

Time and Human Agency

A Re-assessment of the *Annales* Legacy

Robert C. H. Sweeny

*C'est un autre avenir qu'il faut qu'on réinvente
Sans idole ou modèle pas à pas humblement
Sans vérité tracée sans lendemains qui chantent
Un bonheur inventé définitivement
[...]
Au nom de l'idéal qui nous faisait combattre
Et qui nous pousse encore à nous battre aujourd'hui.¹*

The end of the Cold War has fuelled an important debate in left academic circles of the advanced capitalist countries.² The issues are not new, but the dramatic changes of the past four years in the world's geo-political situation place them in a new light. Although this debate is about the future of socialism, it is largely an historical debate and this on two distinct levels. What lessons are to be learned from the failure of the Soviet Union? And in light of that failure, what are the intellectual, political and cultural traditions that can or should be drawn upon in the building of an alternative socialist strategy? As a Marxist historian who works on the development of capitalism in Québec and Canada, I find this renewed debate both stimulating and disturbing. Stimulating because of the variety and richness of the traditions offered up for inclusion, from Enlightenment ideas to environmental activism, but also disturbing because of the quite one-sided nature of this critical re-assessment. Almost all the participants in this debate denounce the effects of a dogmatic, sclerotic, Marxism upon the former Warsaw Pact countries, but surely forty years of Cold War politics have just as strongly influenced thinking in the advanced capitalist countries. I believe it would be both ahistorical and short-sighted to think that either the relative autonomy of past intellectual work or the enticements of present post-modern theory can save us from some difficult soul-searching of our own. For those of us still on the left, however that may be defined, the struggle for socialism in the 1990s necessarily involves an ongoing, rigorous, critical, theoretical and practical debate about the relationship between the human sciences and the dominant social order. In the present context and as part of this debate, it is particularly important for those of us working or studying in the universities to be critically aware of the manner in which our own intellectual practices and disciplines have been transformed by more than forty years of Cold War politics.

The urgency of this critical self-examination is highlighted by the seriousness of

1 Jean Ferrat, *Le Bilan* (Paris 1980).

2 An important theme in the inaugural issue of *left history*, the wide-ranging nature of this debate is illustrated by the collection drawn largely from the pages of *New Left Review: After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism* edited by Robin Blackburn (London 1991).

the present geo-political situation. The spectre now stalking Europe, indeed most advanced capitalist countries, is not communism, but the ghost of the 1930s. The problem is the enormity of the task. This article focuses on the *Annales* and it was chosen as a starting point for two reasons. First, not only is it the most influential school in 20th century historical theory and method, but it was at the centre of both the pre-war debates on history and the social sciences and those of the 1950s and 1960s on interdisciplinarity and the human sciences. Thus, the significance and meaning of its legacy should be of interest to more than just historians. Second, according to the prevailing historiographical consensus, this influential journal's theory and method evolved in a progressive manner, through difficult times, from its founding by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929 to its flowering under the direction of Fernand Braudel in the 1950s and early 1960s.³ Indeed, this continuity was an important element in Immanuel Wallerstein's recent characterization of this school as being the primary centre for a critical challenge to the hegemonic discourse of the Cold War in Europe.⁴ In short, the *Annales* constitutes a good test case, for if I am correct in asserting that critical thought in Western academic life was transformed by the Cold War, then it should be evident in the evolution of the *Annales'* theory and method.

My argument is simple enough. The *Annales* school initiated in the period between the wars a new type of historical theory and method, which constituted a significant intellectual challenge to existing historiographical practices. It was not a revolutionary challenge, but its particular form of oppositional humanism, influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson, retains a resonance that is not without relevance in these troubled times. In the immediate post-war period, however, the direction of the journal abandoned certain key Bergsonian concepts, notably his definitions of time and memory. This rejection of the philosophical foundations of the early *Annales* approach to history resulted in a radical transformation in both their theory and method. These changes were so important that I believe it is misleading to speak of "an" *Annales* school prior to 1968. There were at least two schools of historical praxis which used that name and I will argue the dividing line between the two was that very Cold War year of 1949.

In order to understand the significance of this paradigmatic shift it is necessary to explore, perhaps all too briefly, Bergson's rather unusual definitions of time and memory, before discussing why they constituted a challenge to the dominant histo-

3 For the early years see H. Stuart Hughes, *The Obstructed Path: French Social Thought in the Years of Desperation, 1930-1960* (New York 1968); Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch, A Life in History* (Cambridge 1989); André Burgière, "Histoire d'une histoire: la naissance des Annales," *Annales ESC*, 6 (novembre-décembre 1979) 1344-1359. For broader overviews see the published proceedings of the Fernand Braudel Centre's conference on the impact of the *Annales* on the social sciences in *Review*, 1: 3/4, (1978); Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The "Annales" Paradigm* (Ithaca 1976); Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution. The Annales School 1929-89* (Stanford, 1990); and Jacques Revel, "Histoire et sciences sociales: les paradigmes des Annales," *Annales ESC* 6 (novembre-décembre, 1979), 1360-1376.

4 "Beyond Annales?" *Radical History Review*, No. 49. (1991). As the founding director of the Fernand Braudel Centre, Wallerstein is the scholar who has perhaps most contributed to the prestige enjoyed by the *Annales* in North America, which of course pales in comparison with its reputation in Latin America and Western Europe.

riographical practice in France. Bergson himself thought the problems he identified in historical practice were so insurmountable, that they effectively denied the possibility of a scientific discourse of proof in history. Thus, the problems faced by the founders of an historical school based on Bergson's ideas were significant. As we shall see, the solutions proposed by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch were different and therein lies a partial explanation of the rapidity of the subsequent abandonment by Febvre of Bergson's *durée réelle* in favour of Braudel's *longue durée*. In conclusion, I will illustrate and then briefly discuss the importance of this paradigmatic shift.

Bergsonian Time & Memory

Henri Bergson was an enormously influential philosopher in the early years of this century. Most of his principal works were published before the Great War, although he would survive to be one of the first Jews in France to be a victim of Nazi genocidal policies.⁵ Born in 1859, the year Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, Bergson was to develop an organic epistemology that integrated into a philosophical worldview the most recent biological and psychological research with a critique of classical physics.⁶ He argued that understanding reality provides the key to the meaning of life. His perception of the nature of reality was highly original. The central idea of all of his work was that movement is the only given aspect of reality.⁷ For Bergson, however, this movement was through time, not through space. Thus understanding reality involves not only an appreciation of the centrality and complex character of

- 5 He died of pneumonia contracted after standing all day in the Parisian rain waiting to be registered as a Jew. Ironically, his death preceded by one day the special exemption accorded Marc Bloch by the Vichy authorities. All references to Bergson's work in this article are from the standard, centennial edition, in two volumes, *Oeuvres and Mélanges* (Paris 1959). The former contains *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889); *Matière et mémoire* (1896); *Le Rire* (1900); *L'évolution créatrice*, (1907); *L'énergie spirituelle*, (1919); *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932) and *La pensée et le mouvant* (1934). The latter contains two works, *L'idée de lieu chez Aristote* (1889) and *Durée et simultanéité* (1922) as well as the essays, articles and correspondence that were published in his lifetime.
- 6 My appreciation of the degree to which Bergson attempted to keep abreast of current scientific research and, in the case of physics was clearly conceptually in advance of much of that research, was greatly enhanced by reading Milic Capek, *Bergson and Modern Physics, A reinterpretation and re-evaluation* (Dordrecht 1971). Hubert Watelet has recently suggested that the dramatic changes in physics in the early twentieth century also strongly influenced the development of the initial global paradigm of the *Annales* school. Hubert Watelet, "Les rapports entre science et culture et les paradigmes du mouvement des Annales" in *La construction d'une culture. Le Québec et l'Amérique française* Edited by Gérard Bouchard & Serge Courville. (Sainte-Foy 1993), 221-250.
- 7 "On s'est beaucoup occupé de ma conception de la durée, mais il est rare qu'on ait mis l'accent sur le point essentiel, sur ce qui a été l'idée directrice de toutes mes recherches. Je formulerais cette idée de la manière suivante: tandis que nos facultés naturelles de perception et de conception, construites en vue des nécessités de l'action, croient l'immobilité aussi réelle que le mouvement (la croient même antérieure au mouvement est fondamentale, le mouvement venant s'y surajouter), les problèmes philosophiques ne sont susceptibles de solution que si, par une inversion de ces habitudes de penser, nous arrivons à apercevoir dans la mobilité la seule réalité donnée. L'immobilité n'est qu'une vue (au sens photographique du mot) que notre esprit prend sur elle." *Mélanges*, 1417-1418.

time, but a critique of how spatial biases have distorted our perception of time.

