

Sabina Loriga, «Biographical and Historical Writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries».  
*Transitions to Modernity Colloquium.*  
The MacMillan Center, Yale University, 02/18/2008.

## I.

For a long time, historians believed that their task was to snatch human actions from oblivion<sup>1</sup>. That idea was rooted in an immortal image of Nature – being eternal, natural elements didn't need memory to continue existing; but human beings, marked by mortality («we pass it all by like an exchange of breath»..., wrote Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>2</sup>), can become almost the same as nature because of History. From this perspective, the historical writing ought to focus on the great actions and works of which mortals are capable – those terrifying creations that Sophocles talked about<sup>3</sup>.

Things have changed in the last two hundred years. After the end of the eighteenth century, historians put the actions and suffering of individuals on one side to try to discover the invisible process of universal history, «that evolutionary movement of our genre, which should be considered as its true content, as its centre and its essence.»<sup>4</sup> There are various reasons which led historians to ignore individual human beings and pass from a plural history (*die Geschichten*) to single history (*die Geschichte*)<sup>5</sup>. Two difficult surprises of modernity have, without doubt, weighed on this. On one hand, there was the discovery that nature is also mortal and, on the other, the progressive loss of trust in the ability of our senses to grasp the truth (from the time of Copernicus, science has done nothing other than show us the limits of direct observation)<sup>6</sup>. But, alongside these profound transformations, which go well beyond our conscious attitudes and, for certain aspects, elude us, some less tragic, or even banal, intellectual vicissitudes have perhaps influenced us. First of all, the hope of giving stable and objective scientific bases to social sciences and humanities. This aspiration mobilized an immense effort across disparate disciplines (from demography to psychology, history, sociology, and more) to highlight uniformity and eliminate idiosyncrasies from humanistic and social scientific models of interpretation and comparison.

This tendency to make the past uniform has had serious consequences. Hannah Arendt spoke about it in a letter dated 4 March 1951 to Karl Jaspers. Returning, once more, to the political and social tragedies of the twentieth century, she wrote that modern thought had lost the taste for difference: «What radical evil really is I don't know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. François Châtelet, *La naissance de l'histoire*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien*, Wiesbaden, Erschienen im Insel, 1950, *Duino Elegies*, Portland, Oregon, Breitenbush Books, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Hannah Arendt, *The Modern Concept of History* (1958), in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Penguin Books, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (1910), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Stuttgart/Göttingen, Teubner/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, vol. VII, hrsg von Bernard Groethuysen.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1979, chapter 4°.

<sup>6</sup> On the awareness of the vulnerability of nature, cfr. also Hans Jonas, *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, Chicago, The University Chicago Press, 1974.

superfluous (...). This happens as soon as all unpredictability – which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity – is eliminated.» Then she clarifies: «I suspect that philosophy is not altogether innocent in this fine how-do-you-do. Not, of course, in the sense that Hitler had anything to do with Plato. (...) Instead, perhaps in the sense that Western philosophy has never had a clear concept of what constitutes the political, and couldn't have one, because it spoke of man the individual and dealt with the fact of plurality tangentially.»<sup>7</sup>

Evidently, in addition to philosophy, loss of plurality also concerned history. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, history books were full of facts without protagonists. They talked about powers, nations, peoples, alliances, and interest groups but only rarely of human beings<sup>8</sup>. As the German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger (an author who has always been particularly attentive to the past) guessed, the language of history started to hide individuals behind impersonal categories: «History is shown without a subject, the people whom history is concerned with only appear as accessory figures, like a scenic background, as a dark mass in the background of the picture. There is talk of 'the unemployed' or 'businessmen'... Even the so-called makers of history appear to be lifeless: «The fate of the others – those whose destiny doesn't make news – is avenged on their luck. They're stiffened like mannequins and resemble the wooden figures which, in De Chirico's paintings, take the place of men.»<sup>9</sup>

The ethical and political price of this desertification of the past is very high. As Isaiah Berlin wrote, at the time we discard personal reasons, «Alexander, Caesar, Attila, Mohammed, Cromwell and Hitler are like floods and earthquakes, sunsets, oceans and mountains; we may admire or fear them, welcome or curse them, but to denounce or extol their acts is as sensible as addressing sermons to a tree.» I believe that Berlin's words are extremely important and current. They show how the danger of relativism, which corrodes the principle of individual responsibility, is not an exclusive feature of so-called post-modern historiography, inspired by Nietzsche, but is also innate in an impersonal reading of history which describes reality through anonymous relationships of power. To quote again Berlin, «to blame and praise, consider possible alternative courses of action, accuse or defend historical figures for acting as they do or did, becomes an absurd activity. Admiration and contempt for this or that individual may indeed continue, but it becomes akin to aesthetic judgment. We can eulogize or denounce, feel love or hatred, satisfaction and shame, but we can neither blame nor justify.»<sup>10</sup>

## II.

How and when did this sacrifice of the individual dimension occur? The border separating history and biography has always been uncertain and anything but peaceful. In the Attic period, Thucydides expressed absolute contempt towards biography. There is little space for a narrative genre which tries to captivate a popular public in his programme of precise, impersonal, and universal historiography. Two centuries later, Polibius wrote that biographical history, founded on the means of tragic theatre, created confusion between poetry and history. His considerations were part of a much wider discussion that took place in Greek historiography and which opposed the ideal of the *true* to that of the appearance of

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Briefwechsel 1926-69*, München, Piper, 1985, eng. transl. *Correspondance 1926-1969*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jonovich Publishers, 1992, pp. 165-166.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Philip Pomper, «Historians and Individual Agency», *History and Theory*, 1996, 35, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, «Letteratura come storiografia», *Il Menabò*, 1966, IX, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, «Historical Inevitability» (1953), in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969.

truth (*verisimilem*), the latter being pursued by the Sophist Gorgias. Unlike the affirmations of some historians of the fourth and third centuries BC (such as Philarcus or Durydes of Samos), who aimed careful to make history into drama, by looking for an accurate representation (*mimesis*), the story dramatic, to look for the mimesis, Polybius meant to establish and hand down the objective truth<sup>11</sup>.

The distinction between history and biography is sometimes also reiterated from the other side of the barricade by those who write biographies. In the Imperial Age, Plutarch displayed little interest in structural factors and claimed the primacy of the signs of the soul over political etiology: «It is the life of Alexander the king, and of Caesar, who overthrew Pompey, that I am writing in this book, and the multitude of the deeds to be treated is so great that I shall make no other preface than to entreat my readers, in case I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men, nor even speak exhaustively at all in each particular case, but in epitome for the most part, not to complain. For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles when thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the *signs of the soul* in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.»<sup>12</sup>

The words of the ancients have had alternating fortune with early modern historians. In 1599, John Hayward, the so-called English Tacitus, expressed his diffidence towards biography in his *Life and reigne of King Henrie III*, and advised not to confuse «the government of mighty states» with «the lives and acts of famous men.»<sup>13</sup> A century later, Thomas Burnet, William III's chaplain, attributed great importance to history but only recognized an accessory, ornamental value to biographical reflection: «the lives of the philosophers, the births, deaths, praise, travels, good or bad actions and things of that nature integrate and beautify the subject but are of minor importance as the seeds and progress of human knowledge and the government of Providence are sought in this part.»<sup>14</sup> However, not everyone accepted the separation between biography and history proclaimed by Polibius. In the eighth century, the Venerable Bede stated that biography was nothing more than history seen from a closer point of view. In the early modern period, the main paleography, diplomacy, and historiography manuals (from Jean Bodin to Agostino Mascardi and Gabriel Mably) considered biography a legitimate form of historical writing. In the seventeenth century, Thomas Stanley, the English philologist famous for his critical edition of Aeschylus's tragedies, defined the biography of legislators, *condottieri*, and sages as the highest form of history<sup>15</sup>. That the individual destiny of illustrious men makes the choices of a nation intelligible was also a widely shared opinion in the following century. David Hume was convinced that the spiritual nature of Charles I was fatal for the absolutist cause in England. And several decades later, Voltaire wound his historical narration around Louis XIV, Charles XII of Sweden, «excessively great, unfortunate and mad», and the glorious adversary of

<sup>11</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, Camb. Mass., Harvard University Press, 1971.

