

Towards a methodology of historical research

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Abstract:

The research methods used in studying history have for a long time been a debate issue among the adepts of different thinking schools. From the use of typology, or models, to comparative strategy and quantitative ones, the researchers tried to discover which is the best manner in which to probe the depths of human history and civilization, or if objectivity and subjectivity are the appropriate terms for evaluating these methods. The comparison with the techniques used by other socio-humanist sciences, like sociology, ethnology or pedagogy, may shed more light on the research issues.

Key words: *investigation methods, typology, comparative method, quantitative investigation, theory vs. empiric*

The debate concerning the methodology of historic research is long and may be approached from various and even extreme perspectives. Some historians may begin their discourse by enouncing what history *is not* or *does not*. History is not a science because it doesn't have a method, but implies the use of an ensemble of research methods, versus history is a science and it is very useful to discover this thing because the notion is a precise one and experience taught us that carelessness in debates over words is generally accompanied by confusions regarding the notions and the concepts.

History does not explain anything and doesn't speak about "what it is not to be seen again twice". It does not mean to pretend that it is subjectivity, perspective, that we inquire the past starting from our own values, that the

historical facts are not things, that man must be understood and not explained and therefore about him there can be no science (Veyne, 1999, 5-6). There is an endless mass of facts, from the appearance of man, but this mass is not inert, it has some sort of latent life, its consequences appearing all over the planet. If we would return to the source, they would appear amplified, but the manner in which we perceive the past modifies and can be permanently discussed. A definitive vision about the past is thus impossible, no matter of the scientific approach, same as any other attempt to write a definitive history on any subject from any period of time (Djuvara, 1997, p. 7). C. Geertz defined the concept of culture as being essentially of semiotic nature so if we would consider, along with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in its own significations webs in which he himself tangled, then the *culture* would be those webs, and their analysis shouldn't be an experimental science in search of laws, but an *interpretative* one in search of *significations* (Geertz, 1973, 5; Idem, 1995).

Because the *object of history* consists in events which took place only once, the control modality of the science is extremely difficult. In the case of other sciences (*natural sciences*), the truth is detached from the conscience which elaborated it because, in a way, is eternal (Aron, 1997, 20). Things are different with the *reconstruction of history*. Raymond Aron defined, in the current of *critic philosophy of history*, the *historical relativism*, which attracted the protests of all the professional historians, because it invoked the imperfection of the observer and of his research means, against which we may object that *relativism* does not reside in the *research method*, but rather in the *object of study*, in the *history matter* which is in permanent transformation – the present continuously creates the past (Djuvara, 2004, 6; Aron, 1997, 20).

Each epoch should visit the figures of the past, with its own understanding and research means, with its own sets of problems and inevitable questions. The already given answers cannot be of much help, the task of the historian not being necessarily that to find out what it was said, but how to approach it in a new, specific and necessary manner for the respective epoch. The researchers

place the accent on the *objectivity* with which they approach the subject, although we might argue that *objectivity* is only the incapacity to be subjective without altering the truth. Speaking about the people and the things from the past with today's vocabulary is committing an error from the beginning to the end. "For my part, I wish I had a more «poetic» talent, in order to be close to the truth." (Iorga, 1968, 5)

Because of this *too large liberty*, historians don't do *typology* with great pleasure. As soon as they gather several events, according to a *criteria*, they feel compelled to add that there are other aspects of these same events which does not correspond to these criteria, a fact that seems to go without saying. Do we find, therefore, a *lot of typology* in the historical research?

Sciences like medicine, physics or botanic can describe a certain type on several pages. "Two corn poppies or two chicken poxes are more alike than two wars or two despotisms" (Veyne, 1999, 158). We cannot deny the fact that there are *repetitive schemes and typologies*, because man is an imitating animal led by instinct and because *action* itself has a mysterious logic. A *model* can be defined as an *intellectual construct* which synthetize reality with the purpose of better understanding it (Burke, 1993, 28). It wouldn't be inaccurate to say that historians, with all their devotion for detail and particular, use *models* and *types* all the time, the two concepts appearing rather synonymous: where sociologists speak about "models", Max Weber mentions "ideal-types" (Weber, 2003).

In practice, although all historians deny the fact that they use types and models, they do just that without acknowledging it. For instance, they make general assertions regarding particular societies. For more than a century it was hard to avoid general terms like *feudalism* or *capitalism*, *Renaissance*, or *Enlightenment*, the researchers actually trying to make generalizations regarding institutional changes between neighboring states in a certain period of time. From a *comparative perspective*, all these changes seem local changes of the transition stadiums from the *government type* that Weber called "*patrimonial*" to the "*bureucratic*" type. Weber's distinction inspired a true *direction of*

historical research for the most various and remote historical spaces (Weber, 2003).

Therefore, the researcher may use this *method of historical investigation*. This means that he may imagine the conditions of what really happened, configuration which may rely on a vast historical culture, or on the use of the *comparative method*. The use of the category is better known under the name of “comparative history”, namely the desire to *push knowledge beyond the factual limits* which usually satisfy a traditional type history. The *comparative method* may be prolific, but not in the reconstruction of details. Some *collective representations and mentalities* are always similar at a large number of populations; they seem symptomatic for certain stages of civilization and seem to vary with them (Bloch, 1997, 38). For other societies, like the Romanian one, they are not historically attested, which doesn't mean that they are missing. *Compared sociology* can help us reconstruct them with a high dose of probability.