Bergson argued that human beings have a spatial bias which encourages a false perception of immobility. This illusion of the primacy of changelessness and immobility is the result of the distorting influence of our sensory perceptions combined with our socially defined codes for dealing with the material world, principally our languages, both of which privilege spatial over temporal data. These partial and distorting sensory inputs and language structures are proper to our species' evolutionary development. Bergson argued that this evolution had also led to a distortion in our perception of time. Life is a continuous, dynamic and active process of making choices in order to act on and in the material world. In order to survive and flourish in this world, he argued that the human brain has been structured through evolution to direct its attention to the future and away from the past. Although this useful characteristic of the human species is understandable, according to Bergson, one cannot deduce from it either the meaning of life or the fundamental nature of reality. For to do so, as many philosophers have done, would inevitably lead to the dangerous illusion that the past no longer exists.⁸ Although limited by our false understanding of reality due to these spatial biases and misleading perceptions of time, according to Bergson, we are not their prisoners. We can transcend this false understanding through an intuitive process wherein the dynamic role of memory enables us to understand the reality of temporal movement and change. Understanding the temporal nature of reality, which he called the *durée réelle*, allows one to see the past as real and linked to the present through a creative movement of becoming. In Bergson's worldview, therefore, time shares the same characteristics as reality itself, it is indeterminate, heterogeneous and indivisible.

I think that it is important to understand what Bergson meant when he used these terms, for not only do they explain in part the great appeal that Bergsonian philosophy enjoyed and perhaps the rapidity of its subsequent eclipse, but they defined to a significant degree the theoretical and methodological agenda of the first *Annales* school.

If the only fixed, unchangeable aspect of reality is movement through time, then the only constant is change itself and therefore reality is not pre-determined. This indeterminacy is not absolute, because the movement of reality is through time. Thus reality has a direction, but it is temporal not spatial and so time is heterogeneous in two ways. Not only is the past different from the present and the present different from the future, but the continuous and indeterminate nature of temporal movement means that the idea of a singular present is illusory; for if the continuous and

8 "C'est que si le changement est réel et même constitutif de la réalité, nous devons envisager le passé tout autrement que nous n'avons été habitués à le faire par la philosophie et même par le langage. Nous inclinons à nous représenter le passé comme de l'inexistant, et les philosophes encouragent chez nous cette tendance naturelle. Pour eux et pour nous, le présent seul existe par lui-même: si quelque chose survit du passé, ce ne peut être que par un secours que le présent lui prête, [...] par l'intervention d'une certaine fonction particulière qui s'appelle la mémoire et dont le rôle serait de conserver exceptionnellement telles ou telles parties du passé en les emmagasinant dans une espèce de boîte. — Erreur profonde! erreur utile, je le veux bien, nécessaire peut-être à l'action, mais mortelle à la spéculation. On y trouverait, [...] la plupart des illusions qui peuvent vicier la pensée philosophique." From *La pensée et le mouvant in Oeuvres*, 1385.

heterogeneous past were to culminate in a single moment of the present, it would necessarily imply a determinancy to that past. Finally, time is indivisible, since any dividing line between past and present would be an artificial, unreal device outside time.

Bergson argued that the indeterminate, heterogeneous and indivisible nature of this temporal movement into the present is best conceived as a creative evolutionary process. To conceive reality as a creative temporal process of becoming was both radically unconventional and potentially empowering. Bergson's conceptualisation of time, in combination with the centrality of the role he assigned to memory, constituted the basis for an oppositional humanism, which challenged both religious and scientific norms. Indeed, Leszek Kolakowski has described it as an instrument of liberation.⁹ For Bergson, in this creative movement of becoming was to be found the meaning of life:

If, then, in every province, the triumph of life is expressed by creation, ought we not to think that the ultimate reason of human life is a creation which, in distinction from that of the artist or man of science, can be pursued at every moment and by all men alike; I mean the creation of self by self, the continual enrichment of personality by elements which it does not draw from outside, but causes to spring forth from itself!¹⁰

For Bergson, this internal, human creativity was the meaning of life, because it expressed the fundamental nature of reality. He argued that we can only understand the meaning of life by overcoming the limitations inherent in the very nature of our material life. Since for Bergson reality is indeterminate, heterogeneous and indivisible temporal movement, then the past is real, with no break between it and the present. Each individual human consciousness can perceive the reality of this existing past because of the ability of the human mind to transcend the spatial biases of our perceptions and our languages through an intuitive interrogation of memory. Thus our creativity is based on a realisation of the continuing existence of the past, whereby we become one with the temporal movement of reality.

Memory was central to this dialectic of transcendence and understanding, because for Bergson memory was not a partial recollection of the past. All of the past continues to exist in memory because memory is the living past.¹¹ Bergson was careful to distinguish between recollections of the past, which he called *souvenir-images*, and the living past in memory, *souvenir-pur*.¹² He did so because the phenomenon which

9 Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson* (Oxford 1986), 5. To which I would add the important proviso that it was a bourgeois instrument, for it was a philosophy of individual, rather than social, liberation. I do not mean to suggest here that Bergson was personally antagonistic to socialist movements, quite the contrary — see his sympathetic analysis of Chartism in *Mélanges*, 1095-1098. However, despite the influence his thinking had on such social theorists as George Sorel, Bergson's philosophy was essentially individualist and in the face of what Alain Guerreau has called the bourgeois dilemma in philosophical thought of the 20th century — the choice between irrationalism and God — Bergson chose God.

10 "Life and Consciousness." The 1911 Huxley Lecture, University of Birmingham, in *Mélanges*, 932. The emphases were in the original.

11 " ... la mémoire n'a donc pas besoin d'explication. Ou plutôt il n'y a pas de faculté spéciale dont le rôle soit de retenir du passé pour le verser dans le présent. Le passé se conserve de lui-même, automatiquement." From *La perception du changement*, in *Mélanges*, 910.

12 See in particular *De la survivance des images la mémoire et l'esprit* in *Oeuvres*, 276-316.

needed explaining, from his perspective, was not memory, but our ability, indeed propensity, to forget. He argued that we forget because we are essentially active beings. If we were constantly aware of the totality of the living past, it would impede our ability to choose and to act. This impediment in the material world would be fatal. Thus the partial nature of recollections allows us to function successfully in the present, precisely because they do not overwhelm us with the totality of the past. These partial recollections are, nevertheless, part of memory and could, Bergson argued, act as gateways to the infinitely larger living past.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Bergsonian philosophy, therefore, was that it re-interpreted time and memory in a manner which re-asserted the centrality and meaning of individual experience. In the context of early twentieth-century European thought, this was no mean achievement. Whereas nineteenth-century scientific research on time, in particular the geologists' discovery of deep time,¹³ had tended to dwarf into insignificance the human experience, Bergson argued for the great significance of not only human experience in general, but each individual in particular. Bergsonian time meant that the very meaning of life was to be found in the flowering of individual creativity, itself an expression of reality. In this perspective, psychological factors were not limiting, but liberating. So although contemporaneous with the establishment of psychology as a distinct discipline, Bergson's analysis of memory and consciousness was rigorously anti-determinist. Neither archetypes nor other mysterious constructs of our unconscious determine our actions, rather our consciousness in the form of memory enables each of us to understand and be part of reality.