<sup>12</sup> Plutarch, *Greek Lives*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. John Garraty, *The Nature of Biography*, London, Knopf, 1957., p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Mario Longo, *Historiae philosophiae philosophica. Teorie e metodi della storia della filosofia tra Seicento e Settecento*, Milano, IPL, 1986, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> On Mediaeval and Renaissance historiography, cfr. Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship. Language, Law and History in the French Renaissance*, New York-London, Columbia University Press, 1970; Denis Hay, *Annalists and Historians. Western Historiography from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Centuries*, London, Methuen & Co., 1977.

Poltava, Peter the Great. Unlike many of his successors, Voltaire didn't celebrate any cult of heroes but he was convinced that through great souls we can gain access to the surprises of history, that is, those unexpected occurrences that are so essential to the broad picture when «the *verosimile* doesn't always occur.» Thus in the pictures of Géricault or David, only the hero's face, hewn by the anonymous madman who lives in background, expresse the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age<sup>16</sup>.

In sum, for centuries the border between biography and history was contested, until it became the focal point of several intellectual conflicts precisely at the moment when historical thought and writing touched its apex. In what follows, I would like to examine two key moments of this battle over the border between history and biography. The first dates to the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries and is especially linked to the impact and success of philosophical history. The second lies at the heart of modern historiography and coincides with the divorce of social history from political history, which occurred in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In both cases, totality became the explanatory category of becoming<sup>17</sup>.

### III.

From what I said so far it should be clear that the first push toward the annihilation of the individual came from philosophy. In his short essay on the finality of history, written in 1784, Immanuel Kant portrayed man as a means through which nature achieves its ends, and stated that history must raise itself above the individual and think on a grand scale, as what appears confused and irregular in individuals is a succession of unitary and systematic events in the totality of the species: «Individual men and even entire nations little imagine that, while they are pursuing their own ends, each in his own way and often in opposition to others, they are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature. They are unconsciously promoting an end which, even if they knew what it was, would scarcely arouse their interest.»<sup>18</sup> With the rise of a providential vision of history, biography became even more marginal. After reiterating the a priori unity of history, Fichte denied the independent value of the individual in the face of the universal – only the progress of the life of the species counted, «that of individuals in no way». Hegel also felt that the concreteness of existence should be sacrificed to the *Welt-plan* – individuals are a superfluous mass which must not dim those things worthy of history. When the events of the world, even the most distant or aberrant, are dialectically integrated into an eschatological horizon (the infinite and necessary development of human kind), individuals (even the great historical figures, which coincide with the universal superior, like Caesar or Napoleon, immortalized on the Jena battlefield) appear as instruments of reason which accomplish a plan that they don't even understand: «The aim that world-historical individuals are unconsciously driving at is not what they are consciously planning but what they must will, out of an urge which seems to be blind and yet has a wider perspective than personal interest. Hence such men achieve, with an instinctive comprehension, that which is intended with them. They act historically by being acted upon by the power and cunning of reason (*List der Vernunft*), which is to Hegel a rational

<sup>16</sup> On Enlightenment historiography, cfr. Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (1936), Munich, R. Oldenbourg, 1965, chaps. 4° and 5°.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Judith Schläger, *Les métaphores de l'organisme*, Paris, Vrin, 1971.

<sup>18</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in welt-bürgerlicher Absicht* (1784), in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin, 1902, engl. transl., «Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose», in *Political Writings*, Camb., Camb. Univ. Press, 1991. On the peculiarity of Kantian finalism, cfr. Ludwig Landgrebe, *Phänomenologie und Geschichte*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1968, Chap. 3°.

expression of divine providence.»<sup>19</sup> As Karl Löwith noted, Marxism did not break with classical German philosophy on this point, «since Marx himself had already settled his accounts with the ‘German ideology’ of post-Hegelian philosophy, he felt confident in anticipating the future philosophy which realizes the unity of reason and reality, of essence and existence, as it was postulated by Hegel.»<sup>20</sup>

In this providential conception of becoming, according to which humanity will achieve its superior aims by passing through a gradual but necessary arduous path, the individual remains completely crushed by the law --a dramatic and implacable law which is immune from accidents. The oblivion of the person almost always coincides with the denial of the hazard or, at least, with its partial reduction. For example, the outcome of the battle of Waterloo was certainly conditioned by the torrential rain which fell during the night of 17/18 June 1815, but those drops of water were sent by the god of History..... Victor Hugo poetically expressed this type of providential wait. After recounting that Oliver Cromwell wanted to leave for Jamaica and Honoré Gabriel Mirabeau for The Netherlands, but that both were stopped by the prohibition of the king, he commented: «or, ôtez Cromwell de la révolution d’Angleterre, ôtez Mirabeau de la révolution de France, vous ôtez peut-être des deux révolutions, deux échafauds. Qui sait si la Jamaïque n’eut pas sauvé Charles Ier, et Batavia Louis XVI? Mais non, c’est le roi d’Angleterre qui veut garder Cromwell; c’est le roi de France qui veut garder Mirabeau. Quand un roi est condamné à mort, la providence lui bande les yeux.» In other words, the hand of God can always be found behind each event: «Eh! Qui ne sent que dans ce tumulte et dans cette tempête, au milieu de ce combat de tous les systèmes et de toutes les ambitions qui fait tant de fumée et tant de poussière, sous ce voile qui cache encore aux yeux la statue sociale et providentielle à peine ébauchée, derrière ce nuage de théories, de passions, de chimères, qui se croisent, se heurtent, et s’entre-dévoient dans l’espèce de jour brumeux qu’elles déchirent de leurs éclairs, à travers ce bruit de la parole humaine qui parle à la fois toutes les langues par toutes les bouches, sous ce violent tourbillon de choses, d’hommes et d’idées qu’on appelle le dix-neuvième siècle, quelque chose de grand s’accomplit! Dieu reste calme et fait son œuvre.»<sup>21</sup>

#### IV.

Many historians in the nineteenth century began to react against this providential and teleological conception of the philosophy of history. Particular notable is Wilhelm Humboldt who, in two essays on universal history of 1814 and 1818, and in his famous speech of 1821 on the task of the historian, rebuked the philosophical systems of Fichte and Hegel, but also that of Kant, for being founded on an abstract image of Man which aims «to reduce the apparently casual and dispersed events of the world to a single point of view and deduce one from the other on the basis of the principle of necessity.»<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Humboldt advocated a sort of physics of history which is heedful of men as rational beings but also as sensitive ones.

