mysterious paths. You do not know where you are going. In the end, often, he says, “this was a path without meaning”. But, in the end, he reveals where he wants to lead us. I find this technique very persuasive. One of the reasons of Carlo Ginzburg’s success is his literary ability, his ability to convince, because the reader is already hypnotized when he arrives at page 200, in a maze and eager to know what will happen in the end. It is like a detective novel. It is no coincidence that often Ginzburg establishes connections between History and detective novels, because our research is, at many occasions, similar to the police investigation. We seek things without knowing who the killer is.

But there is a fundamental flaw in that. We, historians, always know who the murderer was before — not before we start our research, but before in time: we arrive later and know many of the consequences — we dedicate to the past and we already know the consequences. At many occasions, we risk discovering reasons that are not true. If we say “it rained for 15 days, so Berlusconi won the elections in Italy”, Berlusconi won the elections in Italy, but for another reason. Our selection of motivations is often only about good judgment, not actual causes, because we work at a time when the killer has already been revealed.

This problem of communication is critical, because it has generated all the discussion about the history and narrative debate. Hayden White is always mentioned as someone who denies the existence of the actual difference between the scientific activity of history and literature. There is a fundamental feature that makes all the difference between history and literature. The historians always write the same book. We write 50 books each year on Pedro II, Charles V, Philip II; it is a continuous rewriting, we seek something that always needs new explanations. But we cannot write many times *The Man without Qualities*, or *War and Peace*. Novels are unique. The histories are repeated *ad infinitum*.

This does not mean that there is no truth in Literature. There is a literary truth that is different from the historical truth. While the latter has the bond of documentation, literary truth is connected to understanding the described world. However, it is not the same thing, because we always write the same book. What does it mean to write the same book? Why write the same book? Because the historical truth is always partial. We cannot say who Carlos V is. It is impossible. We can get close to the truth. Our job is always to work on partial truths. The fact that each year 50 books about Carlos V may appear does not mean that 49 are stupid and one is clever. It means that each book seeks a new perspective on him.

I will use an example about the History of Judaism. The Jews — I’m Jewish — cannot say that God exists. Because the God of the Jews is very nervous. If you say God exists, someone says how “can we make sense of the existence of God”. He is incomprehensible to humans. There are men, and we can understand the existence of men, but the existence of God is impossible to define. However,

the duty of men is to work constantly on the search for the understanding of God's existence. This is somewhat the activity of historians. We cannot say: "Carlos V was like this". We can always dedicate to Carlos V, discovering a truth that will always be different from the one we could qualify as definitive. This is the nature of historians' communication. We always work on something that one cannot say unquestionably, that one cannot solve definitively.

These three stages are very important as different activities. The fact that historians write books, often boring ones, indicates that we do not think about the reader. This is crucial, because we should think about the reader. Generally, historians work imagining as readers their colleagues, the other historians. It is a very collectivistic writing. We write for our corporation, and a corporation is always more fragile, for reasons we will discuss later. This produces books that cannot be read, which are boring, have no audience, or have an audience of 50 people. In other words, these books do not have the opportunity to speak to a different audience other than professionals of historiography. One can also think of a single writer. For example, Stendhal used to say "When I write I think of four people". But it is crucial to think about the reader when you write. Ginzburg, who is a close friend of mine, told me at some point: "you write for 50 people, I write for 15,000". I found this argument interesting, because I thought "I probably write for 50 people. I will try to write for more". However, it is important to know that identifying the specific audience is not only about quantity, but the audience's nature. For us, it is necessary to know who we write for. For example, in the book that André⁵ asked me to sign, I wrote: "for my children, who are only two". But the problem was that, when I read the book to my youngest son, he said "this is a book that may only be of interest to physicians". After that, I spent a year at Princeton and rewrote it so that it would not be only for doctors. At the end, the book had some success. It is essential, when we write, to know who will be the potential reader, 1 or 15,000. But of course there is much academic pressure to write for academics. The saddest example, I think, is the United States today, where young historians are obliged to write according to the latest trend. Every three or four years in the United States someone says, "we should do cultural history" and everyone should study cultural history so they won't be unemployed. It is not interesting for universities to hire people who do not practice cultural history. After that, they say we should do history of slavery or history of emotions. Perfect! Everyone writes about it. That seems very impressive to me. Certainly, there is the advantage of producing sparkling debate on a specific field of research, but, at the same time, it produces much conformism. I had a brilliant student — I think today she is a teacher at a prestigious American university — who wrote a very successful book. When I read it, it seemed banal. Why? It was a good book, but similar to many others I had read. She was fashionable, one might say. I think this kind of academic pressure produces a fatal degradation

⁵One of the students who approached the table, before the beginning of the lesson, asking him to sign his copy of *A herança imaterial*.

in historiography, a very limited ability to speak to a different audience. My student's book had 600 copies, because they make editions of 600 copies of all important American academic works, but unsalable to 600 American libraries that buy the books. This is automatic. The price is set on 600 and, therefore, they are very expensive. Fifty more copies are printed for gifting. The cost of these books is 120 to 150 euros. Those books are solid, but meant for local corporate readers. Other books are completely different. Many times, a book published in a 600-copy edition, if it is very successful, will be published in a more economical format.