The Bergsonian Challenge to History

Undoubtedly, Bergson's unconventional and potentially empowering ideas contributed to his popularity and impact before the Great War. I have not found any evidence, however, that Bergson's ideas significantly influenced the French historical profession until years after the guns had fallen silent.¹⁴ In light of the importance of his reflections on time, this delayed impact is significant, because it highlights the close relationship between the socio-cultural role of history as a discipline and the conceptualisation of time. Inasmuch as the early *Annales* critique of French historiography was influenced by a Bergsonian conceptualisation of time and memory, it would necessarily involve a re-evaluation of this socio-cultural role for history as a discipline.

Before the Great War, French historical methodology was dominated by the *École des chartes*, with its strongly empirical bent and its exclusive preoccupation with written documents. Positivist in origin, this analytical method¹⁵ presupposed that time

13 Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow and Time's Cycle, Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge 1987).

14 Bergson's metaphysics did inspire historical writing outside of the academy, notably in the prose and poetry of the French idealist writer Charôles Péguy: *Clio, dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme paenne* (1909) and *Mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc* (1910).

15 Alain Guereau summarized the methodological principles of the *École des chartes* at the end of his very stimulating discussion of the evolution of French historiography: "Cette méthode reposait sur trois piliers: principe de non-intervention; principe de non-contradic-

was divisible: the past was distinct from the present. Since the past no longer existed, written documents from the past were considered as epistemologically autonomous and they constituted the sole basis of an historical discourse of proof. The division in time was absolute: the historian in the present could not change the past, he or she could merely uncover it. Thus, the divisible nature of time meant a denial of the historicity of the historian. Furthermore, since the historian was not in history, the past was not only empirically verifiable, but singular. Limited only by the existence of adequate documentation, the past could be reconstructed. This “illusion of a strictly cumulative science”¹⁶ meant that time could not be indeterminate, for if time is divisible and singular, it must have a definite, identifiable direction. Determinate, singular and divisible, time for the historian was the antithesis of Bergsonian time.

Bergson’s conceptualisation of time and memory represented a profound challenge to French historical theory and method. First, it meant fundamentally rethinking the epistemological status of knowledge of the past. For if time is non-cyclical and has no fixed direction, then what the future might hold is unknown, but the continuity of movement means it will not be the same as either the past or the present. Thus every past moment is unique. Furthermore, if the present is necessarily different, although not distinct, from the past, then any historical method implies an imposition of the present on the past, because we apprehend and comprehend the past through our consciousness in the present. Hence any historical knowledge is necessarily relative, not absolute and the historian can neither objectively reconstruct nor recreate the past.

This reintroduction of historicity with a vengeance raised a two-fold problem for historical theory and method, which Bergson identified as early as his now-lost 1913 lectures at Columbia University.¹⁷ On the one hand, there is a retroactive self-validation of the present, whereby the present throws its shadow over the past, highlighting certain aspects while obscuring others. As a result, an illusion of causal relationships, which appear to link the past to the present, is created and the past is thereby misrepresented.¹⁸ On the other hand, since the present is not predetermined, it was

tion; principe de plausibilité. Non-intervention: l’Histoire est ce qu’elle est, son découpage est indifférent; l’Érudit choisit son sujet, applique sa méthode critique aux documents, pas à l’Institution dont ce document émane, [...] Non-contradiction: si deux assertions ou deux documents concernant le même fait sont contradictoires, l’un des deux au moins est faux et doit être rejeté; inversement deux documents dont on peut montrer qu’ils sont indépendants et qui rapportent le même fait de la même manière valent preuve. [...] Plausibilité: dans les cas où le principe précédent n’est pas applicable clairement, [...] on s’en remet au bon sens pour distinguer l’historique du légendaire.” *Le Féodalisme: Un horizon théorique* (Paris 1980), 169.

16 *Ibid.*, 144. My translation.

17 In his 1934 collection of essays *La Pensée et le mouvant*, Bergson refers, in a footnote, to these questions as already having been explored in these lectures. (*Oeuvres*, 1264). Only a partial résumé of one of these lectures, in English, has survived. (*Mélanges*, 978-989).

18 “Par le seul fait de s’accomplir, la réalité projetée derrière elle son ombre dans le passé indéfiniment lointain; elle paraît ainsi avoir préexisté, sous forme de possible, à sa propre réalisation. De là une erreur qui vicie notre conception du passé; de là notre prétention d’anticiper en toute occasion l’avenir. [...] Pour prendre un exemple simple, rien ne nous empêche aujourd’hui de rattacher le romantisme du XIXe siècle à ce qu’il y avait déjà de romantique chez les classiques. Mais l’aspect romantique du classicisme ne s’est dégagé que par l’effet rétroactif du romantisme une fois apparu. S’il n’y avait pas eu un Rousseau,

not the only possible outcome of the past and so to expect evidence from the past to explain clearly our present is to assume that people in the past could correctly foresee the then-indeterminate future.¹⁹

This two-fold problem arose directly from an acceptance of the temporally-relative nature of knowledge and it in turn raised the question of the limits, indeed validity, of any scientific understanding of the past. Following his 1922 debate with Einstein, Bergson's own work became increasingly metaphysical and spiritualist. The fact that Bergson would effectively renounce the feasibility of a scientific historical discourse of proof did not mean, however, that all was lost. Historians could still develop a Bergsonian historical theory and method, because of the role he had accorded memory; but, such a solution was dependent on a recognition of the historian being in history.

As we have seen, the prevailing orthodoxy in French historiography denied the indeterminate, heterogeneous, and indivisible nature of time. In so doing, it also effectively placed both memory and the historian outside history. In contrast, Bergsonian philosophy stressed the temporal continuity of movement and said that it was only through memory that the active becoming of individual creativity understands reality. Thus, an understanding of the past does not exist in the abstract; the past can be understood only through the active, conscious creativity of the mind of the historian in the present. Two important implications for historical theory and method potentially arose from this recognition of the primacy and agency of the historian's intuitive understanding. First, the mind would provide not only the single point of entry to the past, but also the key to understanding those who peopled the past. Second, an historical document should not be conceived as being epistemologically autonomous. Therefore, a Bergsonian historical epistemology would require not only a non-determinist perception of reality as temporal, but through a recognition of the historian being in history, it meant an enhanced appreciation of the importance of psychological factors and a new definition of what constitutes historical evidence. It was precisely in these areas that the founders of the *Annales* school made their greatest contributions to historical theory and method.

Towards a Critical Historiography: The early years of the *Annales*

The fundamentally conservative structure of the French historical profession initially withstood the changed circumstances of the immediate post-war world. When change

un Chateaubriand, un Vigny, un Victor Hugo, non seulement on n'aurait jamais aperçu, mais encore *il n'y aurait réellement pas eu* de romantisme des classiques d'autrefois [...] Le romantisme a opéré rétroactivement sur le classicisme [...] rétroactivement il a créé sa propre préfiguration dans le passé, et une explication de lui-même par ses antécédents." *Oeuvres*, 1264-65. Emphases in the original.