Certainly, Humboldt recognized the uniform elements recalled by Kant. Individual human beings, particularly when they act globally as a mass, conform to a certain uniformity. It follows that nature also conditions the moral character of a person. If we examine

<sup>19</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1949, pp. 55-56.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Victor Hugo, *Sur Mirabeau* (1834), in Victor Hugo, *Littérature et Philosophie mêlées*, Edition critique établie par Anthony R.W. James, t. II, Paris, Editions Klincksieck, 1976, pp. 285, 331.

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte* (1814), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin, Behr’s Verlag, 1904, Band 3°, pp. 350 sgg.

apparently fortuitous events in series – such as weddings, deaths, illegitimate births or crimes – we find a surprising regularity that can only be explained by the fact that there is a natural component in men's actions, and this component is manifested cyclically, according to uniform laws. However, history is not just a product of nature; it is also dominated by the creative force of human personality: the individual cannot be explained «on the basis of one of the influences suffered (it is rather the reaction of individuality which determines these last)»<sup>23</sup>. In other words, human actions always modify nature, even if in unknown and unexpected ways. All that's needed is for a strong spirit, more or less consciously dominated by a great idea, to meditate on a susceptible material to take shape, because the result is related to the idea and therefore foreign to the habitual course of nature. Moreover, when he spoke of human actions, Humboldt did not think solely about the actions of great men: «it is undeniable that the action of the genius and deep passion belong to an order of things other than the mechanical course of nature [but], taken strictly, this is what happens in every result of human individuality.»<sup>24</sup>

Through these reflections, Humboldt suggested two extremely important points. First, he commented on the ethical dimension of history. History is not about moral: it does not have to offer examples to be followed or abhorred; examples are of no use or risk having a misleading effect. But history is ethics because, as Leopold von Ranke would say in 1860, it unveils the drama of freedom: «the element in which history operate is the sense of reality (*Sinn für Wirklichkeit*) and it contains the awareness of the transience of existence in time, and of dependence upon past and present causes; at the same time, there is the consciousness of spiritual freedom.»<sup>25</sup> Secondly, Humboldt reminded us that the historian's sense of wholeness does not coincide with the concept of an ideal totality; it is neither unique nor conciliatory but always manifold, full of life, conflictual, made of differences and contrasts. In 1803, in a letter to the diplomat Karl von Brinckmann, Humboldt gave a fulminating formulation to this intuition when he said he felt «driven not towards the One, which would be the whole, a new mistaken concept, but towards a unit in which every concept of man, every opposition between the unit and plurality, is entwined.»<sup>26</sup>

Humboldt's reflection would be taken up by other historians, such as Johannes Droysen or Jakob Burckhardt, in the years to come. From certain points of view, the attempt of the philosophy of history to go beyond the individual tracks of the past and, therefore, eliminate its differences, met effective resistance from historians and nurtured a series of extremely rich reflections which aimed at defending the plurality of the past.

## V.

The second crucial turning point in the widening of the divide between history and biography dates to the end of the nineteenth century. As Johann Gustav Droysen, the most reflexive historian, sensed, «our science has just been liberated from the philosophical-theological embrace and, lo and behold, natural sciences want to appropriate it.»<sup>27</sup> In reality,

<sup>23</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Betrachtungen über die bewegenden Ursachen in der Weltgeschichte* (1818), in *Gesammelte Schriften* cit., pp. 360 sgg.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers* (1821), in *Gesammelte Schriften* cit., eng. transl. «On the Historian's Task», *History and Theory*, 1967, 6, 1, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Briefe an Karl Gustav von Brinckmann*, hrsg. von Albert Leitzmann, Leipzig, Verlag Karl W. Hiersemann, 1939, p. 151 sgg.

<sup>27</sup> Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik. Die Vorlesungen von 1857*, hrgs. von P. Leyh, Stuttgart - Bad Cannstatt 1977; *Texte zur Geschichtstheorie. Mit ungedruckten Materialien zur 'Historik'*, hrgs. von G. Birtsch u. J. Rüsen, Göttingen, 1972.

rather than from science, the danger came from some young social disciplines such as demography and sociology, which wanted to acquire an unquestionable scientific statute.

In the 1830s, Lambert Adolphe Quetelet coined the idea of the average man, with the hope of elaborating social mechanics, or a social science that would be able to define the laws which govern intellectual and moral phenomena in ways not unlike the law of physics: «l'homme que je considère ici est, dans la société, l'analogie du centre de gravité dans le corps; il est la moyenne autour de laquelle oscillent les éléments sociaux: ce sera, si l'on veut, un être fictif pour qui toutes les choses passeront conformément aux résultats moyens obtenus par la société.»<sup>28</sup> The notion of the average man led to the official sacrifice of all that is too individual or anomalous: «nous devons, avant tout, perdre de vue l'homme pris isolément, et ne le considérer que comme une fraction de l'espèce. En le dépouillant de son individualité, nous éliminerons tout ce qui est accidentel; et les particularités individuelles qui n'ont que peu ou point d'action sur la masse s'effaceront d'elles-mêmes, et permettront de saisir les résultats généraux.»<sup>29</sup> In the following decades, the idea of the average man enjoyed a great success. Convinced that human beings cannot escape the universal law of causality, Henry Thomas Buckle, Grant Allen, and Louis Bourdeau insisted on the force of external limits, in particular geographic ones, and portrayed human beings as ants, which weave the warp of social life (in the same way that cells reconstruct organic tissue) in an anonymous manner<sup>30</sup>. According to Herbert Spencer, the same constraints also applied to great men: «Along with the whole generation of which he forms a minute part – along with the institutions, language, knowledge, manners and its multitudinous arts and appliances, he is a resultant of an enormous aggregate of forces that have been cooperating for ages.»<sup>30</sup> It followed that science had the task of explaining the average man of every race, renouncing all morphological variations and individual differences. Even though each individual person may be important, individuals' thoughts and actions have no historical meaning. With a significant linguistic drift, Plutarch's «signs of the soul», which Hegel had already devalued to «trifles», now became «personal idiosyncrasies» to be leveled and, perhaps, eliminated.

## VI.

In the nineteenth century, many historians joined this new battle against biography in the name of science. Some of them even proved anxious to abandon the clothes of moral reflection to put on the newer and more conspicuous ones of the social sciences, which were

<sup>28</sup> Adolphe Quetelet, *Sur l'homme et le développement de ses facultés ou Essai de physique sociale*, Paris, Bachelier, 1835, pp. 51 sgg.

<sup>29</sup> Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, London, John W. Parker and Son, 1858; Grant Allen, «Nation Making», *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1878 (in *Popular Science Monthly Supplement*, 1878, pp. 121-126); Grant Allen, «The Genesis of Genius», *Atlantic Monthly*, march 1881, XLVI, pp. 371-381; Louis Bourdeau, *L'histoire et les historiens. Essai critique sur l'histoire considérée comme science positive*, Paris, F. Alcan, 1888.

