

## Notes on *reporting* in the relation between past and present

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The concept of “reporting” does not seem to be one of the most commonly used in traditional historiographic analyses. However, if we look more deeply into the aspects connected to it, it may emerge more clearly that both the links between the various human disciplines, as well as the very concept of “reporting”, are far more common in the historian’s work than one usually tends to think. In this article I will try to explain the main tools, problems and analyses characterising the historian’s work with reference to this kind of problem. I will try to offer some general ideas before focusing on some aspects that I feel are more significant.

Two opposing pairs may help us get into the topic. The first is that of present and past. When we approach a problem that is typical of historical knowledge, the first point that cannot be ignored is the type of construction we can establish between these two terms. The present and the past are actually two extremes that are not at all definite and objective. Generally, we try to identify the present and the past because we need to select and establish the boundaries around possible fields of intervention. However, both present and past are difficult to select in an objective, neutral way. By defining our present, that is, our being in the present today, and presenting a past that we want to think about – the French Revolution or the Congress of Vienna rather than the Algerian crisis or the Six Day war – we make a selection in a field, in a file, in that infinite computer memory which is the past. Looking backwards, however, we find a vast range of possible information but above all of possible ways that this information can be put together and organised.

Around this dialectic there is another, far more pressing and far more important, between the subjectivity of the person trying to make this kind of observation and the presence of traces of the past – it would be a monumental error to say ‘objectivity’ – the way this manifests its permanence over a longer time. The subjectivity of the present can only be the subjectivity of the historian. This is an issue on which historiography has formed and expressed different viewpoints, different themes and also different meanings. Some historians tend to foreground the subjectivity of the historian, that is, his ability or inability to look at the traces left by the past with the passing of time. The question that then springs to mind is how can we, with what tools, dynamics or approaches, measure our relationship with the past; with this question we are faced with a seeming contradiction between the narrowing/expansion of temporal space. Actually it is we ourselves that define the perimeters and boundaries within which we want to look at the past. This is true even when the object of study may appear, in a superficial analysis, to be already defined in its essence, in its force, in its capacity to “tell about itself”. By applying the historian’s method and tools to the study of the question, we realise that it tends to lose its “self-telling” force.

Let us look at an example. The peace treaties after the first world war might seem to leave room for a construction tied to an established version. In other words, what the five treaties were, how they developed from the point of view of European geography, which countries were involved, etc. These are all basic things, which must be known. However, even behind the expression of a stage in contemporary history that may appear so clear in its formulation, there actually emerges the dialectic between present and past and between the subjectivity of the person telling the story and the traces of this presumed objectivity of the fact of being told and being able to be told in a brief space, as a response to a single cause, direct, immediate, with no question marks and no problems.

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The very terms “subject” and “object” are also relative. When I say subject I must necessarily place it in space and time. Am I talking about a historian in 2008 or in 1992 or at the end of the 1600s? The subjects that are evaluated by the past are incomparably different, even with the same past. The history of historiography is not only an analysis of the steps of this infinite, uninterrupted process of knowledge-getting, and therefore of continual discoveries that can be stabilised and questioned. It is also – I would say above all – a continuous changing of the subject of the knowledge due to the changes in tools, approaches and languages.

The awareness of the complexity of these two opposing pairs enables us to focus on some more specific problems. I would like to concentrate on three in particular. I am talking about problems and not progress made, precisely because they are questions that one kind of historiography, more interested in problematisation, continues to think about with increasing interest. These three elements are held together by a very brief premise: the idea that today in complex contemporary societies, there seems, perhaps paradoxically, to be too much history. In our country, on various occasions history has risked losing its cultural and scientific configuration. Too often, doubt is cast on history's capacity to read the dynamics and transformations of the present compared to what came before. The most interesting and most painful thing to say is that this does not happen due to an marginalization of history, of its disappearance or re-proportioning. Suffice it to see how much history is present in the new three-year degree courses, or again how often history is talked about in the media, in newspapers, in information programmes, etc. The risk however is that of not realising that an excess of bad history that does not respond to the scientific interpretative canons typical of the historian's craft, risks pushing into the background the progress made, the findings that critical historical culture had laboriously confirmed in the decades behind us.