19 "Nous transmettons aux générations futures ce qui nous intéresse, ce que notre attention considère et même dessine à la lumière de notre évolution passée, mais non pas ce que l'avenir aura rendu pour eux intéressant par la création d'un intérêt nouveau, par une direction nouvelle imprimée à leur attention. En d'autres termes enfin, les origines historiques du présent, dans ce qu'il a de plus important ne sauraient être complètement élucidées, car on ne les reconstituerait dans leur intégralité que si le passé avait pu être exprimé par les contemporains en fonction d'un avenir indéterminé qui était, par là même, imprévisible." *Ibid.*, 1266.

came, it was from outside the traditional centers of academic power in France and it succeeded only through the continued struggles of its leading proponents. Thus, the historiography on the *Annales* school has tended to focus on the divergent personalities of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. They were undoubtedly an odd pair, but one should not overlook the significance of their common life experiences. Despite their difference in age, both were members of what Bloch would call, in retrospect, the Dreyfus generation. Both had been students at the *École normale supérieure* and then researchers at the *Fondation Thiers*. At the *École* they were trained in geography by Vidal de la Blache and in philosophy by Bergson. In the work of both Bloch and Febvre the influence of Vidal's critical handling of spatial determinates and Bergson's definition of temporal reality would enjoy an uneasy co-existence. Both Bloch and Febvre had their academic careers interrupted by the war. They both served in the trenches and each had attained the rank of Captain by war's end. In 1920, when Febvre was appointed professor of late medieval and early renaissance history at what was effectively a new university in Strasbourg, it was not all that surprising that he found in his younger medievalist colleague a scholar with whom he could collaborate.

The most important fruit of this twenty-year collaboration was the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* founded in 1929. The *Annales* was, in the inter-war years, what *Past and Present* would be in the 1950s and 1960s and *History Workshop Journal* would be the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was the single most important review in the discipline, not because it was the most prestigious, but because it was the most innovative. The *Annales* in the inter-war years was a forum where historians and social scientists critically examined the basis of historical knowledge and in so doing significantly redefined historical theory and method. They took as their starting point Febvre's famous maxim, there is no history only historians. They stressed the importance of psychological factors which, when combined with Bloch's dramatic denial of the uniqueness and centrality of the written document, brought western historical praxis into the 20th century.

Implicit in this redefinition of historical theory and method was a worldview consistent with the ideas of Henri Bergson. Their programme of action presupposed the validity of Bergsonian time and memory. It was, however, a programme that would never be completed; indeed I will argue it was consciously abandoned by Lucien Febvre in 1949. The subsequent direction of the review, particularly under Fernand Braudel, would have antithetical philosophical bases, which purported to find in "the dialectic of time spans" an explanation of human society "in all its reality."²⁰ This fundamental realignment was strongly influenced by the context of the Cold War, but it also had deeper, intellectual roots. I think that despite important shared beliefs, Bloch and Febvre differed in their handling of the challenge posed by Bergson and as a result the historical theory and method of the early *Annales* was significantly more ambiguous than the historiography would lead one to believe.

For both Bloch and Febvre the dialectic of mind and material reality was central to their project of a new history. In their analysis of this relationship there was never

20 Fernand Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences: The *longue durée*" in *On History*. Translated by Sarah Matthews. (Chicago 1980) 38. The article originally appeared in *Annales E.S.C.*, 1958.

any doubt where the primacy lay. With Bergson, they argued for the unique creative capacity of the mind: the mind of the historian as point of departure and the minds of those who lived in the past as the primary object of historical inquiry. They argued that if we are to understand why people did things in the past, we have to understand how their minds worked, or what Febvre called their *outillage mental* (mental equipment). Writing in *Annales* as late as 1941, Febvre explored this dialectic:

For the historian cannot understand or make others understand the functioning of the institutions in a given period or the ideas of that period or any other unless he has that basic standpoint, which I for my part call the psychological standpoint, which implies the concern to link up all the conditions of existence of the men of any given period with the meanings the same men gave to their own ideas. [...] for the historian ideas and institutions are never data coming from the Eternal, they are historical manifestations of the human genius at a certain period under the pressure of circumstances which can never recur.²¹

It had been precisely this question of a never re-occurring time that had led Bergson to raise the dual epistemological problems for history of the present throwing a shadow over the past and of those who peopled the past being incapable of foreseeing the future. Febvre's handling of these problems was both technical and theoretical. His most forceful arguments stressed the importance of respecting the historical dimensions of the past. Febvre consistently argued, throughout his career, that "an individual can only be what his period and social environment allow him to be."²² Lessons from the present, be they psychological or otherwise, should never be indiscriminately applied to the past. This theoretical stance on the second of Bergson's problems, however, was expressed in a manner which implied that one could, if careful, thereby also avoid the first of Bergson's conundrums.²³ In what was probably his most important work, Febvre argued that Rabelais could not have been an atheist because this was not a choice available to the people of sixteenth-century France.²⁴ In this work, starting from the particular of Rabelais, Febvre expanded his analysis in an attempt to recreate the totality of the age. The epistemological and methodological implications of this approach are clear. If one could accumulate sufficient information about a particular period, then one could establish the nature of people's general conditions of existence, which would then permit one to understand both their mental processes and the options available to them. For Lucien Febvre, a broadly-based contextualised approach, which would come to be known as

21 Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History, from the writings of Febvre*, Edited by Peter Burke and translated by K. Folca. (New York 1973), 19-20.

22 How the period and the environment should be defined would change, but his belief in the importance of the relationship would remain. "History and Psychology", in Febvre, *A New Kind of History*, 4. Originally published in the *Encyclopédie française*, 1938.

23 "[...] as soon as we refrain from projecting the present, that is our present, into the past [...] as soon as we set out to illuminate all the actions of social groups, and in the first instance their mental processes, by examining the general conditions of their existence, it is obvious that we shall be unable to accept for the historical period in question any of the descriptions or statements made by psychologists of today working on the basis of data provided for them by our own age." *Ibid.*, 9.

24 Lucien Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle: La religion de Rabelais*. (Paris 1942).

histoire totale, provided the methodological solution to the epistemological problems Bergson's framework posed. As we shall see, this faith in the epistemological value of empirical research would constitute an important line of demarcation between Lucien Febvre and his long-time colleague, Marc Bloch.

Bloch's reflections on the general problem posed by temporal relativism resolved the question by recourse to Bergsonian cognition. If reality is continual temporal movement, then the present exhibits the same characteristics of indeterminacy and heterogeneity as the past. A person trying to understand and to explain the present encounters the same epistemological difficulties as does the historian exploring the past. The problem is not therefore specific to history, rather it marks the limits of any scientific discourse of proof. To transcend these limitations is in effect to transcend the limitations of an intelligence developed to deal with the spatial, physical world. With Bergson, Bloch considered the "solidarity of the ages" to be "so effective that the lines of connection work both ways."²⁵ The historian can only transcend the limitations of intelligence by recourse to the *durée réelle*, that is by an intuitive and imaginative exploration of memory. Bloch provided an excellent example of this Bergsonian cognition, what he called "understanding the past by the present," in his discussion of warfare:

For here, in the present, is immediately perceptible that vibrance of human life which only a great effort of imagination can restore to the old texts. I have many times read, and I have often narrated, accounts of wars and battles. *Did I truly know, in the full sense of that word, did I know from within*, before I myself had suffered the terrible, sickening reality, what it meant for an army to be encircled, what it meant for a people to meet defeat? Before I myself had breathed the joy of victory in the summer and autumn of 1918 [...] did I truly know all that was inherent in that beautiful word? In the last analysis, whether consciously or no, it is always by borrowing from our daily experiences and by shading them, where necessary with new tints that we derive the elements which help us to restore the past.²⁶

Thus the subjective memory of the historian was essential for Bloch, indeed it provided the key in the present to truly understanding the past. Bloch did not, however, follow Bergson into the realms of purely metaphysical speculation. Not only knowing the past, but adapting the methods of history "as Bergson put it, 'to the very contours of reality'" remained for Bloch not only a feasible proposition, but the "ultimate aim of any science."²⁷ The importance for Bloch of an intuitive under-

25 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, translated by Peter Putnam. (New York 1953), 43. Originally published in 1949 as *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*.