<sup>30</sup> On this subject, it seems important to underline the influence of racial thought on the process of depersonalisation of the social sciences. The most interesting case is undoubtedly that of Spencer who, during the Boer War, accused the British government of *re-barbarisation*. In the second chapter of *The Study of Sociology*, he defines the environment in racial terms: «There [is] no possibility [that] an Aristotle comes from a father and mother with facial angles of fifty degrees, and that out of a tribe of cannibals, whose chorus in preparation for a feast of human flesh is a kind of rhythmical roaring, there is not the remotest chance of a Beethoven arising.»<sup>30</sup> Not only; in the following pages, he described biographical curiosity as a tribal phenomenon, typical of the first historical races, and insinuates the idea that abstract, impersonal thought is one of the salient features of superior civilisations. We also find this last idea in Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History?*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1961. Cfr. George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution. A History of European Racism*, London, Dent 1978, on the presumed superiority of abstract thought.

modeled on the natural sciences. These historians shared the idea of confirming, once and for all, impersonality as a fundamental criterion of being scientific, even if they did not appreciate the extreme determinism of Buckle, Spencer or Bourdeau. On this side of the Atlantic Ocean, John Fiske, the author of several works of American history, hoped, in this way, to create a «great historiographical revolution»: «Since the middle of the nineteenth century the revolution which has taken place in the study of history is as great and as thorough as a similar revolution which, under Mr. Darwin's guidance, has been effected in the study of biology. The interval in knowledge which separated Edward Freeman in 1880 from a Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1850 is as great as the interval which separated John Dalton and Humphrey Davy from the believers in phlogiston. Yet in the principal works by which this immense change has been brought about - such as the works of Henry Maine and William Stubbs, Numa Fustel de Coulanges and Maurer – biography plays either an utterly subordinate part or no part at all.»<sup>31</sup>

In France, Emile Durkheim recognized an important political function of great men: «une société où le génie serait sacrifié à la foule et à je ne sais quel amour aveugle d'une égalité stérile, se condamnerait elle-même à une immobilité qui ne diffère pas beaucoup de la mort»<sup>32</sup>. But Durkheim thought that great men were a disturbing element for the social sciences, which had to study ways of thinking, feeling, and acting independently from individuals. His famous comparison between social fact and statistics sprang from this conviction: «comme chacun de ces chiffres comprend tous les cas particuliers indistinctement, les circonstances individuelles qui peuvent avoir quelque part dans la production du phénomène s'y neutralisent mutuellement et, par suite, ne contribuent pas à le déterminer»<sup>33</sup>. A few years later, François Simiand took up the same idea, this time to advocate the unification of all social sciences. Although he recognized the specific interpretative quality of history, Simiand maintained that historians had to study what is objective, not individual spontaneity: «une règle de droit, un dogme religieux, une superstition, un usage, la forme de la propriété, l'organisation sociale, une certaine vision du travail, un certain procédé d'échange, une certaine manière de se loger ou de se vêtir, un précepte moral, etc., tout cela m'est donné, m'est fourni tout constitué, tout cela existe dans ma vie indépendamment de mes spontanéités propres et quelquefois en dépit d'elles». Politics, individuals, and chronology (defined as the three «idoles de la tribu des historiens») were without reality and had to be replaced by other key concepts, such as repetition, regularities and tradition: «La règle est ici, comme dans les autres sciences positives, de suivre les abstractions heureuses, c'est-à-dire celles qui conduisent à établir, celles qui sont propres à mettre en évidence, des régularités.» For Simiand, moreover, historical causality no longer had the form of motivation but that of the law: «l'établissement d'un lien causal se fait non entre un agent et un acte, non entre un pouvoir et un résultat, mais entre deux phénomènes exactement de même ordre; il implique

<sup>31</sup> John Fiske, «Sociology and hero-worship», *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1881, p. 81. To this end, it's interesting to note the double image of Darwin. Fiske used it in an antibiographical key – for him, all that is individual assumed a superficial aspect which is too fast. But other authors appealed to the theory of evolution to criticize geographical determinism. William James did this in two short essays in which he defended the notion of the great man through the concept of spontaneous variation: «I affirm that the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the 'variation' in the Darwinian philosophy. It chiefly adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys, in short, selects him. And whenever it adopts and preserves the great man, it becomes modified by his influence in an entirely original and peculiar way.» William James, «Great men and their Environment», *Atlantic Monthly*, 1880, p. 226. Cfr. also William James, «The Importance of Individuals», *Open Court*, 1890. Both texts were republished in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York-London, Longmans, 1897. A similar position was supported by Henri Berr, «La méthode statistique et la question des grands hommes», *Nouvelle Revue*, 1 and 15 June 1890.

<sup>32</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Le rôle des grands hommes dans l'histoire* (1883), in *Textes. I. Eléments d'une théorie sociale*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1975.

<sup>33</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode scientifique* (1895), Paris, Puf, 1963, p.10.

une relation stable, une régularité, une loi. Il n'y a cause, au sens positif du mot, que là où il y a la loi, au moins conceivable.» And he added that: «il n'y a rapport causal (...) que s'il y a régularité de liaison, que s'il y a renouvellement identique de la relation constatée; le cas unique n'a pas de cause, n'est pas scientifiquement explicable.»<sup>34</sup>

The dream of writing impersonal history also seduced some German historians. In 1896, Karl Lamprecht, founder of the *Kultur-und Universalgeschichte Institut* of the University of Leipzig, extrapolated a regulatory and absolute concept of science from the natural sciences and applied it to all social disciplines. He suggested that causality became a primary and systematic fundamental so that history could acquire an unquestionable scientific status. As science has the task of knowing the necessary concatenation of causes and effects, which is shown as uniform in all special processes, history should also only be concerned with what is comparable – the historical-cultural method also coincided with the acceptance of an absolute causality in the spiritual field and «works with the specific methods of comparative sciences; with synthesis and inductive comparison and generalization.» In Lamprecht, this perspective led to the sacrifice of all differences. Historians can, or rather, must stop detecting what separates things in order to discover what unites them. Therefore, they should not consider each individual as a particular being, with a precise, unique, unrepeatable character, much less as a being able to impress change on the course of history, but as a generic sample equivalent to others, only dominated by ideas, feelings, and impulses that are common to the group he belongs to<sup>35</sup>. Unlike Marxist historians, who preferred the notion of class, for Lamprecht the determining social unit able to explain all the *rest* was the nation, which he understood not in a juridical or political sense, but in a romantic sense, as an organism which evolves according to its own laws. This was an interesting point of disagreement: the concept of nation was no longer an element of individualization of the past, as it had been for many historians in the early decades of the nineteenth century, but a regular dimension of historical life<sup>36</sup>.