But, in general, the academic books are produced for academics. This is a real tragedy. Why is this tragedy? Because the historians have lost their role. We no longer have the central role that history had in the past. History's great triumph was the 19th century, when nation-states were created. The historiography had the role of speaking to the nation, of saying things that were interesting to everyone. Why? Because the historians had a political role. "We must build a historical mythology, a national mythology." This produced the great historic literature of the 19th century. Nowadays, the issue is not very interesting. For example, I think about the historiography of the Palestinians; it is a very weak historiography, but a very interesting one. The Palestinians have the problem of the creation of a Palestinian

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state and the need to say that they were a nation before the creation of the State of Israel. They must show that the Palestinian people were not part of the Syrian people, or part of the Arab people, but rather a specific people. Thus, Palestinian historians seek the fragments of a Palestinian nationalism in the late 19th century to prove their nationality was not born as a result of the conflict with Israel or the conflict of non-acceptance of the other Arab countries, but by being a specific people. The political significance of this is the idea that a nation-state should be created considering its tradition, its large internal cultural tradition and not its contingent tradition linked to other countries. For example, Rashid Khalidi,⁶ the best Palestinian historian, who works at Harvard, dedicates a lot to Filistin magazine, the magazine of the Philistines and Palestinians, as an important sign of the birth of the nation-state. It is a cultural magazine that must have had a small elite readership, I imagine, in the late 19th century.

Until the mid-20th century, history was the science of sciences; social science of social sciences. That was the reason for the success of Braudel,

⁶Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian identity. The construction of modern national consciousness*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997.

for instance. Today, when we speak of Braudel, it is almost like talking about the Bible, a difficult book to read today, but that once was very successful; a book that sold millions of copies, translated to every possible language. Today that does not happen. Why? Because, after the 1950s, history started to be done outside the books. The book stopped being the exclusive instrument of communication, of historiographic research and communication. Other media were born, which were more effective because they had a larger audience. Reading a book has become increasingly rare, and even more a history book. Television has produced a huge audience. It has attracted a different attention. We take four years to write a book, sell a thousand copies when we have a huge success, and the TV speaks in little time of historical facts and has millions of viewers. This has produced a historic sense that is different from before. We have a sense of history that is different from when the book was the center of historiographical communication. Why different? Because our profession is characterized by something absurd: we do things slowly and in a complex way. "Why make things simple if we can make them complicated?," asked Jacques Revel in the introduction to the French translation of *Herança imaterial*. The television, however, is all about simplicity and speed. Things must be immediately comprehensible, even when they are not true. For example, Hitler is like Stalin. This is something that, if we say to an audience of non-specialists, they will think that Hitler was like Stalin. In fact, both were very wicked, but very different, and the historian's work is to say in what sense Hitler is different from Stalin. The work television does is to say Hitler is like Stalin. There are some simplifications, slogans that gradually penetrate into people's heads, like "Communism equals Fascism". In Italy, it is heard quite often. Simplicity and speed against complexity and slowness. This, I believe is the great anthropological transformation that historiography has had over the past 60 years. Our role has changed. That is why we have become so alienated. We no longer hold the politically relevant role we had before.

What has that caused? It caused what is called historical revisionism. In other words, the successful books are those that arouse controversy. If we write a book saying that Napoleon was homosexual, it will sell millions. Recently, in Italy, there was a bestselling book about Primo Levi (1919-1987), a prominent historian who wrote about the *shoah*. Then, a young historian wrote a book stating that Primo Levi participated in the execution of a "partisan", which is not true, but it was a scandal. All the newspapers talked about it, and the book had great editorial success. Why has this type of thing been so important in historiography to its scientific validity? There are more important causes, and also the audience are miseducated about historical knowledge. Historical knowledge has entered the common sense not as a complexity, but as simplification. In this, we can introduce all forms of scandal. There are more important reasons, as I have said, such as postmodernism. We must keep in mind that we work in a time when the role of the historian is much reduced. There is an audience with a very different sense of history from the one that existed 30, 40, 50 years ago.

With that, I close the first part of my presentation. Does anyone have questions?

Student: You said that we should not look for something typical, but understand the specificity of the biography. My question is how to articulate a biography with the collective without looking for the typical?