26 *Ibid.*, 44. Emphasis added.

27 "[...] human time will never conform to the implacable uniformity or fixed divisions of clock time. Reality demands that its measurements be suited to the variability of its rhythm, and that its boundaries have wide marginal zones. It is only by this plasticity that history can hope to adapt its classifications, as Bergson put it, 'to the very contours of reality': which is properly the ultimate aim of any science. [...] Historical facts are, in essence, psychological facts. Normally, therefore, they find their antecedents in other psychological facts. To be sure, human destinies are placed in the physical world and suffer the consequence thereof. Even where the intrusion of these external forces seems most brutal, however, their action is weakened or intensified by man and his mind. [...] However, there can be no psychology which confines itself to pure consciousness. [...] In a word, in history, as elsewhere, the causes cannot be assumed. They are to be looked for ..." Bloch, *Ibid.*, 189,

standing of the past provided him with the basis for a significantly different resolution of Bergson's twin epistemological challenge than Febvre's empirically-driven method.

As part of "a glorious victory of mind over its material",²⁸ Bloch used temporal relativism to deny the uniqueness of written documents. Since the past is understood from the present, then the vaunted epistemological autonomy of historical documents is false. This denial of a special character to written documents had two important repercussions. First, once stripped of this autonomy, the idea of a cumulative, empirically valid, singular past based on these documents was exposed as illusory. In its stead stood the past in all its heterogeneity. Second, on the basis of this recognition of the complexity of the past, Bloch argued for a dramatic enlargement of the definition of historical evidence, to include all the myriad tracks of the past.²⁹ If the historian was no longer limited to finding the explanation for future events in the written documents from the past, then Bergson's second order of problems, those posed by the past being incapable of foreseeing the future, could potentially be circumvented. The creative, intuitive and analytical possibilities opened up for the historian by these tracks share a single common feature. The evidence exists in the present. This continuity of the past into the present must of course be both critically analysed and intuitively questioned, but it also showed the path to be followed, backwards in time.³⁰

The epistemological implications of Bloch's methodology are significant. No amount of empirical research can, in and of itself, ever provide a knowledge of the past in its totality. Rather, through a critical and intuitive reading of historical evidence, one establishes in the present a creative understanding and appreciation of the richness and meaning of the past. Knowledge of people and societies of the past is therefore neither absolute nor objective. It is, however, both potentially real and respectful of the totality of the past, inasmuch as one achieves through this intuitive, intellectual exercise a linkage between the living present of the historian and the past as part of the temporal continuity of being. This transcendence of the present reintegrates past and present into the totality of the *durée réelle*.

Marc Bloch defined history as the science of humans in time. His theory and method was strongly influenced by Bergson's concepts of time and memory. Ultimately then, both the limits of his science and the manner of their transcendence were to be found in the very nature of the *durée réelle*. Marc Bloch's theory and method

194 & 197.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁹ Bloch's metaphor of tracks is itself significant. Dead animals don't leave tracks and while where they lead might be unknown, they do go somewhere. In a like manner the Bergsonian past is living, indeterminate but not directionless, and made up of choices made in the material world.

³⁰ "For the natural progression of all research is from the best (or least badly) understood to the most obscure. [...] Here, as elsewhere, it is change which the historian is seeking to grasp. But in the film which he is examining, only the last picture remains quite clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behooves him first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken." *Ibid.*, 45-46. Again the metaphor is evocative of Bergson, who repeatedly had recourse to the same metaphor, particularly in his defence of the temporal direction of reality, because "le mécanisme de notre connaissance usuelle est de nature cinématographique." *Oeuvres*, 753.

differed from those of his long-time colleague Lucien Febvre. Where Febvre hoped to resolve the problem of the present throwing its shadow over the past primarily through empirical research, Bloch had recourse to memory. So that although both recognized the importance of the psychological dimension, Bloch's solution was more rigorously consistent within the Bergsonian paradigm. Bloch never tired of saying that his chosen discipline was in its infancy. I think the importance of Bloch's conceptualisation of history lay in its evocation of a creative, oppositional humanism, rather than as an achievable research programme. As such it retains great merit, for it serves to remind us of the creative potential inherent in the human spirit. On 16 June 1944, in a field outside Lyon, if the Gestapo did know not who, they certainly knew what they were trying to kill.

From the *durée réelle* to the *longue durée*

The voluntarist climate of Liberated Paris was a time for new beginnings. The *Annales* too *faisait peau neuve* and changed its name to *Annales Economies Sociétés Civilisations*. The first issue opened with a manifesto addressed to readers and friends in which Febvre surveyed the state of the world and concluded with the following definition of an historian:

The only one worthy of this beautiful name is one who throws himself [sic] into all of life, with the sense that in plunging into it, bathing in it, penetrating humanity's present, he increases tenfold his investigative capacities and his power to resurrect the past. A past that holds within it, and which in exchange gives back to the historian, the secret meaning of human destinies.³¹

As the empowering Bergsonian optimism evident in this passage clearly indicates the Second World War did not result in a break with the philosophy of Henri Bergson on the part of the *Annales*. This optimistic and oppositional humanism, however, would not survive the very changed intellectual climate of the early Cold War years.

It is rare in the history of thought to be able to give a precise date to a significant change. Ideas are more of an age than of a particular moment. Even when a date of publication provides a clear indication of the entry into the public domain of an idea, more often than not the period of incubation appears on closer examination to have been quite a long one. So it is with some degree of trepidation that I advance the date of 1949 as marking the abandonment by the *Annales* of Bergsonian philosophy and the adoption of an antithetical historical theory and method. In advancing this date I base myself on Lucien Febvre's important and, I think, quite remarkable article *Vers une autre histoire*.³²

Febvre wrote the article when he was seventy-one years old. His years of greatest productivity were behind him and he was about to retire from his Chair in the History of Civilisation at the *Collège de France*. It was not a propitious moment to set off in new directions and yet the structure of the piece clearly indicates that this was his

31 *Annales E.S.C.*, 1, (1946), 8. My translation, which differs substantially from the edited version in Hughes, *The Obstructed Path*, 60.

32 Originally published in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* it was reprinted in *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris 1953) and in translation, under the title "A New Kind of History," was the centerpiece for Burke's collection, from which all quotations are taken, 27-43.

intention, although in conclusion, he admitted that he might not be able to accompany the voyage. At one level the piece is simply an extended review of two books that were published in 1949: Bloch's posthumous *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* and Fernand Braudel's thesis *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. At another level the piece is a laying on of hands, for within the year Braudel would be elected to Febvre's Chair. At yet another level the piece could be read as a defence of team-work in history, one which uses the individual works of an acknowledged master and a brilliant pupil to call for greater co-ordination and organisation of historical research.

In the historiography of the *Annales* these differing levels are related: the execution of Febvre's younger colleague had deprived him of his logical successor and Braudel was a brilliant younger scholar who was in the right place at the right time. This perspective stresses the continuity of the *Annales* school and suggests that the third level of discourse in the article merely points out how the careers of Bloch and Braudel would have been all the more fruitful, if they had had the opportunity to head up historical laboratories rather than working in isolation. Alain Guerreau was closer to the mark when he observed "the triple-timed engine of Braudel was created at the right moment, it earned its ingenious inventor the highest honours and the inheritance of Lucien Febvre."³³ For Braudel's division of historical time into three major components, geographical time, social time and individual time was certainly innovative, but it was more than that. I think Febvre, more than any other historian, realized just how "autre" or "new" it really was.

