

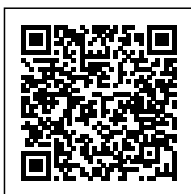
AN INQUIRY UPON PERSPECTIVES OF HISTORICAL STUDIES (JURGEN KOCKA, SANDRO ROGARI)

Posted on 30 Novembre 2013 by Storia e Futuro



Categories: [Numero 33 - Novembre 2013](#), [Numero 33 - Percorsi](#), [Numero 33 - Rubriche](#), [Percorsi](#), [Primo piano](#)

Tags: [bologna](#), [Historical method](#), [History](#), [Social history](#), [Social Sciences](#), [storia e futuro](#)



di SeF Editorial Board

When, ten years ago, "Storia e Futuro" began to be published, it emerged – among the several different specialistic review dedicated to historical studies – as one able to propose a new perspective of the relationship between past and present, and the approach to a historical perspective of it.

"Placed between a past so rich of events, changements, cultural, political and social heritage, and a future which was going on along new directions, risks and opportunities", "Storia e Futuro" claimed itself as an instrument to analyze these tremendous changements in the mirror of past.

After ten years, we can say – without exaggeration – this main purpose has been – in a general meaning – achieved. Lots of themes and subjects of research – in a large number of essays – have been approached: from political history to institutional one, without missing the great attention given to the matter of social history in the most different fields: from demographic development to economic one; from culture to sport; from the history of food to the emerging new technologies. Always, we have to precise too, regarding the dual dimension of international and local history: from the universal dimension of global history, to the local dimension of a very specific – territorially based – case of study. The same development had the different sections the review is divided in: so, just to make two examples, for the Agenda and the Scaffale, which took care to have a continuous overlook on the new results of historical research, both regarding meetings and conferences at a local, national and international level; and the bibliography, continuously up-dated.

After ten years, "Storia e Futuro" can take – we think – a positive stock of its experience. During this period not only "Storia e Futuro" changed: both in its formal aspects and in its contents. As a review perfectly involved in the national and international debate, it could observe the strong changement in historical science itself: in its contents and approaches, in its editorial, academic, scientific mechanisms. For these reasons we think it can be useful open a debate on what historical studies have become, what historical science is today, in a moment of deep crisis and decline of humanistic studies and humanistic intellectual. Strongly attacked not only by technical, but also – and perhaps mostly – from social sciences, history appears today in a deep decline: both from the point of view of its methodological and epistemological status, and from the point of view of its social role. Who is the historian? What kind of activity does it practice? What are his instruments? And what kind of knowledge – useful to the progress and development of human community – can he obtain? These are some of the questions we intend to propose to the debate, which will bring our readers to know opinions and suggestions of several different historians – of recognized authority, of different generations – from Italy, Europe, and all over the world.

We begin, in this first step, offering the answers given by Jurgen Kocka – Professor of History at the University of Berlin, one of the most important and recognized historians in Europe and all over the

world, especially in the field of social history – and Sandro Rogari – Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Florence, recently author of a book titled “The historical science”.

It will be a sort of travel along centuries and along countries, with a claimed a strong basic purpose: to defend and support historical science. Join the reading!

Questions (by Andrea Ragusa)

1. What is the outlook of historical studies at the start of the 21st century? The status of the field today seems to be marked by a double tracer: On the one hand, a tendency towards ever-greater specialization, while on the other hand there is the push towards grand interpretative summarizing of the centuries (1800s, 1900s) or of entire eras corresponding to traditional historical periodization (typically the contemporary age). Is this the mark of a change of traditional statutes of historical knowledge, weakened and suffering aggression from other social sciences? Is the weight of history consequently also of an ever-decreasing relevance in the organization of knowledge?
2. What relationship is being established between history and other social sciences in an organization of knowledge which is increasingly geared towards the present and increasingly unwilling to cultivate the “vice of memory”? In the book *The Historian's Craft* Marc Bloch had planned to write a final chapter dedicated to historical forecasting. Must we simply give in to the idea that in this current “presentism”, the past is useless because it's unable to contribute to forecast the future?
3. There is also a problem of training of historians and of the publishing market of history. The ever – increasing bureaucratisation of the training of historians, marked by increasingly rigid timelines and deadlines, makes it more and more difficult to carry out historical research which is meditated, conducted with the timing and waiting necessary for the maturation of a full judgment, increasingly crushed by an accelerated productivity. On the other hand, the expansion of the field of academic publishing makes it increasingly difficult to stay on top of the historiographical literature even for a bounded topic.
4. There is also the “performative” issue regarding historical essays, which has emerged with particular criticality in the passage of the *linguistic turn*. Greatly simplifying the Aristotelian question whether history is more art or more science, one could ask: Is a good historian who is able to identify important issues or rather one who is able to skillfully recount facts? The question is naturally more complex: it follows both the manner to divulge history but also the “democratization” of knowledge. Consequently, it often happens that confusion is made between writing history well in the sense of writing in such a way that everyone may read and understand the account, and the idea that anyone may write about history. Typically, for example, among authors, alongside a professional historian one finds the historical enthusiast or the journalist.
5. The issue is accentuated by the tendency to use sources once considered heterodox: film clips, documentaries, oral history, even song, by now considered a source for history and it itself an object