To be sure, in this period too there were dissenting voices, who were reluctant to sacrifice the concreteness of human existence in the name of science. But, unfortunately, many of those who defended the individual nature of history continued to cultivate the rhetoric of personal greatness. In other words, the great politicians able to shape events were set against the anonymous social forces invoked by Simiand and Lamprecht. Even those who did not succumb to the heroic ideology dreamt of improbable individuals, all intentional and free. Friedrich Meinecke spoke of an «indissoluble, unitary and aprioristic central nucleus of the individual,» while Eduard Meyer set the personalities operating against indifferent individuals «whose names can only be given in history because they were, by chance, the vehicles of a particular historical process, like officials, diplomats, clerks and others; so only the name and job of these has a historical interest, not their personalities»<sup>37</sup>. It is noteworthy that the primacy of great men almost invariably coincides with the primacy of politics. Only the State seem worthy of historical investigation. As the German historian Eberhard Gothein wrote ironically, the actions of great importance, State facts, are the prerogative of political historians, while cultural historians confined themselves to the rubbish bin and the «wardrobe

<sup>34</sup> François Simiand, «Méthode historique et science sociale», *Revue de synthèse historique*, 1903, republished in *Annales*, 1967, 1, pp. 87, 91, 95, 105.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. Karl Lamprecht, «Was ist Kulturgeschichte? Beitrag zu einer historischen Empirik», in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 1896-97, I, pp. 75-150.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr Jürgen Kocka, «Ideological repression and methodological Innovation: Historiography and the Social Sciences in the 1930s and 1940s», *History and Memory*, 1990, 2, pp. 130-138 on the link between social history and ethnic nationalism in the following decades.

<sup>37</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, «Zum Streit und die kollektivische Geschichtsschreibung», *Historische Zeitschrift*, 1896, 76; Eduard Meyer, *Zur Theorie und Methodik der Geschichte* (1902), in *Kleine Schriften*, Halle, Niemeyer, 1924, vol. I.

of old things» (*das Kehrichtfass und die Rumpelkammer*)<sup>38</sup>. In a period marked by a steady growth of State power and the affirmation of the masses as a political subject, the articles of the *Historische Zeitschrift* ignore social problems (there are no courtyards, factories, families, suburbs, etc.) and flatten politics, identifying it with the manifest, formal ideology of State institutions<sup>39</sup>.

The dangers of such a definition would become evident in the following years, during and after the First World War, when many political historians showed that they were unable to understand the serious social tensions which disrupted Germany, and Europe more generally. Eduard Spranger, one of the inspirers of historical morphology, whom the Gestapo arrested on suspicion of complicity in the conspiracy against Hitler of 20 July 1944, would realize this peril, and confided to Meinecke that «Goethe's ideas are not enough to understand our current inferno»<sup>40</sup>.

It seems to me that, in many ways, history emerges profoundly weakened from the methodological debate of the late nineteenth century. The main figures of that epoch obfuscated the richest and most complex views, such as those of Otto Hintze. Thus, the historiographical landscape quickly regrouped around a rather debatable conceptual distinction, that between social and political history. In the following decades, the former would cultivate its impersonal vocation while the latter would continue to populate the past with decorative, upright characters (forgetting Bismarck's warning, «My influence is generally greatly exaggerated (...) but, despite everything, no-one will think of requiring me to make history»<sup>41</sup>). It was a sad result, particularly if we think that, at the same time, two authors 'extraneous' to the historical discipline, such as Max Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey, were developing extremely rich and innovative reflections on the relationship between biography and history.

## VII.

During the twentieth century, the image of biographical history was further damaged. The apex of this suspicion against biography was probably reached in France<sup>42</sup>. The battle against the *histoire historisante* started on the pages of the *Revue de synthèse historique* and was won by the historians of the *Annales*, who tried to collect the deep under-layer of history (social structures, mental representations, and long-lasting phenomena) beyond individual personalities and events. In a short time, biography became the emblem of traditional history, what Fernand Braudel called *histoire événementielle*, one which was more attentive to chronology than structures, to great men than the masses. For Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the aim of history was man or «disons mieux: les hommes. Plutôt que le singulier, favorable à l'abstraction, le pluriel, qui est le mode grammatical de la relativité, convient à une science du divers»<sup>43</sup>. But after Bloch and Febvre, the second and third generations of the *Annales* historians subsumed all individual tensions in the long-lasting collective structures. Fernand Braudel defined the events as nothing more than dust, «une agitation de surface», and treated

<sup>38</sup> Eberhard Gothein, *Die Aufgaben der Kulturgeschichte*, Leipzig, Duncker & Humblot, 1889.

<sup>39</sup> We find this type of setting in *History and Biography. Essays in Honour of Derek Beales*, edited by T.C.W. Blanning and David Cannadine, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> Klaus Epstein, «Friedrich Meinecke, Ausgewählter Briefwechsel», *History and Theory*, 1965, p. 85.

<sup>41</sup> Bismarck's declaration, made on 16 April 1869 to the Reichstag of Northern Germany, was given by Gheorghe V. Plechanov, *Über die Rolle der Persönlichkeit in der Geschichte* (1898), Berlin, 1945, engl. transl. *The Role of the Individual in History*, New York, International Publishers, 1940.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. Josef Konvitz, «Biography: The Missing Form in French Historical Studies», *European Studies Review*, 1976, 6; Marc Ferro, «La biographie, cette handicapée de l'histoire», *Le Magazine littéraire*, avril 1989.

<sup>43</sup> Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* (1949), Paris, Armand Colin, 193, p. 83.

individuals as a patina of reality, brilliant but superficial. His insistence on the illusory nature of human actions arose from this: «tout effort à contre-courant du sens profond de l'histoire est condamné d'avance». A few exceptional figures aside (Pope Pius V or don Johann of Austria, for examples), human beings were completely impotent in his scheme (Charles V was presented as a calculated case, prepared and sought after by Spain, anything other than the artifice of the imperial project)<sup>44</sup>.

Social historians were not the only ones to mistrust individuals. In the 1960s and 70s, during the boom of quantitative historical methods, some historians also hoped to assess cultural phenomena in quantitative terms (what Pierre Chaunu defined as the «troisième niveau»). François Furet maintained that the notion of subordinate classes evoked, above all, an idea of quantity and anonymity. Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie hoped for «an histoire sans les hommes.» Jacques Le Goff (later, author of two important historical biographies) wrote that the history of collective mentalities studied «le quotidien et l'automatique, ce qui échappe aux sujets individuels de l'histoire parce que révélateur du contenu impersonnel de leur pensée, ce que César et le dernier soldat de ses légions, saint Louis et le paysan de son domaine, Christophe Colomb et le marin de ses caravelles ont en commun»<sup>45</sup>.

## VIII.

For several decades, the taste of singularity only survived in a few hidden corners of historiography. One of these was the field of prosopography. Diffident towards the philosophy of history and the history of ideas alike, Lewis Namier believed that social facts could only be explained scientifically by exploring the roots of individual behavior. His microanalytical method provided for the fission of social facts in a myriad of particular existences, which eventually were to be reintegrated in much larger totalities. The historian «has to get acquainted with the lives of thousands of individuals, with an entire ant-heap, see its files stretch out in various directions, understand how they are connected and correlated, watch the individual ants, and yet never forget the ant-heap»<sup>46</sup>. Nevertheless, Namier's *pointilliste* conception – taken up essentially by the historians of Ancient Rome and the scholars of the English aristocracy – often assumed an anti-biographical dimension in the sense that the variety of the past was sacrificed in the name of regularities. As Louis Bergeron and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret would later claim, the aim of prosopography was to transform the singular into the plural: «retrouver les hommes et, à travers eux, préparer la définition des types. Au delà du masque savant, retrouver le visage quotidien, et les singularités régionales, et des phisyonomies multiples faire jaillir les traits communs»<sup>47</sup>.