Febvre's call for large research teams to work on a variety of complex historical issues in a comparative context was not in itself new. He had made it as early as his 1936 inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France* and it was a common feature of his reflections on method during the late 1930's and early 1940's. A strongly hierarchical structure was, however, central to Febvre's vision of collective research. Witness his 1943 definition of the task: "The work to be done must be collective; I mean there must be an architect, a site foreman - and a host of labourers — carefully chosen, full of zeal and imbued with the master's ideas."³⁴ In his extended discussion of method in the *Apologie*, Bloch did not endorse this particular vision of research and instead looked forward to a time when scholars, animated by a team spirit, could collaborate on specific questions.³⁵ In his review of *Apologie* Febvre chose to ignore the quite different political and philosophical positions underlying these contradictory visions. Instead, he treated Bloch's failure to endorse a corporate model of research as merely a lapsus stemming from the mental depression Febvre alleged was then affecting Bloch:

But circumstances and that kind of withdrawal into himself which he experienced on the morrow of 1940, removal from his normal surroundings and the need to collect his thoughts rather than develop outwards probably explain his silence on this point which in no way detracts from the strength and purposefulness of his meditations, though it does date them. Since 1945 we have lived through years which have each been the equivalent of ten. People think of themselves as being in the vanguard when

33 Guerreau, *Le Féodalisme*, p. 143. My translation.

34 Febvre, *A New Kind*, 270.

35 Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, 69.

the main part of the troops have already advanced, by hand, several miles further on.³⁶

I think that this was a deliberate misrepresentation of both Bloch's *Apologie* and what his larger work during the Second War was all about. Furthermore, I believe the elliptical reference to the vanguard is significant in understanding why Febvre felt it necessary to offer this singular explanation.

Bloch considered the collapse of the French forces in the Spring of 1940 to have been a defeat of the French intellect.³⁷ It was for Bloch a defeat that went far beyond the inability of the French General Staff to grasp the significance of mobility in an age of tank warfare. This particular and important failure was merely a symptom of a much larger malaise, which affected the entire French academic and intellectual world. Action was required on several different and related levels. Not only did he consider collaboration abhorrent,³⁸ but active participation in the Resistance would become a moral imperative. Furthermore, a searching intellectual self-criticism and renewal was essential and this was the leitmotiv of the entire *Apologie*. As we have seen, in this work Bloch returned to the basic principles of Bergsonian philosophy and produced not only an important piece on theory and method, but one which reasserted the importance and centrality of the creative potential of the individual. Febvre's suggestion that this exercise was a rejection of outward development was not only an incredible misrepresentation, but, coming as it did from a scholar who had continued to occupy the Chair in the History of Civilisation throughout the years of Occupation, it might well be seen as hypocritical.³⁹

Prior to the war, the *Annales* had been an important forum for intellectual exchange. Although neither of its founders could be even remotely construed as Marxist, a number of important Marxist scholars did publish in the journal.⁴⁰ The

36 Febvre, *A New Kind*, 33-34.

37 See his penetrating analysis in *The Strange Defeat* (Oxford 1948).

38 Bloch would break with Febvre over the continuation of the publication of the *Annales* in Occupied France. It should of course be noted that because Bloch was Jewish, continuation of the journal meant his name as a founder would have to be and was dropped from the masthead. It was an action that, although not taken lightly by Febvre, foreshadowed his subsequent rewriting of history. Fink's *Marc Bloch*, 241-292, contains significant new material on the acrimonious relationship between Febvre and Bloch during this period.

39 It should be noted that Georges Duby, perhaps the most illustrious of Bloch's disciples in French medieval history, has recently strongly defended Febvre: "Je lui rends grâce, et je le fais à voix d'autant plus haute que, dans le moment où j'écris, [the summer of 1991] cet inimitable historien n'a pas bonne presse. Des gens qui ne savent pas ce que c'était que tenir bon sous la botte allemande pour ne pas baisser pavillon, lui reprochent son acharnement à maintenir les *Annales* en vie pendant l'occupation. On l'oppose à Marc Bloch dont on amplifie le rôle tandis que l'on minimise le sien. Or, s'il exista jamais une 'école des *Annales*', ce fut bien grâce à Lucien Febvre." *L'histoire continue* (Paris 1990), 116. If my interpretation is correct, then Duby would be right, but for the wrong reasons. The *école* we know owes far more to Febvre and Braudel, than Bloch. More's the pity.

40 Commenting on the contributions of Franz Borkenau, Paul Nizan, George Friedmann, Yoland Mayor, Georges Méquet, Maurice Halbwachs among others, in the 1930's, Alain Guerreau concluded "Des idées, oui, mais pas n'importe quelles idées. Sans doute, certains collaborateurs [to the review] avaient-ils des positions un tantinet flottantes ou ambiguës, Lucien Febvre au premier chef; il n'en demeure pas moins que les sympathies et l'orientation d'ensemble des *Annales* étaient très vigoureusement marquées, et que c'est cet aspect-là de la revue qui faisait bégayer de rage les vieux canassons et les spadassins de la plume

vanguard Febvre so disparagingly referred to, included those former colleagues and all the other intellectuals who still defended Marxism. Indeed, what made the changes wrought in the years between 1945 and 1949 seem so significant to Febvre was the fundamental geo-political re-orientation and division of Europe. In the new reality of the Cold War, Bloch's defence of an engaged humanist history might well appear dated to someone who had so accepted the norms of the new world order.⁴¹ These changes were also evocative of Braudelian geographic time and social time, for the Iron Curtain - at least along its northern line of descent - conformed to that most important division in modern European history: the second serfdom. It would not have been a coincidence lost on an historian of the calibre of Lucien Febvre.⁴² This recognition of the centrality of the *longue durée* resulted in a dramatic shift in focus and emphasis away from contemporary history in the pages of the journal. Prior to 1949, excluding the war years, the *Annales* devoted more than half of its pages to recent, post-1815, historical issues. After 1949, contemporary history rarely accounted for more than a quarter of the review.⁴³

Febvre's call for a new type of history meant therefore a rejection not only of the legacy of his former colleague and the philosophical bases they had both shared, but also of much of his own past. It cannot have been an easy choice. It would appear, however, that the importance and urgency he attached to the issues left him little alternative.⁴⁴ Nevertheless the language, even for an article by Febvre, was extraor-

qui se partageaient alors le devant de la scène historiographique." Guerreau, *Le Féodalisme*, 122.

- 41 Febvre's vision of the future of historical research included the following: "the alert and flexible research director who, having received a very broad education, having been trained to seek in history material with which to look for solutions to the great problems of life which societies and civilizations come up against daily, will be able to map out any investigation, put the right questions, point to precise sources of information, and, having done that, estimate expenditure, control the rotation of equipment, establish the number of staff in each team and launch his workers into a search for the unknown. Within two, three or four months, everything will have been gathered in. And then the processing begins - study of microfilms, recording on index cards, preparation of maps, statistics and graphs, comparison of historical material as such with linguistic, psychological, ethnological, archeological and botanical material, etc. which may assist the work. Six months or may be a year later and the investigation is ready for presentation to the public." Febvre, *A New Kind*, 33. Hughes, who knew whereof he spoke (from 1946 to 1948 he headed up the American State Department's European research division), commenting on this particular article by Febvre, observed that "it could have been written by an American foundation executive." *The Obstructed Path*, 57.
- 42 This renewed importance of old divisions strongly influenced historiographic debates in the West, most notably in the first round of the Transition Debate and then in the development of the Atlantic Revolution school. I have analysed the historicity of these debates in "Internal Dynamics and the International Cycle: Questions of the transition in Montréal, 1821-1828." Ph.D. Thesis, McGill University, 1985, 53-70.
- 43 After 1949, contemporary history was prominent in only four years of the journal's production (1952, 58, 64 and 66) and in these years it never reached the heights of the earlier period when in certain years recent history accounted for more than 65% of the journal's contents. H. L. Wesseling, "The Annales School and the Writing of Contemporary History," in *Review*, 1: 3/4. (1978), 186.
- 44 "Encouragement from outside, lessons drawn from philosophy [such as Bergson?] or warnings given by historians who went before us [Marc Bloch for instance?] will never bring about a change of outlook and attitude in the world of historians and lead to profound

dinary and it serves to remind us of the emotional costs that were involved. In his conclusion, Febvre discussed the role, scope and importance of history. (An issue which he felt Bloch had dealt with in too technical a manner!) After reflecting briefly on the social reality of demography, the “copulations, rapes, brutal mixtures and normal unions” that constitute its history, he wondered how long we remember and concluded:

But we have an instinct which leads us away from all that. An instinct warns us not to let ourselves be hypnotized, infatuated and absorbed by the past. It tells us that it is essential for human groups and societies to forget if they wish to survive. We have to live. We cannot allow ourselves to be crushed under the tremendous, cruel, accumulated weight of all that we inherit, that is, through the irresistible pressure of the dead on the living, flattening the thin layer of the present under their weight, to the point where the living are robbed of all resistance. [...] History in the last resort meets the same need as tradition, whether the need is conscious or no. History is a way of organizing the past so that it does not weigh too heavily on the shoulders of men. [...] For history has no choice in the matter it systematically gathers in, classifies and assembles past facts in accordance with its present needs. It consults death in accordance with the needs of life.⁴⁵

How quintessentially modern is the irony of Febvre’s use of a Bergsonian explanation of why we forget to redefine history as teleological process. Here Febvre used the urgency of action in the present, indeed treating it as a question of survival, to justify a dramatic rejection of the oppositional humanism inherent in Bergson’s living past.

What’s Been Lost and What’s Been Gained?

I have been arguing that there was not one, but at least two *Annales* schools. The abandonment of the *durée réelle* and the endorsement of the logic of the *longue durée* transformed the theory and method of the *Annales*. This transformation can in retrospect be seen as having its roots in the differing solutions to Bergson’s twin problems for historical theory and method proposed by the *Annales* founders. Nevertheless, although less rigorous, Febvre’s work had also shared in the Bergsonian optimism of his long-time colleague. Thus it is appropriate to illustrate how different the two *Annales* were by contrasting two articles, both on the topic of civilisation, the first written by Febvre in 1930 and the second by Braudel in 1958.⁴⁶

Febvre’s article attempted to explain why we have two different meanings for the

transformations in history, which are so apt to be thwarted in a country like ours as a result of university traditions. Repeated blows are needed. What is needed is a continuous harassment of contemporary man by means of history, an effective sort of history and one which takes on an active role in the consciousness of all. There will be protests at first. There will be ridicule. And then people will begin to think. And then we can start, play and win.” Febvre, *A New Kind*, 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁴⁶ Febvre’s *Civilisation: l’évolution d’un mot et des idées* was first published in *Première semaine internationale de synthèse*, Part 2, 1930 and was reprinted in *Pour une histoire à part entière* (Paris 1962) and in translation in Febvre, *A New Kind*, 219-257. Braudel’s *L’histoire des civilisations, le passé explique le présent* was first published as a chapter of the *Encyclopédie française* and was reprinted in *Écrits sur l’histoire* (Paris 1969) and translated in Braudel, *On History*, 177-218.

word civilisation. The first is plural, particular and refers to a social formation, i.e. French or Aztec civilisation. The second is singular, universal and linked to a concept of progress, i.e. civilisation as opposed to barbarism. Both senses of the word are surprisingly new and the latter preceded the former. Civilisation, in the sense of a well-ordered society, became current only in the last quarter of the 18th century. The word first appeared in print in 1766, in French, and then spread quite rapidly finding greater acceptance in English than in German. Civilisation was unknown to Rousseau, Voltaire, Montaigne and others of the Enlightenment, who used a combination of words - interestingly enough most frequently *polité* - to convey something similar. But, and the details need not detain us here, the resonance of progress was in large measure absent from these earlier terms. The idea of there being civilisations, in the plural, first appeared in the early nineteenth century and was apparently strongly influenced by the work of George Cuvier.⁴⁷

Braudel was also interested in the origin and meaning of civilisation, but his approach was radically different from that of his erstwhile mentor. He started out by linking civilisation to culture and suggested that the words, although often overlapping, frequently are in competition. After a cursory exploration of the history of the word civilisation, he proceeded to the heart of the matter. The way François Guizot, Jacob Burckhardt, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Alfred Weber and Philip Bagby each approached the relationship between civilisation and culture was examined in turn. There is a chronological order here; however, the analysis was not historical, but conceptual. The merits and the short-comings of each person's approach were discussed in order to deduce a general model of what civilisation means. Not surprisingly, Braudel proposed a three-part model for the analysis of civilisation: cultural areas, borrowings and refusals. Civilisations are first of all geographic spaces, which share certain cultural features. Cultural elements are, however, constantly on the move between areas and there is a great deal of borrowing from differing spaces. Nevertheless, certain elements are not borrowed. Civilisations can and do refuse innovation from outside and this refusal is the third important defining characteristic of the model. In conclusion, Braudel discussed how this conceptual model might facilitate inter-disciplinary research into the nature and evolution of civilisations.

My point here is a simple one. For Febvre, the creation of the idea of civilisation and its subsequent evolution, whereby it came to mean two quite different things, was an historical problem, that is a problem of temporal dimensions susceptible to explanation. For Braudel, the question was fundamentally conceptual and only incidentally historical: if an adequate model could be developed that was consistent with the past, one could explain both the present and the future. These two approaches represented two quite different and antithetical historical theories and methods.

Through a detailed and attentive listening to the usage of the term civilisation in a wide variety of sources, Febvre argued that we can begin to understand how people who lived in the past viewed not only this word, but their world. The focus on the *outillage mental* of particular people living in society was deliberate, for it permitted an analytical understanding and appreciation of the creative processes that were under

⁴⁷ A greatly misunderstood thinker, (see Gould, *Time's Arrow*) from whom I have argued historians still have a lot to learn; *Les relations ville/compagne: le cas du bois de chauffage* (Montréal 1988), xciv-cix.

way. Braudel did not attempt to understand the historical context of the differing thinkers he discussed, because he did not conceive of their ideas as historical products. Indeed, he explicitly denied the possibility of understanding such constructs in human terms.⁴⁸ Rather, he treated these writings as attempts, for the most part failed, to transcend the particular of individual life in order to grasp the importance of the general phenomenon of civilisation, which alone had historical significance.