Giovanni Levi: For me, it is evident that a typical biography does not work, because we are all different. This is interesting. There are limits to our ability to know people, to write a biography, but the typicality trend has produced what? In general, it has produced biographical coherences, the idea that our life is coherent. We know that is not true. Our life is not coherent. We have several different types of contradictions ... In verbalizing, we transform our emotions... our intuitions into words, and we cut things, simplifying them to obtain the consistency and linearity of the biography. The real problem is how can we prevent this? Dilthey, a German philosopher, said no one can imagine people's emotions, impressions, if they have not had, somehow, an objective manifestation. We work on documents and on people only when there is something said, something evident, but what goes on in people's heads not even those people know. But we have the impression that something different, not coherent, is missing. Moreover, we have a double life: if we are conscious, we have a life. When we sleep and dream, we have another life. Our unconscious suggests things we prefer not to turn into words. The difficulty of writing a biography is exactly this: to avoid typicality, coherences and linearities. The real problem is always having to say everything and, at the same time, knowing that people's lives are a mystery that we can only approach, but not resolve. We cannot know everything. Knowing this, maybe we can write an interesting biography. I think this has been much debated, especially in literature. I mention Schwob,⁷ the writer of *Vidas breves*, or something like that. In ten lines, he tried to define the character. Another person who worked on this was George Winfried Sebald, a German writer already deceased and very popular in the recent debate. He worked on tiny fragments. In his book, *Os Emigrantes*,⁸ he talks about missing people who left behind fragments: a photo, the place they were in, a letter, anything. I think this is very important: talking to the reader, requesting his senses. Why? Because history is not done with documents; I want to say that the documents are liars because they are always partial. They are always produced in acts of decision and action. But men are made of things that are neither decisions nor actions in 90% of their lives. That is why I have mentioned Schwob and Sebald, since they seek to work on something that does not give information, that gives little information, because it is our, we cannot say imagination, but our effort to understand through fragments that benefits more the comprehension than the quantity of documents.

I finished an article about a person named Giorgio Cardoso.⁹ I know very little of him, but I have caused a controversy among those who dedicate to

⁷Marcel Schwob, *Vidas imaginarias*. Estudio preliminar y traducción de Julio Pérez Millán. Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1980.

⁸Winfried George Sebald, *Os emigrantes*: quatro narrativas longas, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2002.

⁹Giorgio Cardoso, "Intimidade marrane", *Penser/Rever*, n. 25, 2014, p. 103-113.

inquisitorial acts. In general, these are wonderful documents because they give a lot of information to historians, but are not all external documents. The result is that the Marranos and Moriscos tried by the Inquisition are always treated considering their alterity; at the end, you get the impression that they used their possibility to be Muslim, Jewish and Catholic, depending on the occasion, creating an image that does not reveal the personal tragedy of these lives. The book from Garcia-Arenal, which is about a family of Marranos, is a very interesting work, more interesting than the books from Nathan Wachtel¹⁰ It suggests that they were taking advantage of their Marrano condition. On the contrary, the problem is tragedy. Then, in the life of Cardoso, which I studied, I knew only one thing, something of his family upbringing. In his family, Judaism was practiced secretly. I know nothing more, I just imagine. Then, after becoming an adult, he remained sympathetic to his family, which appeared very Catholic to others, but practiced Judaism secretly. When his father died, his uncle and tutor decided to make him a monk, a servita priest, and he changed names, no longer being called Giorgio Cardoso to be known as Friar Francisco. They have spent a lot of money buying clothes, images, but on the day that he was supposed to enter the convent, he disappeared. The uncle wrote in the book of accounts of the family: "I have paid 36 ducats to Giorgio who is not called Friar Francisco anymore because he fled". That is all I knew about him. But I was intrigued by the mystery of this life. I thought about how his private life worked, his private life as a child, when he probably was a Jew at home and a Catholic outside at the same time. His private life and the privacy of his family. A young man who was supposedly was very Jewish at home and very Catholic on the street. I thought about his life when he escaped and sought other intimacy, probably the intimacy of the others in the nation, when he fled seeking others who had the same condition, let us say.

Now I think that few documents make us think. That is what we should do, because it allows us to ask general questions for other cases. We should not work on what we see; there lies the problem of the intimacies of the characters that had been tried by the inquisition. I do not know if this example is demonstrative, but I think it suggests doubts about the documents, about the excess of documents.

Student: My question is about the three steps you described of the historian's work. About the phenomenon that Kant called *a priori* imagination, and later Humboldt called "historical imagination", then Collingwood called "the idea of history", and, more recently, Hayden White called "meta-story", this sort of anticipation that happens in the historian's head before he starts to work. In your opinion, does this happen in a separate stage of the historian's work? Or is it a phenomenon attached to all these phases you described, or yet a phenomenon that has no place in your definition of History as a science?

¹⁰Mercedes García-Arenal; Gerard Albert Wieggers, *Un hombre en tres mundos*. Samuel Pallache, un judío marroquí en la Europa protestante y en la católica, 2. ed. corregida y aumentada, Madrid, Siglo XXI, 2007.