Another interesting experience sprang from sociology. At the end of the 1910s, William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki wrote a monumental work, *The Polish Peasant*, starting from the personal testimonies of Polish immigrants to the United States (personal correspondence and also Wladek's autobiographical account were considered as a «typical

<sup>44</sup> Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949), Paris, Armand Colin, 1990, vol. II, pp. 21-23, 512-520. Cfr. the critical observations of Jacques Rancière, *Les mots de l'histoire. Essai de poétique du savoir*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1992. pp. 26-27.

<sup>45</sup> François Furet, «Pour une définition des classes inférieures à l'époque moderne», *Annales E.S.C.*, 1963, 18, pp. 459-474; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l'historien*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, part IV; Jacques Le Goff, *Les mentalités*, dans *Faire de l'histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, t. III, p. 80.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis B. Namier, «The Biography of Ordinary Men», in Lewis B. Namier, *Skyscrapers and other Essays* (1931), New York, MacMillan, 1968, pp. 46-47.

<sup>47</sup> Louis Bergeron and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret (eds.), *Grands notables du premier empire*, Paris, Editions CNRS, 1978, p. VI.

representative of the culturally passive mass»)<sup>48</sup>. The book had a difficult life, partly because of political vicissitudes: Thomas, a militant pacifist, was arrested for adultery in 1918 and only rehabilitated ten years later (speaking of the weight of biographical events...), and partly because, for scientific reasons, American sociology soon decided that personal documents were not reliable. The coup de grace came in 1939, when Herbert Blumer decreed that biographical material founded on irremediably subjective procedures did not allow valid and reliable generalizations to be made<sup>49</sup>.

## IX.

Just when it seemed to be officially dead and buried, the biographical message was taken up by a series of free players (including the sociologists Richard Hoggart or Danilo Montaldi) who intended to let all those forgotten by History with a capital H speak<sup>50</sup>. It was from this perspective, so far from the traditional one of political history, that the individual slowly found its way back. Initially tied to the memory of the excluded (as in the case of oral history, the studies of popular culture or of women), biographical reflection progressively moved to the core of the historical discipline during the last two decades of the twentieth century<sup>51</sup>. The crisis of Marxism and Structuralism led many historians to ask themselves about the notion of the individual. In 1987, Bernard Guenée wrote that «l'étude des structures [lui] semblait donner une place trop large à la nécessité» and, a few years later, Le Goff clarified that «la biographie [lui] semble en partie libérée des blocages où des faux problèmes la maintenaient. Elle peut même devenir un observatoire privilégié»<sup>52</sup>. Even social historians,

<sup>48</sup> William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, Chicago, The University Chicago Press, 1918-20.

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. Herbert Blumer, *An Appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki's «The Polish Peasant in Europe and America»*, New York, Social Science Research Council, 1939. Cfr. Howard S. Becker, *The Life History and the Scientific Mosaic*, introduction to Clifford R. Shaw, *The Jack-Roller* (1930), Chicago, 1966, now in *Sociological Work. Method and Substance*, New Brunswick, N.J., Transaction Books, 1970 on the discredit of personal documents in sociology.

<sup>50</sup> Cfr. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Changing Patterns in English Mass Culture*, Boston Mass., Beacon Press, 1961; Danilo Montaldi, *Autobiografie alla leggera*, Torino, Einaudi, 1961; Danilo Montaldi, *Militanti politici di base*, Torino, Einaudi, 1971. Cfr. also the works of Oscar Lewis, *The children of Sanchez: autobiography of a Mexican family*, New York, Random House, 1961.

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. François Dosse, *Le pari biographique. Ecrire une vie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005. An example is the number of social science journals which gave special attention to biography between the end of the Seventies and the end of the century. Cfr., in chronological order, some of the journals which dedicated an issue to the theme of biography and auto-biography: *New Literary History*, 1977, IX, 1; *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse*, 1979, 20; *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, «Histoires de vie et vie sociale», 1980, XLIX, 2; *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, «Récits de vie», 1983, 191; *Sigma*, «Vendere le vite: la biografia letteraria», 1984, XVII, 1-2; *Poétique*, «Le biographique», 1985, 63; *Sources*, «Problèmes et méthodes de la biographie», Actes du Colloque, Paris, Sorbonne 3-4 mai 1985; *Diogène*, «La biographie», 1987, 139; *Social Research*, «Reflections on the Self», 1987; *Revue française de psychanalyse*, «Des biographies», 1988, 52; *Enquête*, «Biographie et cycle de vie», 1989. *Cahiers de Philosophie*, «Biographies. La vie comme elle se dit ...», 1990, 10; *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, «Le Biographique», 1991, 224; *Politix*, «La biographie. Usages scientifiques et sociaux», 1994, 27; *Revue Pôle Sud*, «Biographie et politique», 1994, 1; *Zeitschrift für Geschichte – Revue d'histoire*, «Biographie – Biographien – Biographie – Biographies», 1995; *Revue d'Allemagne et des Pays de langue allemande*, «Le genre biographique dans les historiographies française et allemande contemporaines», 2001, 33; *Revue des sciences humaines*, «Biographies», 2001, 263; *Littérature*, «Biographiques», 2002, 128. Since 1978 there has also been a magazine exclusively dedicated to the biographical genre: *Biography. An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*.

<sup>52</sup> Bernard Guenée, *Entre l'Eglise et l'Etat. Quatre vies de prélates français à la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987, p. 14; Jacques Le Goff, *Saint-Louis*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 15. Cfr. also Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1983; Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal de ma vie. Jacques-Louis Ménétra compagnon vitrier au 18e siècle*, éd. par Daniel Roche, Paris,

traditionally more sensitive to collective historical experiences, were disappointed and dissatisfied by the *overpowering* categories of social class or mentality – categories which reduce the sense of human actions to a sub-product of economic forces and cultural milieu. So they, too, started to reflect on personal destinies<sup>53</sup>.

I suggest that two contradictory thrusts characterized these new historiographical tendencies. On one hand, we can recognize more than an echo of gigantic hopes which go well beyond the *normal* work of scientific understanding. The French sociologist Daniel Bertaux described it very well. In 1968, biography seemed to him to be a means of alternative and anti-authoritarian knowledge of the past, and also as an instrument of the struggle to change society<sup>54</sup>. On the other hand, we can identify a resigned, *minimalist* view founded on the strange conviction that studying an individual is an easy task (a view, I shall add, that usually prevailed over Bertaux's grand stands). Thus, in a conference organized at the Sorbonne in 1985, the profound (even if not always conscious) reasons that had once more pushed individual destinies to the forefront of historical investigation were liquidated as emotional and linked to psychological needs. Biography was presented as a pleasant expedient, «a modest instrument, that can help [the historians] to illustrate long-term trends and structure but certainly cannot profess to becoming an intellectual lever»<sup>55</sup>. According to these characterizations, life-history would simply have a function of suggestion (of preliminary exploration of the problem) or illustration (theories are established through other research procedures and the personal anecdote is used as an ornament, as the icing on the cake). In both cases, life-history is not used to understand social life but as an example for a general reasoning; it is the ‘sandwich’ technique which slips in a piece of individual existence between one piece of context and another.....<sup>56</sup>.