Clearly, Braudel's theory and method in this piece excluded any serious consideration of memory within history. Nor is this surprising, for Braudel was the historian who had compared the historical importance of individual human experience to fireflies lighting up a beach: potentially dramatic and beautiful, but essentially ephemeral.⁴⁹ What might not be so clear, is the corollary. The denial of the centrality of individual human experience resulted in an emphasis on spatial determinates and structural influences. Rather than reality being conceived as continuous, temporal movement, his approach presumed spatial immobility wherein change could come only very slowly. Thus, since people's creative choices were no longer conceived as the central integrative aspect unifying human life with this larger temporal movement of reality, human agency lost both its epistemological and historical significance. In its place, Braudel proposed the social mathematics of game theory, informed by a concentration on place and a recognition of the centrality of the *longue durée*.⁵⁰ It was an epistemology wherein a scientific discourse of proof consisted of cybernetic models that recognized not an historical time, but a supra-human time, "a mathematical, godlike time [...] external to men."⁵¹

If it would be difficult to find a less Bergsonian conceptualisation of time than that espoused by Fernand Braudel, this did not mean his theory and method represented a complete break with the conceptual and political programme of the early *Annales*. In the work of both Febvre and Bloch geography was conceived historically. Spatial determinates were not immutable, but rather socially determined and hence could be modified over time. In the best of the *Annales* later work, this legacy of Vidal de la Blache remained an important element. Similarly, a recognition of the centrality of social history characterised the best work of the two schools. Furthermore, the importance of inter-disciplinary dialogue which the early *Annales* had championed was also a part of the very significant achievements of the later *Annales* school, in the 1950's and 1960's. As Febvre foresaw, this dialogue established history at the heart of the human sciences in France. Despite these shared characteristics and the evident gains of those years, however, the theory and method of the later *Annales* constituted a qualitatively different approach to the fundamental questions of what does it mean to understand and to explain historical processes of change.

48 His discussion of the meaning of the present was quite explicit in this regard: "Let us not judge this present on the scale of our own individual lives, in the daily slices, thin, insignificant and translucent, represented by our own personal existence. On the scale of civilizations and of all other collective constructs, quite other measurements must be used, in order to comprehend and grasp them." Braudel, *On History*, 214.

49 This analogy was advanced in his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*, December, 1950. *Ibid.*, 10.

50 Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences: The *longue durée*." in *Ibid.*, 25-54.

51 *Ibid.* 48

A dialectical relationship between the individual and society was at the heart of the early *Annales* theory and method. To understand historical processes of change meant understanding how people saw the possibilities and constraints they faced. To explain historical processes of change meant explaining how and why people took advantage of certain possibilities and not of others in their creative evolutionary modification of those constraints. The primacy of this dialectical relationship meant that the social was not conceived as a separate or pre-existing construction upon which the individual had some influence, but rather the social was people in time. In contrast, Braudel's "triple-timed engine" of geographic time, social time and individual time placed the emphasis upon the pre-constructed, already existing constraints of spatial and social determinates. Although not immutable, these determinates operated according to rhythms and logics which belonged to an order of things beyond that of the individual human experience. To understand and explain historical processes of change in this perspective meant above all understanding and explaining the relationship between these largely quantifiable, supra-human determinates. No longer the key to understanding the fundamental nature of reality, individual human experience paled in significance. Ironically, this meant both a lengthening and a flattening of historical time. Since that which was most important operated on the time scales of the *longue durée*, the perspective was opened onto vast stretches of human history. Research into these long-time spans, however, necessarily focused on the quantifiable as opposed to the qualitative aspects of historical experience. In short, by stressing continuity and structure the second *Annales* school effectively eschewed the significance of historical specificity. Ultimately this paradigmatic shift would lead to a denial of the need for an epistemology proper to history.⁵²

This effective denial of the importance of human agency and historical specificity, in favour of the perspective of the *longue durée*, greatly facilitated the search for a new common ground with the social sciences. Thus, there was a qualitative difference between the inter-disciplinary dialogues engaged in by the two *Annales* schools. In the early *Annales* the dialogue focused to a significant degree on the historical nature of socio-economic and political problems facing progressive scholarship. In the inter-disciplinary dialogue of the later *Annales* it was precisely these pre-war schools of the social sciences, which had stressed the importance of social change, that were notable by their absence. Their place was taken by newer schools within the social sciences; schools which reflected in their own fields a parallel paradigmatic shift away from human agency and social change, towards questions of social control, structure and immobilities; schools which privileged the use of abstract models and supra-human explanations of causality.

52 As Pierre Chaunu expressed it in the 1964 founding manifesto of serial history: "Pour l'historien comme pour chaque combattant de cette Sociologie vraiment globale, véritablement explicative, donc vraiment utile, qui malgré instituts, projets et discours demeure une promesse réfugiée encore dans un avenir imprécis, l'épistémologie est une tentation qu'il faut résolument savoir écarter. L'expérience de ces dernières années ne semble-t-elle pas prouver qu'elle peut être solution de paresse chez ceux qui vont s'y perdre avec délice - une ou deux brillantes exceptions ne font que confirmer la règle - signe d'une recherche qui piétine et se stérilise?" *Histoire quantitative, histoire sérieuse* (Paris 1978), 11.

The fundamental re-orientation of the *Annales* in the early years of the Cold War was not an isolated event. The success of Braudel's new approach in history was paralleled by that of Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, Skinner in psychology, Chomsky in linguistics and Popper in philosophy — to name but the most prominent architects of what was to become the new intellectual order in Western academic thought. The remarkable success and influence gained by these new interpretive frameworks has objectively impeded a critical, historical understanding of their development. In a manner which illustrates well Bergson's perceptive comments on the self-validation of the present in the past, these schools appear as the crowning achievements of a progressive evolution within their respective fields, rather than as representing significant breaks with earlier critical approaches; breaks whose historical specificity necessarily raises the question of the limitations that a dominant social order imposes on the development of the human sciences. In 1845, Karl Marx observed that the dominant ideas of an age are those of the dominant social class. My, perhaps all too summary, critical evaluation of the evolution of the most important school in twentieth-century historical theory and method would certainly suggest that his observation retains great merit. Nor, I suggest, would a larger critical re-assessment of the dialectical interaction between the conjuncture of the Cold War and the development of other schools of critical thought in the academy prove him wrong. As we undertake this critical re-assessment, so necessary for the creation of a truly human science, I believe a respect for human agency in its historical specificity, which was also a hall-mark of the early *Annales* school, offers our best starting point.

*I would like to thank Erik Davis, Grace Laing Hogg, Richard Lanthier, Stuart Pierson, Brian Young and the outside readers of **left history** for their critical comments on earlier versions of this article; Louise Dechêne for much needed support; Elizabeth-Anne Malischewski for guidance and, as always, Richard Rice for inspiration. This article is dedicated to the memory of a fine Marxist historian, who always recognized in his work the centrality of human agency: George Rudé, 1910-1993.*

Radical History Review

Editorial Secretary
Daniel Walkowitz, New York University

Published for MARHO:
The Radical Historians' Organization

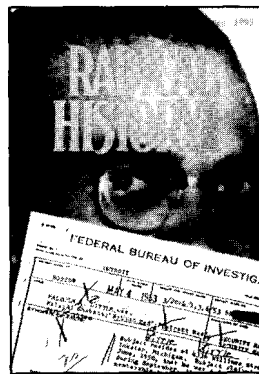
Radical History Review presents innovative scholarship and commentary that looks critically at the past and its historians from a non-sectarian perspective drawn from the political left. *RHR* scrutinizes conventional history and seeks to broaden and advance the discussion of crucial issues such as the role of race, class and gender in history. The journal offers original articles; review essays that examine the uses and abuses of history in the popular media, film, history museums and other public forums; and interviews with leading radical historians. Each volume is illustrated with drawings, cartoons, photographs and other graphic art. Issues are often thematic and cover a wide range of geographic areas and subjects. Recent themes have included: "Political Correctness," After the Berlin Wall, Gender Histories and Heresies, and Perspectives on the Columbus Quincentenary. Volume 55 (Winter 1993) focuses on African-Americans and labor movements in the United States.

Triannual (ISSN 0163-6545)
Volumes 55-57, 1993
Institutions \$48.00; Individuals \$24.00.
Single Parts \$16.00.

Send orders to:
Cambridge University Press
40 West 20th Street
New York, NY 10011-4211

(Outside the USA, Canada or Mexico, contact:
Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building,
Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2RU, England.)

**CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS**



E.P. Thompson



1924-1993