Giovanni Levi: Historians have an ongoing imagination because they are not neutral. They are like the anthropologists, who have ideas when they go the field, but these ideas should be elastic and flexible, because we have many enemies. The main enemy is the anachronism. We must explain in our words, only transforming our questions to ourselves into general questions, into questions to others, but without making them equal to us. This is evident when we work on the past, even if very recent. For example, the relationships between parents and children have changed much over the past 30 years. So we cannot explain the relationships of parents and children from 30 years ago with our autobiography, but we can ask what has changed. But, automatically, we bring our culture, our sensibility. We do this when we work on archives, especially when we encounter difficulty in dealing with documents, with what we find incomprehensible. This is an automatic shock against our culture, our sensibility, so our fantasy begins to work, often without immediate results, but we know that there is something we do not know how to explain. It is the same thing when we summarize and when we write. This always exists, our personality. I do not believe in a neutral historian that knows nothing and only listens to documents. One should listen knowing that that he must renounce much of himself, of his ideas and information. One must seek new information, without anachronisms. Your question involves a general assessment. You have used the word fantasy, and I think this is the problem of historians. Historians should have a lot of fantasy because they have an essential hidden enemy: the documents, which are always false for two reasons. First, the documents are always partial. Also, if we have piles of documents about something, we only have fragments — a lot of fragments. The documents suggest we know what is necessary to know, but lie by their partiality. Always! The second reason is that the documents are produced when there is action and decision; otherwise, why make them? All notarial documents — which are the most interesting source for historians — are inscribed in action and decision. We make wills, dowries, buying and selling, loans, things that are actions, but much is missing. It is important for the historian and his fantasy to read between the lines of the document. For example, in wills, witnesses who are generally not used are interesting. For dowries, there are also witnesses. In there, lies indirect information that often says a lot, for example, about the relational world where an action occurred. This is the first flaw of sources: the partiality of their creation. The Greeks, for example, in the 1980s, by the decision of parliament, burned all the documents of the civil war, of the dictatorship in the years 1935 to 1948. They decided it would be better for the pacification of Greek society if this period of increased conflict, of massacre of nearly a million people in the Civil War was deleted from the official records. Now, must we forgo the writing about the history of the Greek civil war? No! There are always fragments, diaries, documents from other countries, letters, personal documents that have not been burned. We have lots of information, but we do not have the documents that the State produced, we only have the public and private documents that were not

burned. Then, we must write the history of the Greek civil war also without the apparent totality of documentation that would be available. The second consequence is this. I think historians are less insightful when they work with contemporary issues. Fans of the contemporary, I am sorry. Why? They are mules, not in the physical or psychic senses, but as a condition. Because they have too much documents and deal with multiple documents. Then, we have the modernists, a little smarter, but also with a lot of documents. Later, the ones who study the Middle Ages, which are very intelligent, and, at the end, the most intelligent ones are the pre-historiologists, who have small fragments, but use their brain more than the documents. On the contrary, we, the modernists, use the brain more than the documents, and the historians of the contemporary use only the documentation. This is a tragedy, a paradox, but I think this issue of our relationship with the documents needs to abandon the fetishism of documentation. We should use a lot of fantasy in our work. Not inventing things, nor creating false documents, but seeing what is in the fragments we have, which questions they suggest us.

If we have a skull of a Neanderthal, that is a document to ask many questions. If we have ten skulls of Neanderthals, the yield is already decreasing. If we have 10,000, then, the yield of the latter is zero. I think that is the main problem. The essential is not the amount of documentation. If we think of who is the greatest historian of the 20th century, I would say Marc Bloch, a medievalist. Who is the greatest expert on contemporary history of the 20th century? Karl Polanyi, an anthropologist, not a historian. In fact, there is a problem and I think it is the suffocating amount of documentation.

Student: You spoke of the good judgment the historian must have to find the right “motivations” to the studied facts. My question is how to find the good judgment?

Giovanni Levi: Yes, it is not simple, because good judgment is not of easy measurement, but, effectively, many times there are explanations that lack good judgment. I mean, before this lecture I was talking to Veronica about one of the dramatic problems of the recent American historiography... I read two books that discussed European issues, books written by Americans who only quoted works in English. In one of them, a gentleman wrote a fierce review in the *Journal of Economy History*, saying, “Braudel wrote the book about the Mediterranean in the 16th century. Now I will write about the 17th century”. And he wrote about the Mediterranean, without mentioning a single book that was not in English. The result was that he quoted books by historians of other nationalities, but only if they were translated into English.¹¹ The other one, which I am reading now, is a book against Guha, the great Indian historian of the Subaltern Study Group. We will talk about this later.¹² It also discusses a lot the fact that, according to Guha (as I will explain later) France

¹¹Faruk Tabak, *The warning of the Mediterranean, 1550-1870: a geo-historical approach*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

¹²Vivek Chibber, *Post-colonial theory and the specter of capital*, London; New York, Verso, 2013.

