

AMERICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Charles Town, West Virginia

Historians and Historiography: the 20th-century *Annaliste* framework

Historiographical Essay 2

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Hist501: Historiography

June 7, 2022

Historiography has undergone much progression in the past centuries. Initially, the chronology was a natural method of recording history, which had the romantic influences of Greece, Rome, and early Christianity. This was followed by new directions with the impress of humanists from the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution. Both earlier methods reflected unique forms of biases, none the less, there projected the societal influences and causes. While in the 18th century, a positive outlook took root through Enlightenment historians like Gibbon and Condorcet with philosophical history and the philosophy of history. But it was Giambattista Vico that advocated a cyclical theory of historical development, as well as, for the historian to have a canny ability to reenvision the past with empathy. The 19th century focused on objectivity with Ranke; as such, the critical method emerged, a reconstructing of the true nature of events that a text describes, and history became established as an independent area of study. By the 20th century, the writing of history became infused with the social sciences. The Annales school emphasized a socio-economic-cultural history.¹ Subsequently, the social aspect created challenges in various forms, but it is these extreme thoughts that appear to be competing for prominence as well. It was the *Annaliste* that made a significant difference in historiographical thought by providing a framework that I take some foundational affinity while yet having some qualifying reservations as well.

Among the many schools of thought for all historians to consider was one of great significance that developed out of the French *Annaliste* (French for Analysts or Annalist) in the 1920s from the prominent Fernand Braudel, Marc Bloch, and Lucien Febvre. This work is by no means exhaustive but will take away significant points in the conclusion. Established out of a

¹ Michael E. Brooks, "20th Century Historiographical Trends," Video Lecture, Bowling Green State University, retrieved from YouTube user Michael E. Brooks at <https://youtu.be/vMmKtXLBcLQ>

publication titled *Annals of Economic and Social History*, there were some connections to the Marxist analysis yet had some distinction from political Marxism. The Annalist promoted an “interdisciplinary approach between academic disciplines” or collaboration. Fernand Braudel in his book *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), masterfully makes use of other disciplines. It included geography, sociology, economics, psychology, and Anthropology for “total history.” This angle, without doubt, enables for a full understanding of history with the integration of other fields of expertise. However, Alain Corbin informs that “this [Annalise] mood should be seen as only one part of a more general ‘turn’ in the intellectual direction.”²

The Annalist also emphasized the drawing upon the “thinking and beliefs” of a given society, as well as the grasping of history from the “common people” over the political elites. This method was a new way of looking at history from a long period of elite influence that opened fresh perspectives and provided more context. These are arguably valid essential aspects to consider; however, this does not negate the need to understand history from also the elite’s perspective. For a complete balance, there should also be included political elites, preferably

² Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 115, ISBN 9780415202671, retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=235279#>; Michael E. Brooks, "20th Century Historiographical Trends, Video Lecture, Bowling Green State University," retrieved from YouTube user Michael E. Brooks at <https://youtu.be/vMmKtXLBcLQ>; Ernst Breisach, *Historiography Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, 3rd ed., (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 391-94, ISBN 9780226072838, retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=448528>; Dennis Smith, “History, Geography and Sociology: Lessons from the Annales School,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 5.1 (1988): 142-43. Web.

without their control or influence of the historian. With both perspectives, a comprehensive historical record can be drawn.³

Another enlightening observation that the Annalist reveals is their understanding of how time passes in three ways. First, the unrealized “long durations” like the rise and fall of civilizations. Secondly, the cyclical and measurable time millennia, centuries, and decades referred to as “conjunctures.” Thirdly, “event or short-term history” that is, visible events, places, and people, a more chronological perspective of time. All these frames of time are essential to consider when evaluating the whole context. Bloch’s contribution to time divisions was regarding “civilizations and generations” by way of *conjunctures* or “conditions that occurred simultaneously... without priority to a single factor.” I suggest there is an additional way of looking at time, a more magnified approach across time and all-encompassing, that is, of the past, present, and “future.” As such, it is like using a magnifying glass to consider what correlations took place before an event, during an event, and after an event (or future). Then stepping outside of time and viewing the all-encompassing period, these can reveal or reflect a cause and effect. It would be like viewing a parade as a spectator on the ground seeing only a portion as processions pass by vs. viewing it in entirety from outer-space all at once.⁴

A third area of significance that the Annalist addressed was geo-historical. I ascribe that the scientific principle of general relativity (space and time) is an essential context in which history takes place. It was Braudel who explains that humans interact with their environment and thus make up part of the historical influences. He notes that geography changes and thus influence events differently. Bloch also correlates this relationship of societies and physical

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

components knit with humanities struggle to survive. He emphasized correlations between demography and geography. But it was Febvre that stressed “human adaptation to environmental challenges.” In this way he considers the “‘geo-historical’ structures” like “physical, economic, [and] climatic.” Accordingly, when examining society’s historically, one must consider their geo-history as well, the impact of space on history.⁵

In conclusion, by studying the various historians and methods, or schools of thought, historians can extract and utilize what is valuable and dismiss what is extreme for applying balanced methodologies. There can be extreme aspects to the various thoughts with bias agendas; thus, exercising caution in those areas is prudent when writing history. Social history is by no means the only kind of history. The Annalist methods are not the only right methods for writing history, as some flaws are addressed in this research, but they have made many positive contributions to the writing of history. Other historians have made good points on methods not discussed here, and it is, for this reason, that I prefer not to limit myself to trends or historians exclusively but rather prefer to absorb and utilize effective methods from all. I feel that different histories may require different or multiple techniques, accordingly, may dictate the methods used. Also, the mood of the historian, politics, or society may differ as well, thus impacting the methods used, for example, whether the writer is in the period or writing of the past. Points to take away from examining the Annalist are: 1) consider the thinking and beliefs of ordinary people but don’t neglect the elite, 2) think of the various groupings of time but avoid the disregard for sequence correlation, 3) make use of interdisciplinary expertise, and 4) consider

⁵ Dennis Smith, “History, Geography and Sociology: Lessons from the Annales School,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 5.1 (1988): 142. Web.; James R. Hudson, “Braudel’s Ecological Perspective,” *Sociological Forum* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 150. doi:10.1007/BF01107898, retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=aph&AN=11057137&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

how geography impacted any given event. It is these points that provide some excellent foundational approaches or “framework” to historiographic methodology. With “total history,” we can expound on all aspects of people and events for a complete understanding.⁶

⁶ Carl D. Weiner, "The Annales School," Carleton College Department of History, retrieved from <http://www.carleton.edu/history/faculty/emeriti/weiner/annaes>

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