An excess of history is often transformed into an excessive use of memory, which in turn tends to be considered a substitute for history. This is a very clear mechanism, in my view, in the dynamics of the public relationship of our country with its past; very often we witness the search for something that is impossible from the historical point of view, namely shared memory. In other words, memory that can bring together everything and its opposite. This is at the expense of the only terrain that could constitute the sharing of a process and an identity. I am referring for instance to the debate over the war of liberation. Memories of the two years from 1943 to 1945 were, are and will remain divided. Each of us will be able to choose the one he identifies with or feels is closer to his own problems today, or a space from a memory that can illuminate the present better. This issue cannot be solved either through politics or the media. The memories of a period remain as sediment in a different space, each in its own irreducibility. The history of those two years on the other hand – this is the point that we risk not facing – is, and must increasingly become, a terrain on which the different memories should be placed and rooted. We, on the other hand, witness an excess of bad history that loses sight of its ultimate reasons for being: the need to make an effort to facilitate the understanding of the past, instead of giving simplifying, univocal answers.

This “bad history” also risks affecting the dialectic relationship between past and present, as well as the subject-object relationship. We therefore risk producing a situation in which, in the space of less than half a century, from Croce to today, we pass from a conception of history as the “high road” for considering the past and constructing a connection between one's own individuality and freedom, to a diametrically opposed excess bringing problems and contradictions in which history, in the sense of historical culture, can again be challenged. This happens because history runs the increasing risk of being transformed from its *raison d'être* to the advantage of a series of modernisations that lead to the problems and complexity of history itself being pushed aside.

If this is the premise, the first of the three elements I mentioned concerns the need to rethink the *forma mentis* that often pushes us to look to the past in order to find solutions or prescriptions for present-day problems. One often looks to the past because it is believed that some things must not be repeated: the conception of history as a teacher of life. Until we complete this impossible quest, the hope that the past will provide us with the remedy for almost everything around us – which is precisely what leads to the bad simplification I referred to earlier – we will not be to bring the dialectic between knowledge-getting subject

and object potentially to be known, back to its more appropriate form. However, the problematisation of the present/past node is difficult to sustain and explain in a heated debate confined to – returning to the earlier example on the war of liberation – wanting for instance to reconstruct the number of victims on one side or the other of the Italian civil war, for the political purposes of the present.

The second element. The way of looking at the past arises from the demands formed in the present. The historian starts from his questions, from his subjectivity, from his own culture. Observing the traces of this process also means showing – and on this point Bloch has written some enlightening pages – the traces of a process leading to one conclusion rather than another; above all showing how the process was constructed. It shows which traces of the past, when placed in the present space and time using the historian's tools, languages and methodologies, can enable us to reach a conclusion, to dialogue with other interpretations, to offer a new interpretation that can go beyond, hold together, or contradict. This is nearly always an uninterrupted process; not a port of call, but a journey which never stops.

The third aspect concerns the transformation of the tools used for working. Until a few years ago, historians approached the study of the past with a set of tools that was always subject to the problems I referred to earlier but that had its direction, its reference points, its availability. History, especially contemporary history, is subject to a quantitative abuse of tools, languages, forms that inevitably, and I believe rightly, have challenged some of the findings, forms and methods used until a few generations ago to approach the delimitation of an object of the past. I am referring for instance to the need, which has always been found in the great historians but that I believe has become something deserving greater attention today, to define the boundary and the viewpoint very precisely. This is because I think that one of the dangers of the bad history I referred to earlier is the tendency to generalisation, to the possibility of thinking about everything and the opposite of everything, thus overshadowing the need to return to the documentation and the archive. It is precisely because documents are complicated and have to be placed in space and time that they are so much more necessary.