and England have built a modern state, and India has not, for fundamental reasons of how their bourgeois revolutions occurred. He mentions France a lot in his book, but everything he wrote about the French organization is based on American books. Now, this is a use of “bad” judgment, there will be only two winners: American imperialism, “what we do is enough”, and, secondly, the American publishers that translated books of French historians, but only the ones translated by some editors. This is how the editor who chooses the books we read or not is constituted. This is a true paradox now, a very important clue to the fact that, in the end, there is no good judgment, but interpreted causalities. In the case of the second book, in a very political way, in the negative sense, they say that Europe did not have a bourgeois revolution, but India did have, and that there is no difference between India, England, and France, which is stupid. But what is the causality in this sense? It is a causality that comes from the adopted bibliography and of a mindset... I am not entering a controversy about American imperialism, but about their cultural imperialism. They think that it is sufficient to read only what they produce. This is a fatal danger. I have not been to the United States for many years because I do not want them investigating my passport, but it is true that, gradually, the American historiography has closed itself in a totalitarian margin, and that is very sad. In my generation, people were told they could not, that it was not legitimate to study Morocco without knowing how to speak Arabic. You could not study the Balkans without understanding the Slavic languages. That does not happen now! We have everything translated into English. And the paradox is that there is a note in this book about the Subaltern Studies that says: “So far, this book has not been translated into English and I cannot quote it”, like that, so shamelessly. It is not a good answer to your question, but it is the best I can do.

Regarding what I said before about the crisis of historiography, there is a fundamental problem, which is that not all social science marches at the same speed. I think a lot of this is caused by the corporate organization of the academies, and by the historians working among themselves, as well as the economists and anthropologists. The opinion of Karl Marx was that social science is one, and I think that is true. We propose some problem and it should be viewed with all the possibilities. We cannot say that here our responsibility as historians ends here, and now the economists can take over. It cannot work like this. We cannot know everything, but we have to know something. We must know that the result is the different pace of development of the social sciences. The second consequence is that we, if we use also dilettante readings from other social sciences, can find very important questions for ourselves. One of the classes that I will teach will be about the absence of Psychoanalysis in History, of the questions of Psychoanalysis, and not its interpretations. But what is the suggestion of Psychoanalysis that historians should also ask, but do not? We will talk about this and about temporality later. What I mean is that a different pace has caused other social sciences to ask fundamental questions that we did not find important.

One example is economics. Economics is very ignorant, and the economists are generally very ignorant about history, but they have a major crisis that would also be very interesting for us. They have constructed themselves as a fairly exact science, and constituted imagining that men are all roughly equal in their utilities, in their rational behaviors. In general, they always say that all have the same desires, the same uses, because you cannot construct a science if men act differently regarding behavior over markets etc. You must find a consistency of will. Men are equal. In general, the whole classical theory, and the economic theory, was created on the idea that there is a behavioral homogeneity among people. This enables the formulation of laws of consumption, the functioning of markets etc. Over the past 50 years, economists have realized something fatal: that people are different. Speaking like this, it seems banal that we should ask ourselves how to build a theory, a science considering that people are different. We must begin to cope with these differences. Starting from Simon¹³ and continuing with Tversky,¹⁴ Kahneman...¹⁵ and recent Nobel prize winner... the economists have destroyed economics and began to work on the rationality of people. If we imagine homogeneity in rationality among men, we do science.

*The historical knowledge has entered the
common sense not as complexity,
but as simplification. In this, we can
introduce all forms of scandal*

But what if people's rationality is not homogeneous? Simon started by saying that people are different for many reasons, but, in the economic field, this happens because they have different pieces of information. That was a great revolution both in economic theory and in other social sciences. They have different information and, therefore, we cannot imagine they would have the same market behavior. There is a gap of information that emerged with the great development of information science, which is exactly why there are different pieces of information. But, gradually, economists began to think that maybe people's rationality is not homogeneous, that they react in different ways, and have different wills and different brain formations. Not that there are stupid and smart, but there are people sensitive to some things, and insensitive to others and vice versa.

The entire economic science today is discussing the theory of rationality. It is very interesting, but also incomprehensible for us who are not economists. But it does suggest things. It is better to read a book by Daniel Kahneman

¹³Herbert Alexander Simon, *Models of discovery*, Dordrecht, D. Meidel Publishing Compagny, 1977.

¹⁴Psychologist and mathematician. He published studies in partnership with Daniel Kahneman.