In this methodological context, historic research may be applied by appealing to certain concepts like the one of “*mentality*”. It is a concept which appears in the works of the historians who desire to surpass the documents' limits and barriers. “Always behind mentalities hide those «*profound issues*» which seem to exert a dull seduction over the spirit”. It intervenes with nuances, without pushing history towards psychoanalysis. Practically, it remains “one of those *vague concepts* which helped history surpass the limits and the barriers, to move forward towards another direction, further on, towards the inner heart of the phenomena, people and historic societies” (Bloch, 1997, XXIII). But *the history of mentality* has the duty to explain this authentic tonality, achievable with instruments which are specific for the epoch scientific erudition.

The aforementioned *comparison*, played an important role in the *social theory*. Durkheim asserts even that *comparative sociology* is not a special branch of sociology, but it's the sociology itself. Against the *classical objection that history approaches the study of particular*, asserted by numerous

practitioners of the profession, have brought arguments, from Weber and Durkheim, numerous historians, starting with Marc Bloch and Otto Hintze: it is because of the comparison method that we may see what it is not there, in other words to understand *the significance* of a specific absence (Bloch, 1997).

After World War Two, the *comparative studies* gained amplitude, with the appearance of other disciplines like *economy, compared literature* or *compared politics*. Although numerous historians remained skeptical regarding this *method*, it was proved that it can be extremely useful in *historical sections* which demands *theorizing*. At least in social history, the comparative study inspired by Marc Bloch continues to flourish, parallel with the debate concerning the utility of *theory* and practice and of the interdependence or the hiatus between them. It is provocative subject for the *education sciences epistemology*, for *the history of pedagogical thinking* and of school / university *institutions*.

Of course there are also dangers in using this *method*. The first danger is accepting too easily the idea that *societies evolve in an inevitable succession of stadiums*; an example is represented by the *comparative method*, proposed by Marx, Spencer or Durkheim, oriented towards the identification of the *stage* which a certain society had reached. In this case the solution is the effectuation of *comparative analysis* which to consider the different paths on which the respective society may travel. The second danger which must be mentioned is that of *ethnocentrism* and of the attempt to frame forcefully the history of certain peoples in occidental patterns (Burke, 1993, 26). Of course, these warnings are not unique.

The quantitative research methods have also a long history, but what is relatively new and for the time being debated, is the idea that they may be useful in studying the human forms of behavior and attitudes. For instance the sociologists develop what they call *inquiries* by applying questionnaires or developing interviews in groups of people which are large enough for the results to be analyzed statistically. The psychologists also use questionnaires

and interviews. Demographers study the variations in the rate of birth, marriages and deceases in different societies. Several historians begun to step on this path, *the generalizing of the use of personal computers encouraging the use of quantitative methods in historical research.*

There are many such methods, some of them fitting more than others at the researched object. Either it is about “*history in series*” or *sampling*, like in the case of the *industrial societies*, the methods seem to evidence elements that other strategies do not indicate. The *conclusions* of these historians are often presented under the form of “models” which can be tested by means of the *computer simulations* (see the demographic, economic etc. history etc.). Without these *methods* certain *types of history* would be impossible, expressions like “more or less” becoming all the more rare. They are still far from being indisputable. In the 50’s and the 60’s , their adepts used them with great confidence, criticizing all the other approaches in research, using a scientific language and sustaining that historians have no choice but to learn, for instance, *statistics*. Gradually, the *limits* of the different *quantitative methods* became more and more obvious.

First of all they are not as objective as it had been assumed – *social classes*, for instance, are not as objective as the various *types of plants*. Secondly, how could we *measure change*, if the *measurement instrument* changes itself? From these raisons and not only, in the last decades appeared *a reaction at using the quantitative methods in research*, although their intensity must not be exaggerated. The use of *prosopography*, or the investigation of the common characteristics of a historical group, by the historians, is probably more popular than ever. In the same time it was felt the need to search for *alternative methods*, this being partly the raison why *ethnography*, at which the use of quantitative methods was always minimal, became a model that some sociologists and historians seek to follow.

Beginning with the 70’s, following the model of *social anthropology*, the sociologists begun to pay greater attention to the *micro-social analysis*, and the

historians to *micro-history*. The most representative examples are two famous studies of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou* and Carlo Ginzburg, *The cheese and the worms*, extreme cases of *micro-historical research*, but after which appeared an entire avalanche of such studies. Curiously, few debates were heard concerning the passage from *large scale history*, the *Annales School* type, to *small scale history*. At first sight, *micro-histories* try to *trivialize* history by studying events of unimportant people or small communities. Their *purpose* is none the less *more ambitious than that*. They do not seek to show the world of a grain of sand, but these historians, like Ginzburg, draw *general conclusions* starting from *particular facts* (Ginzburg, 2012, 193-5).

We may conclude that along time historians found *theory* useful in different ways, while others manifested a strong resistance to the idea in itself. We must stress that *the difference between theory and empiric* does not mean a *distinction between history and sociology or pedagogy* or other fields like *anthropology*. It is ironic that, for instance, the Marxists, were discussing theoretically even when they were complaining about “the poverty of theory” (Burke, 1993, 1). Therefore, in all the situations we foresee, indirectly if not directly, the necessity of discovering (or, at least of searching) the way towards *a methodology of historical research*.

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