of study. What remains of the ancient tradition of archival research, of research from printed sources? And how and how much has been inverted the principal of Croce according to which history is the reconstruction of the past through the judgment that contemporary observers have given about events? We're not so much referring to the advent of social history, but rather to the evident current tendency to abandon the reconstruction of history as an interpretive vision given by the privileged observation of several categories (class, nation, state) and to search for a kind of "quotidianization" of history in which the individual is protagonist, alone with his choices, alone with his doubts, alone with his dramas?

6. Is this the mirror of a certain era which has deconstructed the traditional reference points, the broad interpretive framework, the ideologies positively understood as world visions, leaving humanity, paradoxically we could say, "alone against history"?

7. We'll attempt to conclude with a message of hope: If a certain way of "doing history" is now to be considered outdated, belonging to a history which is finished, we refuse to stop believing that history has scientific and cultural utility. What perspectives does the future hold for historical studies?

Some Answers

Jürgen Kocka

1. The process of increasing specialization has been taking place for a long time. But the more recent trend towards global history should be seen as a promising counter-movement. I am not mainly thinking of grand interpretations summarizing centuries or eras in a global historical way. Rather I think of global history *as a perspective*. It can be applied even if the topic is micro-historical or within the realm of national history. By situating the specific topic in a transnational, transregional and ultimately global perspective it works against ever-greater specialization without demanding synthesis grand style. In Germany historians like Jürgen Osterhammel, Sebastian Conrad and Andreas Eckert practice work of this kind. In my opinion, the essential tool is comparison, i.e. studying similarities and differences in order to answer explicit questions. This is one way among others to maintain and even increase the intellectual and cultural relevance of historical knowledge.

2. I am not convinced that "presentism" is the mark of the day. Historical dimensions are very present in major debates of the present time: e.g. on capitalism, on postcolonialism, on cultural and social identities of different kind, on inequality. In the spheres of leisure activities, organized tourism, and entertainment historical topics are very present (museums, land marks, films etc.). National contexts differ. In Germany historical topics draw large audiences, get a lot of media coverage, and are not on the way out at all. – The relation between history and the (other) social sciences is a different topic. It has been closer and more fruitful in the 1960s and 1970s than today. The culturalist and the deconstructivist moves of historians in the 1880s and 1890s have unfortunately damaged this relationship. But in recent years we can observe a revival of close cooperation between some

historians, and some sociologists, anthropologists and even economists . The cultural turn has definitely ended, this helps.

3. This is indeed a danger. The "Bologna" reforms of university studies may have been necessary here and there, but they have negative consequences and leave little scope for complex, comparative, reflected historical studies. But the possibilities for reasonable doctoral research and postgraduate studies have not diminished, on the contrary. There continues to be sufficient space for studying and writing history of high quality. But, the ever increasing volume of historiographical production is a problem, indeed. The reception has to become more selective. There is the danger that important results of pervious research will be forgotten. On the other hand, some forgetting may be necessary in order to live, even within the historical profession. This is an important topic about which additional reflections appear to be necessary.

4. I strongly believe that the profession has to become more analytical again. This will be necessary if we, as historians, want to have intellectual weight and cultural relevance in the future. As far as recounting events and telling stories are concerned, good journalists without professional training as historians can be as good as every historian, if not better. It is our task as professional historians to identify big issues, ask explicit questions and answer them in a methodological way, with much reflection and analytical rigour. At the same time: we should be able to write well.