¹⁵Daniel Kahneman is a psychologist. He is also a theorist in behavioral finance. Professor at Princeton University. Winner of the Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel in 2002.

than not reading it, although not all of it is “understandable”¹⁶. Simon is also useful to read, because we can see if our characters respond to the plurality of motivations as his. It is true and, at the same time, is not! Our characters have a homogeneous rationality. This is a tragedy for historiography. An interesting research would be about how historians interpret the psychological behaviors in their books. I have tried, but my psychologist was too petulant, and we did not conclude the research. The idea was to take several history books and find psychological explanations used by historians. Great books, to see how they explain the behaviors. I suggest a research about this because it is tragic. We think that men are puppets because we imagine them with a trivial rationality. I remember a great teacher, and a great historian, called Franco Venturi, said: “Franco Genovesi is a lawyer because his father was a lawyer”. This is not a good explanation, we can say. I am a historian and my father was an engineer. We should see, indeed, how we use psychology in our historiographical interpretations. Economists have done it by destroying economics. Few sciences are like economics in this deep but vital crisis that exists today, but the possibility we have of progress is huge, since we have not yet started in this field of people’s rationality.

Before we spoke of biography; the novelists write biographies that are much more real than ours. The link to the documentation makes our characters less emotionally interesting than fictional ones. We must ask ourselves why. For me, a wonderful book is *The Man without Qualities*, by Musil.¹⁷ To read about the contradiction of the protagonist, who keeps questioning himself over the opposites of the same things. Or Mrs. Dalloway, by Virginia Woolf. She is sitting on a bench in a public garden and thinking. Our characters cannot think, but we should think that our characters were able to think and about how many lies we introduce to oversimplify the biographies we write. Another delay: when I was at Princeton, I used to live on Einstein Street, in the corner with Von Neumann Street, because Einstein had lived in a house in that street, and Von Neumann, in another. Von Neumann was a great mathematician and he used to say that the mathematics of the 20th century is the mathematics of qualities, not quantities. He talked about this already in the 1930s, while historians thought, as we discussed before, that the quantity was more scientific and better. Only recently, historians have begun to study the relationships, the quality, as being more important than the quantities, as in the example of the people. The relational world, much studied in Anthropology, and also, but less so, in Sociology. I do not speak of Sociology because a great ethno-historian, John Murra, said: “we are neither friends nor colleagues of sociologists”. So, I think that sociologists are very different from us. The anthropologists, who are most interesting for our research, have in fact questioned themselves about very interesting problems that we, historians, have not examined. They were the

¹⁶Consult, among others, Daniel Kahneman, *Rápido e devagar: duas formas de pensar*, Rio de Janeiro, Objetiva, 2011.

¹⁷Robert Musil, *O homem sem qualidades*, Rio de Janeiro, Nova Fronteira, 1989.

ones who introduced, with violence, let us say like an epidemic, the “network analysis”. Why? Because, in fact, we are defined by our relational world, not only because we are determined by our family, by our parents, but also because our differences stem from the world, from how we organize our relationship world. For example, Boissevain, a Canadian anthropologist who dedicated himself to Malta, a small island in the Mediterranean,¹⁸ discovered an amazing thing: the miners of Malta — a small island with very limited jobs — had 1,500 different relationships per year; their network, their relationships network, was made of 1,500 people. Mine is modest, of 4,000 people. Every year, I meet and exchange information with 4,000 people. This is very important because we can also imagine the ancient world. In the ancient world, one of the terms the Church imposed to allow inbreeding was the relational weakness. It was said that someone should marry a cousin since, in his or her village, if there were no more people from the same social level with whom he or she could marry. Hence, cousins were allowed to get married. This is very interesting, because there is a huge difference between our society, which is very open, and the society of the ancient world, in which everyone knew everyone else, but in small areas. We do not know hardly anyone in huge areas. We know a lot of people, we are determined. This changes the mental structure and the meaning itself of people. Anthropologists such as Clyde Mitchell, Kapferer, and Van Velsen, a whole group that worked in Manchester, students of Max Gluckman, tried to invent rules to prove the social significance of different social networks, to discover, for example, if there was a way to make a political propaganda. They researched how areas of people shift for electoral events. Others, like Elisabeth Bott — who worked in England — tried to study the differences in social networks between couples of factory workers and couples of employees.¹⁹ Elisabeth Bott concluded, in a very interesting study, although statistically weak — because she worked with about 30 families —, that in families of English factory workers very common relationships between man and woman and very dense networks were found. Families often attended the same people in a very supportive group. And, in families of employees, from middle class, the opposite happened: men and women had many different and wide relationships, less repeated and dense. All these things are very important for historians, but difficult to use.

For instance, we have done an experiment with Venice, where we had a Senate with a thousand senators, all aristocrats. A small state with many aristocrats. When a senator died, someone else was nominated. We knew all the results of elections of the 15th century until the late 17th century, each of the nominations. Analyzing the thousand aristocrats and their relational networks, we could predict who will be elected. I do not know if that is clear. We know which were the networks and sources that chose, so, for a space

¹⁸Jeremy Boissevain, “Factions, parties, and politics in a Maltese village”, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 66, 1964, p. 1275-1287.