## X.

With the help of critical reflections by scholars of the calibre of Bourdieu<sup>57</sup>, most historians increasingly moved beyond their *naïveté* and began to raise two sets of fundamental questions. The first series of questions concerns biographical analysis. What is important and unimportant in the life of a person? What are the categories that explain it? Freedom, national independence, and democracy? Army, school and family or social classes, capitalism and who

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Montalba, 1982; Alain Corbin, *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot, sur les traces d'inconnu, 1798-1876*, Paris, Flammarion, 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Cfr. the editorial «Tentons l'expérience», *Annales E.S.C.*, 1989.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Bertaux, «From the Life-History Approach to the Transformation of Sociological Practice», in *Biography and Society. The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1981.

<sup>55</sup> Hubert Bonin, «La biographie peut-elle jouer un rôle en histoire économique contemporaine?», in *Problèmes et méthodes de la biographie* », Actes du Colloque, Paris, Sorbonne 3-4 mai 1985, p. 173; cfr. also Felix Torres, «Du champ des *Annales* à la biographie: réflexions sur le retour d'un genre», *ibid.*, pp. 141-148. For this reason, Jacques Le Goff, «Comment écrire une biographie historique aujourd'hui?», *Débat*, 1989, wrote that «ce qui me désole dans l'actuelle prolifération de biographies c'est que beaucoup sont de purs et simples retours à la biographie traditionnelle superficielle, anecdotique, platement chronologique, sacrifiant à une psychologie désuète, incapable de montrer la signification historique générale d'une vie individuelle. C'est le retour des émigrés après la Révolution française et l'Empire qui 'n'avaient rien appris et rien oublié'».

<sup>56</sup> The expression «sandwich technique» was coined by the English historian Charles Firth: cfr. Godfrey Davies, «Biography and History», *Modern Language Quarterly*, 1940, 1, pp. 79-94.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. Pierre Bourdieu, «L'illusion biographique», *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1986, 62-63; Jean-Claude Passeron, «Biographies, flux, itinéraires, trajectoires», *Revue française de sociologie*, 1990, XXXI, p. 3-22.

knows what other external elements (noise, pollution...)<sup>58</sup>? The second series of questions concerns the relationship between biography and history: can the life of an individual illuminate the past? Can personal witnesses enable a general hypothesis to be formulated?

Micro-history has emerged as a historical approach concerned with both these sets of questions. Like the history of women and that of popular culture, microhistory has tried to restore personal dignity to the losers of history, the victims of the past<sup>59</sup>. In 1976, Carlo Ginzburg used Bertolt Brecht's famous question («who built Thebes of the seven gates?») to give voice to a sixteenth-century miller. In the following years, Giovanni Levi further complicated the issues at stake. If Ginzburg had studied a fairly exceptional individual (Menocchio), Levi chose to focus on «a banal place» (a small seventeenth-century village) and «a common history» (a rather rough exorcist priest)<sup>60</sup>. In both cases (Ginzburg and Levi), political passion went hand in hand with methodological commitment. Both used biographical information in new ways, we could say more aggressively, in order to question the apparent homogeneity of secular and ecclesiastical institutions, local communities, social groups, and other entities, and, in so doing, to reassess the balance between personal destinies and social structures. Searching in the cracks of normative frameworks, micro-history discovered that social contexts resemble a connective tissue with electric fields of different densities rather than a compact and coherent unit<sup>61</sup>.

This contribution is extremely important, both for history as a discipline and for the *polis*. It unveiled the poverty of all naturalized concepts of *belonging*. Social life appears as a series of circles or steps, each intersecting with one another, the centre of one circle being the periphery of another, and so forth. In this scheme, the individual, each individual, is a *hybrid*, a meeting point for different social experiences<sup>62</sup>. But this perspective contains something dizzying: the work of contextualization appears inexhaustible (every space and all time refers to another space and another time). I am not sure whether in the last few years, we have really been able to come to terms with this sense of dizziness. I wonder whether we haven't tried to weaken or even deny this sense too often, up to the point of compensating dizziness with two utopias (Paul Ricoeur would say two forms of *hubris*).

The first utopia is that of biographical representativeness: it promises to discover a point that encapsulates all the qualities of the whole. The historian should work in two times: first to find the representative individual (the normal peasant, the normal woman, etc.), then to extend the qualities of the representative individual to a whole category (the class of peasants, the female gender, and so on) through an inductive process. For example, in his book on Joseph Sec, Michel Vovelle stated that the individual «témoigne pour un groupe social» (the French bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century). For his part, Joël Cornette looked for «non plus

<sup>58</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chandler Publishing Company, 1972, pp. 475 sgg., stated that the most important events of his life were the Treaty of Versailles and the cybernetic revolution and he commented: «You may be surprised or shocked that I have not mentioned the A-bomb, or even World War II. I have not mentioned the spread of the automobile, nor of the radio and TV, nor many other things that have occurred in the last sixty years.»

<sup>59</sup> Cfr. Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, «Il nome e il come. Mercato storiografico e scambio diseguale», *Quaderni storici*, 1979, 40, pp. 181-90.

<sup>60</sup> Cfr. Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1976, engl. transl. *The Cheese and the Worms : the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980; Giovanni Levi, *L'eredità immateriale*, Torino, Einaudi, 1985, engl. transl. *Inheriting Power: the Story of an Exorcist*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. Jacques Revel, *Microanalyse et construction du social*, introduction *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.

<sup>62</sup> Edoardo Grendi (another of the founders of micro-history) coined the oxymoron «normal exceptional». Cfr. Edoardo Grendi, «Microanalisi e storia sociale», *Quaderni Storici*, 1977, 35.

l'Unique, mais un miroir qui refracte tout un monde» in the life of Benoît Lacombe<sup>63</sup>. This is an important perspective which integrates biographical study and generalizations, but it gives rise to a tiring research for experiences close to the average; the commonest aspects are exalted (or, at least, those considered so) while the more particular and personal ones are omitted<sup>64</sup>. Whoever has worked on biographical sources (diaries, correspondence, memories, etc.) knows that, if we follow this utopia, we inevitably end up by smoothing the specificity of personal lives and treading on the variety of the past. In an apparently innocent manner, we ignore, or rather we correct, the egoistic elements of biography (an operation which recalls the advice of the positivists on the elimination of individual idiosyncrasies)<sup>65</sup>. The result of this daily censorial work is rather melancholic: the historical time appears to be an immobile base, without fingerprints<sup>66</sup>.

The second utopia is the naturalist one. In this case, historians do not look for a miraculous point able to reflect history as a whole (an age, a society, a social group, and so on) but tell themselves that they «want the history of each one». When Giovanni Levi suggested that we reconstruct the "biographical stories of *every* inhabitant of the village of Santena who had left a documentary trace,»<sup>67</sup> he may not have predicted that the second generation of micro-historians would end up competing with the Registry Office (to use Balzac's famous expression). In a benevolent interpretation, we could say that historians hope to describe the past in all its details and elaborate interpretative categories that respect the full integrity and complexity of empirical reality. But this idea of knowledge as an integral copy of reality rather recalls the cartographers evoked by Jorge Luis Borges who, wishing to design a perfect map of the empire, set up one «which had the size of the Empire itself and coincided with it point by point»....<sup>68</sup> An impossible task. And even if it was possible, would it be enough? Would it really allow us to restore the living reality of an epoch?