5. It is exciting to see the use of new sources for doing historical work, i.e. for reconstructing the past in relation to the questions and viewpoints of the present. But the use of heterodox sources does neither replace nor devalue archival research. If taking over the whole field and replacing analytical and structural approaches (instead of supplementing them), the "quotidianization" of history would distort the truth and make the professional historians superfluous.

6. It is a very pluralistic and even fragmented reality which we perceive, and in which we live. At the same time entanglements across borders have increased. Traditional reference points may have been given up. At the same time, certain discussion topics are shared world wide even if treated from different angles and in conflicting ways: human rights and terror among them. There is more "Zusammenhang" in the world than 100 or 200 years ago. As historians we should "mirror" this situation by accepting and living with an immense plurality of topics and approaches, but at the same time by relating empirical observations to one another, to generalizable viewpoints, analytical categories and theories, by thorough contextualization, explicit comparison and value-oriented commitment. This is not impossible.

7. The major reasons why a culture needs history have not disappeared: understanding the present, creating (and challenging) identities, satisfying curiosity. The faster things change the more need there is for establishing continuities. If the present gets overwhelming, the past becomes more valuable and the relations between the past and the present more important. Some ways of doing history may have become outdated, but not the need of doing history as such. It is not a bad time for

being a historian.

Sandro Rogari

1. From a basic point of view, I do not think that the duplicity shown contains within itself an inherent negativity. The advancement of historical knowledge is inevitably the product of a research involving excavation on archival sources, published and sources of different types. The major interpretative syntheses in their ever-changing development are valid if you feed the new knowledge gained through specialist research. In essence, the two narrative genres – the one which extols the analysis based on the sources, the other which enhances the summary based on the acquired knowledge – in my opinion coexist, responding to different needs, without contradicting each other: the first one oriented to increase knowledge, the second one achieved to its transmission. This duality is inseparable from historical science, and there is no doubt that historical science is subjected to a reductive process in pregnancy and in his weight training by the pressure of other social sciences. But these are different issues. As for the weight of history in the organization of knowledge it comes from the decline of the humanities with respect to physical and natural sciences and their technological application that invests the totality of knowledge. Within the social sciences then the spirit is determined by the simplistic belief that other research methods can produce a regulatory system that has predictive capabilities, while history would be the realm of the ephemeral, unrepeatable and as such not useful for the purpose of significant social and political choices.

2. About the matter of "presentism" we must make a distinction. In the other social sciences, in the fields of research prevalent in the United States, also on the basis of the tradition of the Chicago school, the historical approach as introductory and preliminary diachronic analysis to the synchronic one is strongly compressed. In Europe and Italy in particular, the orientation is a bit 'different. It is considered the "historical introduction" to a question, be it sociology, anthropology, political science, etc., such as functional frame contextualizing the scientific problem. But prevalent is also the opinion that the function of history ends here, and the analysis of the present, linked to the extrapolation of a nomothetic system is functional to the construction of a science worthy of the name. The methods mentioned, in particular, have as a main achievement to corroborate the purposes and as such tend to open to little or nothing diachronic approach and to its ability to suggest more functional pathways to the community and the historical tradition concerned. The most obvious example is represented by electoral engineering proposed by political scientists to hypothesize complex plots of electoral systems operating in distant countries, neglecting that the electoral system is the product of a historical tradition and compares with the historicity of a culture and the deep feeling of a community.

3. The bureaucratization in the process of scholarship – the young or more consolidated researcher too are forced to chase the increasing pressure of quick scientific production – is an evil common to all sciences. The consequence is – for all young people, especially those operating in a science-established and with ancient tradition – missing the ability to devote adequate time to reflect on the

classical training. This fact by itself does not produce appreciation in that system mainly quantitative weighting of scientific production that characterizes more and more clearly the world of university and research. Regarding the increasing difficulties of access to a very broad historic production I believe that the ability to develop a selective approach to literature can be supported by the expunction from the fence of the historiography of everything that is not the result of rigorous analysis of the sources. Unfortunately, historiography is flooded with an extraordinary wealth of stories that have nothing to do with the science of history. I think that a rigorous pre-selection should drastically restrict the scope.