¹⁹Elisabeth Bott, *Family and social network*. Roles, norms, and external relationships in ordinary urban families, London, Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, 1957.

to be filled or something to be replaced, it is possible to guess with almost 100% certainty the results by a study of networks. And this can be used for many things, because the networks are socially very different. Doctors today have different networks from teachers, for example. A study published in France analyzed teachers and doctors in Rio de Janeiro, Moscow, Paris and Rome for 15 days. The study addressed the questions: who did the doctors and teachers attend in these countries? Which were their inter-relational networks? You can see different strategies for relationship building. Well, I have said that because historians until now use very little of this. It was important to end the blindness to the problem of networks, not of the quantities, but this problem of networks is used by us mostly metaphorically. We speak of networks, but they can be analyzed based on their characteristics, density, morphology and so on.

“How many steps are necessary to relate to someone?” I used to have a colleague who had lunch every Thursday with Pope John Paul II. Then, I wondered how many steps one should follow to do this? Now, the distances are measurable and very relevant because all the patronage and hierarchical forms are problems of differences of steps toward the center. The Cardinal De Luca is

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a cardinal not connected with John Paul II because he is from the 17th century, beginning of the 18th, and is a genius. He was the one who wrote 18 huge folios about everything a historian needs to know about ecclesiastical politics. If you look up Muslims in volume 18, let us say, he tells you there everything the papacy decided on Muslims. It is an essential instrument for historians. The Cardinal De Luca said: “How is honor judged in our society?” — the Old Regime — “It is judged according to the distance from the center”. He said that society is like an egg, the center is in the middle, and people are at different distances from the center of this egg. The closer people are to the place of central power, the more honored they will be and may have, for example, prestige or higher wages.

I will mention another case I find wonderful. Another Catholic lawyer of the 17th century, who was not a cardinal, wrote a very important book on wages. He questioned how to calculate the salary of a doctor. We cannot pay a doctor because he understands about life and death. One cannot pay for that, but we can pay him according to his honor, the distance from the center or distance in the social hierarchy. And he concludes by saying: “that is why the wages of a doctor are called honorariums”. So it is like we say today, “honorariums”. You can pay for different levels of people’s honor. All this shows that these studies about networks and the distances of power, the density and shape of networks etc. are a very useful theme as topics of social history, not only of the

social history that we do. But we are far behind in this regard and we could keep talking about it, but it is just to say that the distance we have from other social sciences involves delays, and means we are encapsulated into something that does not communicate with the other sciences. It is not our error; it is an error of God, the government, the academic or corporate authorities. But we can rebel and read these books.

I think the more interesting books for the historian are not history books but novels, if we read them as historians. They suggest general questions that we did not believe we were not able to think of. Therefore, the other sciences are essential. Later, not today, I will give an example of a more paradoxical science: psychoanalysis in history, about the conception of time that historians have and suggestions that psychoanalysis can give us about that.

Verónica Secreto: I would like to return to the question of rationality because I think is a very present issue in our historiography. We went from a historiography that gave no rationality to subaltern subjects to, at least here in Brazil, a historiography that, in the 1980s, chose an absolute rationality, including the idea that the individuals are fully informed. The individual has information about the laws, the breaches of the law, how to correlate. For example, the historiography of slavery thought the slave with a contemporary rationality, a rationality close to ours, Cartesian. Somehow, the idea that individuals are always in search of freedom permeates the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality, the conquest of freedom, in the sense that we understand it. So, this question has caught my attention enough. You could link the issue of rationality with the economy.

Giovanni Levi: Yes, historians, such as Edward Thompson, have discussed the issue of rationality. What does Thompson say in his famous article on the riots in England?²⁰ He says they were not irrational riots, but rational riots that followed a rationality inspired by a dead society, which was the medieval rationality, with a reference to scholastic philosophy. Everyone has the right to get their bread, and riots destroyed the bakeries, stole from them, but they were riots that caused the free delivery of bread against the speculation bakers and sellers of wheat. That is because Thompson can imagine a different rationality, but that is different from what Veronica meant, I think. It is the idea that there are different logics that belong to different social strata or societies. It is something that the Nobel Prize winner in Economics, Amartya Sen,²¹ said: we must build an economic theory that takes into account European values, for example, and Indian values, which are different. It is something that historians have used a lot. For example, everyone who used the theories of Chayanov,²² explaining how the economic logic of a peasant is very different from that of a factory worker. So, there were, especially after World War II, a lot of studies on the dual societies, because they were not

²⁰Edward Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century", *Past and Present*, vol. 50, 1971, p. 76-136.

²¹Amartya Sen, *Inequality reexamined*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992.