## XI.

Faced with these utopian dead ends, which risk driving us away once more from biographical history, it seems to me important that we again take a step back and return to the *Methodenstreit* of more than a hundred years ago. Today, as political subjects, we are all obliged to ask ourselves about the limits of the concept of belonging. Perhaps for this reason, we are more prepared to accept some of Wilhelm Dilthey's reflections that, at the time, historians ignored. All his reflections suggest how the historic world cannot be understood in terms of belonging, and even less in terms of ownership or assimilation. An individual cannot *explain* a group, a community or an institution and, vice versa, a group, a community or an

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<sup>63</sup> Cfr. Michel Vovelle, *L'irrésistible ascension de Joseph Sec, bourgeois d'Aix*, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud, 1975; Joël Cornette, *Un révolutionnaire ordinaire. Benoît Lacombe, négociant 1759-1819*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 1986.

<sup>64</sup> On the implicit risks in this 'typing' operation cfr. Bernard Lepetit, *De l'échelle en histoire*, in *Jeux d'échelles cit.*, p. 78; Alain Boureau, *Histoires d'un historien*. Kantorowicz, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, pp. 75-76.

<sup>65</sup> Italo Calvino tried it on himself: «Now, though, I have to protect myself from another error or vice of those writing autobiographical memories – that of tending to make one's own experience appear as a 'average' experience of the a given generation and environment, highlighting the commonest aspects and leaving the more particolar and personal ones in the shade. Differently from what I've done other times, I would now like to highlight the aspects which differ most from the Italian 'average', as I'm convinced that more truth can always be obtained from the exception rather than the average.» Cfr. Italo Calvino, *Un'infanzia sotto il fascismo*, in *Eremita a Parigi: pagine autobiografiche*, Milano, Mondadori, 1996.

<sup>66</sup> Cfr. Giovanni Levi, «Les usages de la biographie», *Annales ESC*, 1989, 44, 6, p. 1325-1336.

<sup>67</sup> Giovanni Levi, *L'eredità immateriale cit.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>68</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *El hacedor*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1960, engl. trans. «On Rigor in Science», in *Dreamtigers*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1985.

institution cannot *explain* an individual. There is always a disparity, and this is inexhaustible. On the one hand, the creations of collective life are suffered, lived and achieved by individuals but transcend their control and cover a human space which is wider than the biographical one. They were here before us and will continue after our demise: «these relationships go through individuals, exist within them, but also reach beyond their life and possess an independent existence and development of their own through the content, value and purpose which they achieve.»<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, each and every individual is always a *hybrid*, a point where webs of relationships intersect (*Kreuzungspunkt*). Although an individual is saturated to the bone by his social experiences, he can never be reduced to just one of them. Referring to this, Dilthey gave the example of the judge who, in addition to fulfilling his role in the court, also lived in various other dynamic unities (*Wirkungszusammenhang*). He takes care of his family, looks after his economic interests, has a political function, and he sometimes amuses himself by writing verse...

Moreover, for Dilthey, the relationship between a community or an institution and an epoch or a civilization cannot be defined in terms of belonging. Certainly, each epoch expresses a dominant figure, it is unilateral and, at certain times, the harmony between the different spheres of life is particularly intense. For example, the rational and mechanistic spirit of the seventeenth century influenced literature, politics, and war strategy. But these are exceptions because the various spheres have a certain independence: «each individual system of interactions (...) has, through the positing of values and their realization, its centre within itself»<sup>70</sup>. A civilization is not a compact entity; it is not made of a single substance that can be summarized in a fundamental thought but is an interweaving or precarious mixture of various activities in continuous movement (the economy, religion, law, education, politics, the trade union, family, etc.).

Dilthey elaborates this fundamental plurality of the historical world also on a temporal level. In the wake of Johann Gottfried Herder, who thought that every phenomenon has its own specific temporality, Dilthey wrote that historical time is neither a straight line nor a homogenous flow. For example, the Enlightenment, Bach, and Pietism coexisted during the eighteenth century. This epoch «in which the dominant address of German Enlightenment is expressed in the different fields of life doesn't, however, determine all the men belonging to that age and, even where it influences, it finds other forces alongside it. The oppositions of the previous ages impose their worth and the forces reconnecting to ancient situations and ideas prove to be particularly effective, trying, however, to give them a new form.»<sup>71</sup> Far from a compact and conciliating image of becoming, Dilthey thinks of the historic whole as a plastic, conflictual entity in which dissonant forces live together, rebelling against the *Zeitgeist*. In this perspective, as Siegfried Kracauer would say, the expression «course of time» would be replaced by «course of times.»<sup>72</sup>

Profoundly sensitive to the peripheral vitality of history, Dilthey was forced to face the feeling of dizziness which nurtured the whole biographical history. But, faithful to the example of the judge who writes poetry, he succumbed to neither the illusion of representativeness nor to the naturalistic illusion. We are offered another road – that of accepting the circular character of knowledge. To understand the whole, we have to understand the parts, but to understand these, we have to understand the whole. There is

<sup>69</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* cit., engl. trans. *Selected Writings*, Cambridge University Press 1976, pp. 180-181.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>72</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Last Things Before the Last*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1969; cfr. also Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag 1963, engl. tr. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London, NLB, 1977.

reciprocal dependence between these two operations, one feeds the other: «a universal-historical survey of the whole presupposes the understanding of the parts united in it», however, «understanding of the particular depends on knowledge of the general»<sup>73</sup>. In other words, instead of trying to overcome the feeling of dizziness, Dilthey tries to handle it: «thus the method works in a dual direction. Directed towards the particular, it moves from the part to the whole and back to the part; directed towards the general, the same interaction between and the particular holds»<sup>74</sup>. He suggests that the fact that the work of contextualization is interminable (that each space and time refer to another space and time) is not necessarily an inconvenience or, worse still, a curse. Perhaps it is a human richness that hides an opportunity of knowing.

Accepting this suggestion, that is, welcoming the unfinished nature of history, is anything but simple. It means recognizing that every interpretation implies a hermeneutic art and, therefore, accepting the importance of historical imagination. In this way, we return to the starting point, to a page that Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1821 discussion of the historian's task ignored when he reminded us that, to find the truth of the past, «an enumeration and depiction of events» is not enough. To «work the collected fragments into a whole», historians must use his imagination. This does not mean that they can or should invent what happened. It only means – but the 'only' is anything but simple – that they should enlarge their own humanity as much as possible so that they can let themselves be impregnated by past realities. Like artists, historians also create a work of imitation; they also seek the real inner truth. But their aim is quite different, «the artist merely takes its ephemeral appearance away from reality, merely touches reality in order to fly away from it; the historian is searching for reality alone and has to plunge deeply into it». Instead of hovering above reality, historians subordinates their imagination to its investigation: «in this subordination, the imagination does not act as pure fantasy and is, therefore, more properly called the intuitive faculty or connective ability.»<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* cit., engl. trans. *Selected Writings*, pp. 196, 188.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-60.