4. The issue of language is undoubtedly crucial. History is less guaranteed than the other social sciences, especially in comparison to legal science and economic science which have developed, during a long evolution, a specific language able to stop raids in the field by non-experts. On the other hand, history is often perceived as a narrative genre with a strong emotional appeal because it is capable of arousing passions related to the reenactment biographical itchy or to induce tension in the unveiling of ancient or recent occult plots. It is well seen in the narrative genre that appeals to the evocation of the "dark ages" or the revival under new forms of conspiracy theory and so on. All this contributes to the weakening of the science of history which in itself is not weaker than the others, but that is more susceptible to pollution and camouflage by completely not scientific historical narratives. The matter of language, or more precisely the aspiration to build a code of discipline of historical science is self-standing. During the twentieth century, history tried to open both the road to quantitative conversion of quality processes and the way to mathematical formalization. Both routes and especially the first proved to be fruitful in increasing and perfecting the historical method but only as long as the quantity has been separated from that of quality. However, the mental reservation that is often at the core of these efforts is to identify the epistemological constant historical process that should give to the historical science predictive tools that other social sciences presume to have. In short, some historians often try to force the qualitative dimension of the historical process to the alleged amount. But if the two dimensions of quality and quantity are not fungible is the same historical science to suffer detriment. On the other hand, the mathematical formalization fails to coordinate more than two subsystems calculating interdependencies and as such reveals the same limits of the qualitative analysis. The origin of these efforts are systemic theories by von Bertalanffy onwards that have shown their weakness in the analysis of social bodies.

5. By itself, the growing trend to using unorthodox sources, whether directly functional to the genre of historical essays, is not objectionable. In fact, the kinds of historiography have multiplied and while acting within the large container consists of the social history were very different. Of course, archival research and that on the printed sources remain the preferred route especially for the political historiography and historical narratives closer to it. However, we must keep in mind that the historian of the future will have great difficulty in finding a source as the correspondence which is often crucial for political history. The paper mail has been almost completely supplanted by the use of e-

mail that if not properly stored and maintained disperse and will be deleted. It is just an example to say that the historian will increasingly adapt to the use of different sources. The electronic tool now reigns also in the public administrations in the transmission of official reports, with all the uncertainty and volatility that this entails. Another question is the thesis of Croce's permanent contemporary history. In summary, the emergence of a historical issue is related to cross the epistemological need felt by the historian in the modern world. This assumption remains valid except that the historian must not bend the study of the past and the contemporary understood as the study of every-day present. Historical science always requires contextualization in time and space of the matter investigated. In the triangulation activated by the researcher between present and past the second can be enlivened by the first, but not on it flattened. In this sense, I agree that the difficult effort of contextualization which is often lacking makes you weak and precarious historical literature that often only claims to be such.

6. I am also convinced that the systematic deconstruction during more than 20 years has helped to reduce the credibility of history. Hayden White's thesis contributed massively to reduce the historical narrative in fiction even before the end of ideologies. The latter on the other hand they were of a religious or secular eschatology had built a reassuring that conspired to make sense of purposeful history and then to support studies of coherent historical setting. However, I think the science of history, finally free from this eschatology – since history has not an eschatological purpose neither has an end – can be rebuilt on a new basis, agreeing with all the other social and natural sciences the principle of the relativity of knowledge and of its eternal renewability, but beginning to be science again.

7. Should be permanently abandoned the spirit of minority or inferiority of historical science with respect to the other social sciences. On the contrary, I believe that it maintains a primacy because it is the only social science that gives to the human community the awareness of itself, its origin, its own nature. By studying the specific and unique, historical science builds up a mosaic that gives meaning to the identity of the human being living into social realities. Historical science is also able to detect constants, well aware of their own because it uses an inductive method of study; so the generality of the constant deduced from the specificity of the analysis is volatile in that human communities are formed by beings that do not reproduce mechanistic behaviors, but as these tend to be innovative and ever-changing. On the other hand, this trait of historical science makes it similar to other social sciences that grow in the wrong presumption to be predictive however, to the point of being misleading as it happened in recent times for the economic science. The exception is of course the legal science, but only because it uses a deductive method, ie moving from the norm, an *a priori*, that build up a universal system, and descends until the legal situation treated. In a different case the lack of obedience of law or deviance are field of sociological study, and so newly you return to the application of inductive method. Eventually, the inductive sciences except for mathematics, therefore, on the side of so-called hard sciences, and legal science, on the slope of the social sciences, do not always produce universal rules, but only general and reversal ones. And

this applies to the science of history as to the others.