²²Alexander V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, Homewood, Irwin, 1966.

dual societies only in their development, but also dual in the economic logic. The problem was in the relationship between the two societies. Bumke, who is an economist that studied Indonesia, using Chayanov, to discover what was the relationship between the rural and urban worlds, and the colonial and peasant worlds, with the idea of dual reading. That was also very much used by anthropologists and historians. For example, many of those who have studied the economies of American Indians also used Chayanov as one of the models of reading. What was the maximum difference between the two logics? One was the logic of the prominence of use value, and the other was the logic of the prominence of exchange value, in the sense that, for example, if you need something, the price is determined by your personal need, and, if you do not need it, you can sell it in a non-market price, according to the use the product has for you. The purchase of land between two different economic logics, for example, has also been studied deeply. If two peasants have a small family and a lot of land, they can sell whatever is left over for next to nothing, but, if the family is larger than their land, they may pay too much for the land they want to buy. It is almost as if each exchange represented the entire market. There is not a relationship between all lands, but rather a fundamental idea of value. I think it is very interesting to understand not only the society of the past but also the current one, for many reasons. If we consider the housework today, we can see that it is always evaluated with a use value rather than an exchange value. There is work measured with use value and with exchange value. This is different from rationality, since we do not have different rationalities if we are peasants or factory workers. In other words, within social groups, there are different behaviors, and that is why it is difficult to construct an economic theory, because it is also a historical and social theory. Because everyone reacts differently.

We, historians, see the results and they seem to suggest homogeneities, because, in the end, the result is one. It reminds me of War and Peace but that reminds me of War and Peace, by Tolstoy, which is a good example, or The Red and the Black, by Stendhal. There is a totality of inconsistencies that produce consistency in the end, but we cannot explain them as if their origin was a single cause. It is a multiplicity that produces something unpredictable at the end, but, for us, historians, it is predictable because we work already knowing who the killer is. They produce a consistency through the multitude of inconsistencies, but these inconsistencies are also very interesting. They are a fundamental historical problem that we cannot transform into a simple process of cause and effect. We should see it as an effect that was produced in a manner impossible to predict. That is the real problem: history is not consistent. It has inconsistencies that we should try to preserve. To conclude, I must tell a personal story. For many years, I have been writing a book about consumption. My interest in consumption is the idea that, in the Old Regime, people consumed differently, even within their own family. Today, we also do this. We differentiate among children, but we always think that we treat them equally, when in fact, we spend more with a son and favor him, usually the

less intelligent, because the intelligent ones usually get to do what they want. But we think that the children are equal and, therefore, consumption is equal, but it is a lie. In the past, it was structural that consumption should be different, because it was a society without a welfare state, without any protection. So if a cobbler had three children, he could not have three cobbler children but three children with different activities, trying to save their solidarity, but in different ways, because it was a restricted and small job market. I have been working for years with this problem of the fundamental difference between consumptions and I will never finish it. I hope my children throw out my stuff when I die. I discuss a lot with economists, because economists today work on rationality, and my question was: are some apparent distortions that exist in the mercantile system of the Old Regime a product of the Old Regime or of the men's brains, of the men's rationality? Is it like what we have today or not? We must conduct experiments and research, but economists are far behind in this. They have a good development of the problem, but the experiments in the laboratory are bad. They conduct investigations like: "How do people react to an advertisement?" or is saying "to live in it" better than "live in it" and things like that. They are very small experiments, because only some

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of them are sensitive to a formulation of an advertisement and others are sensitive to other formulations. As a laboratory, they seek the best way to create a propaganda that is easy to be memorized. Those are things that are too small for now. They are works about the rationality of men, about how much consciousness and unconsciousness is used in the normal economic activity, but these are fragments. For us, historians, the problem is more complex, because we need to find, for example, if there is a specific characterization of the overall economic system, or a specific characterization of human brain functioning. But I think the problem in itself is fascinating. How did the rationality of the past work? I think, at a certain point, economists will be able to let me make a final observation on each chapter in which I describe experiments, how the consumption differs within the family. The economists have debated a lot about an important and interesting problem also in regard to the past. To which degree our economic assets, our wealth, are produced by us or by previous generations? How much of the money we spend in our lives comes from the previous generation? There was a big debate, where Modigliani, another Nobel Prize winner, stated that we produce 80% and inherit 20%. On the other hand, Summers, a candidate for the American Central Bank before the other candidate won, stated the opposite: "We produce

20% and inherit 80%". But this is also a good question for historians: how is the relationship between generations, the economic relationship between generations? Often, economists and especially sociologists study wealth as something that we produce, but there is a difference between two factory workers, if one inherits his father's house and the other does not. The salaries of the parents have a completely different meaning. The social condition of both is completely different, and that is why much of what we question in regard to the automatic solidarities within the same professional status is false because the factory workers are not equal. Later, we will talk about it, because a discussion about this is one of the reasons for the birth of micro-history. If we consider that the factory workers are automatically left-wing, it is a failure. It would be the failure of the left in the world to think there is an automatic solidarity. We should also work with the differences, not only of rationality but also of social and psychological conditions within the working and social conditions, because there is a clear hierarchy.

If there are no more questions, we can conclude for today and continue at our next class.