From another point of view, I think that there is increasing importance in the fact that contemporary history in particular requires a methodology of languages, tools, forms that are beyond those of the state-nation on which also the great historiographies constructed their main boundaries of reference. Let us think of the use of comparison in history. When we deal with questions connected to comparison, of the relation between external and internal, of the constraints between national and international, these do not concern only the managerial class, but society as a whole, the cultural models and lifestyles as a whole. The tools of a historian, I mean the great historians – I mean for instance Federico, who more than any others in Italy made some important steps ahead on questions of national and international history – belong to a process of construction, of strengthening of a clearly marked perimeter which is the nation. How much have these approaches changed in recent years? And how much should we therefore update our tools of analysis? This is an issue that is still open, and which actually presents more problems than answers. I think this is the terrain on which in the coming years, in the next generations, there will be challenges to produce good history. If we accept this terrain – personally, for those involved in history I can see no others – all the arguments that are used in support of a different approach and also a different role for the historian, collapse. The idea that there is a problem of nearness to or distance from the object being studied, that there is a hierarchy of sources and viewpoints, some acceptable and interpretable, and others not so; the idea that there is a distant past and a past that is too near to be considered past, all this is brought back into question by the assumption that the problem lies in applying a method for which one assumes the individual and collective responsibility for the historical research.

The current debate has brought to light the problem connected to the users' demand and to the usability of history. First of all, I wish to make it clear that the subjectivity of the historical

approach entails two sub-constraints: first of all the scholar must clearly state the problem he/she intends to deal with: secondly, the identification of the problem must be presented in its research dimension, specifying the pathway to be taken, which traces of the relationship with the past will be used. On the other hand there is always the risk that a history closely tied to its scientific status risks at best marginalization, and at worst, solitude. Usability is therefore a very important question. In Italy we pay for a doubly negative identity: on the one hand the extreme interpretation of the Crociani tradition which we often refer to; on the other, the small daily polemic about a false distinction between history as divulgation and history as scientific-academic knowledge. It is as if these two lines of looking at the past could go in a separate and non-contiguous form. As if professional historians dealt with the second aspect, that is, with their research, and there were another figure, mid-way between a historian, a journalist, an opinion-maker and a publisher who enjoys himself, as part of his experience, spreading historical knowledge. But dissemination is not only the spreading of facts, it is in itself a form of interpretation of the facts themselves. In Italy non-professional historians have often written books not to talk to their country, but to the assembled listeners. Hence the considerations about memory mentioned earlier. In this way there is often the tendency to use a simplifying shortcut, with a different kind of usability, and it is here that the question of the users' demand is relevant: when the role of the historian and the individual and collective responsibility assumed by the historian before the scientific community and before the community itself, is pushed into the background. When the personality and figure of the historian lose their function of responsibility, then I believe that both the issue of the users' demand, and the issue of responsibility can appear in forms that go beyond the intentions of the person proposing them, because they themselves somehow become arguments and parts of other discourses, of other constructions. But these products lose the capacity to make their mark in the transmission of culture and therefore in conveying the relationship with the past.

In this paper, I have deliberately not used the word "reporting" because I could not say with any degree of certainty whether or not historians use it constantly. I would like to conclude by recalling some pages of Eric Hobsbawm's book: *Age of Extremes – the short twentieth century*. This is the fourth book of a study starting further back, and it opens with the words: "While when I was talking about the 1848 revolutions I had a distant time and space, when talking about the rise of Nazism I saw myself as a child, with my mother". This seems to me a clear example of how the measurement of the distance from a thing, and the awareness of this measurement, is fundamental in allowing the historian to relate to the period he is talking about. The fact that an interpretative thesis can be verified and supported, the fact that everybody can go and "compare the papers" and the interpretations, is already a relationship for us. It is a relationship of subject and object at the same time. A text or a document are not measured by their distance or nearness to the subject. Their validity in the perspective of an interpretation we give, depends on what we want to try to make a document say, above all on the kind of questions we ask ourselves when we open up a site of historiographic research and reflection. The space of the distinction between narrative truth and historical truth is that of the degree to which interpretations, judgements and conclusions are verifiable. Pietro Scoppola's posthumous book, published recently, *Un cattolico a modo suo [A Catholic in his own way]*, deals with this problem. When asked about this issue Scoppola answers, "I approached history thinking that I could seek truths through history, but actually the more time passed, the more I realised that there were fewer truths and more problems, fewer certainties and more doubts".

At bottom, history is the search for an identity. And the historian's search for an identity also involves the capacity to assume a responsibility towards others. Perhaps the term "relation", which we often refer to, might find in this distinction between the historian's function and other possible variations a further complication

## References

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