

## The future of historical writing

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**In various manifestations, a sense of crisis appears to have become a universal affliction among historians. Pursuing the very condition of writing history now, the two publications reviewed here respond, in different but related ways, to this context of presentist concern.**

Reviewed : Christophe Granger (ed.), *À quoi pensent les historiens : Faire de l'histoire au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris : Editions Autrement, 2013, 315 p., 23€. Christophe Charle, *Homo historicus : Réflexions sur l'histoire, les historiens et les sciences sociales*, Paris : Armand Colin, 2013, 320 p., 26 €.

Concern for the future of historical writing is now ubiquitous in the discipline. A sense of crisis, in various manifestations, appears to have become a universal affliction among scholars, not merely of history, but of the humanities and social sciences more generally. The standing tropes of fragmentation through specialization and of estrangement within the family of disciplines combine with fears to do with the outside institutional environment, with funding, student numbers, and political administrations out for the destruction of the “inefficient”. In different, if ultimately related, ways, the two publications here reviewed, in pursuing the very condition of writing history now, respond to this context of presentist concern.

### What are historians *not* thinking of?

*A quoi pensent les historiens?* strings together fifteen papers that provide accounts of the currently central problematics of various fields of history. The volume follows a tradition; in 1974, *Faire de l'histoire* and in 1995 *Passés recomposés*<sup>1</sup> had formulated a similar agenda of presenting the then most urgent problems of historical knowledge, in emphatic keeping with the zeitgeist and tentative pursuit of a generational project, although not in the form of “a balance, nor a manifesto” (8), as suggesting either completeness or a unified research program. The collection, then, is an attempt to trace certain lines of development of historical writing while they are being drawn, and to make sense of the inexorable diversification of the discipline that has taken place over the last decades. The collection is difficult to review because it is premised, if subtly, on a ludic principle. It stages a game of musical chairs; its emphatic *Now* is the moment the music stops playing and all the problematics that pretend to centrality scramble for seats, for

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Le Goff, Pierre Nora (eds.), *Faire de l'histoire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974; Jean Boutier (ed.), *Passés recomposés: Champs et chantiers de l'histoire*, Paris: Editions Autrement, 1995.

representation in the central assembly of historical study. The real question of this game is inevitably: who did not catch a spot? What are historians *not* thinking of?

It is remarkable that the volume has, in a sense, a relatively narrow conception of the discipline of history. It falls to Stéphane van Damme's paper to cover relations with neighboring fields, such as sociology proper, social anthropology, and in particular the history of science, a task the paper achieves with great clarity. Yet, given the importance, over the last decades, of interdisciplinary work – as well as of interdisciplinary friction – for the emergence of innovative perspectives, it might have been desirable to pursue these issues separately and in greater depth. Especially the history of science, which has of late experienced rapid growth and a proliferation of novel problematics that have radiated into other fields, appears somewhat neglected in spite of van Damme's valiant efforts. By contrast, the relations between history and literature (Judith Lyon-Cahen), "visual culture" (Gil Bartholeyns) and narration (Christophe Granger), thus some of the main aesthetic forms in which historical knowledge is commonly cast, are amply discussed in the volume. Yet, the discussion of the practical and technological infrastructures underpinning these aesthetic forms (e.g. of writing practice or of academic publishing, of historical television, or indeed of the social frames of the academic world in which historical knowledge circulates) might have received more attention. It is here where science studies and the history of science, with their focus on laboratory practice and experimental systems, for instance, might have been instructive. It does not seem to be part of the generational project to mend the traditional blind spots of historical writing as regarding its own production.

The instructive global history article by Romain Bertrand focuses on the early modern period and lays much weight on the discussion of "connected history" as calling for, but also permitting, a recovery of the concrete, the small scale, and the strange in the field. In a sense, however, the absence of a companion piece that would have traced aspects of global history in the late modern period, and in which colonialism and the post-colonial condition would have featured more prominently, has the effect of presenting the global as a relatively depoliticized environment. This is on the verge of being a recurrent theme of the volume. Many of the papers share a perspective in which "social life" is regarded as the foundation for all historical objects. The ability of history to make meaningful assertions about the social is, perhaps, still the standard by which the scientificity of the discipline is measured in France. There are many things to be said in favor of such a perspective, and it can certainly be deployed for instructive analyses of the political field, as is demonstrated by Déborah Cohen's intriguing paper on the shifting study of the categories of the social, the idioms and practices of the formation of social distinctions. Still, in this overall perspective, the political remains an epiphenomenon of the social. The great absent of the volume, surely, is the state. Not a single chapter discusses what is or is not going on with the state as a field of historical inquiry. Seeing as previous projects of disciplinary innovation were achieved against the state-centered history of institutions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it seems that, at least in this respect, the current practice of historical writing is hardly prepared to break with tradition.

To some extent, these observations on the absentees of *À quoi pensent les historiens ?* are, of course, unfair. The volume is well aware of the limitations besetting its very undertaking: the number of chairs can never suffice. Even nationally, it seems outright impossible to provide, with any pretense of completeness, an overview of the problematics of current historical writing;

and internationally, this impossibility is squared. No doubt, the volume is useful; scholars in different fields will hold reckoning with the assessment of their guiding problems, and certainly many of the chapters will advance to the status of assigned readings with which students are introduced to the conceptual foundations of particular fields. Delphine Gardey's insightful and trenchant piece on gender and the disciplinary politics of the assigning of distinct seats to distinct sub-fields – the underlying principle of playing musical chairs in the first place – is exemplary in this respect. Besides, the general intervention the volume pursues is defined by the elegant introductory article by Christophe Granger. This chapter is notable for its attention towards the ever more precarious social environment of historical writing, as well as its intimations of the persisting joys of historical study, in spite of what almost looks like the early stages of a de-institutionalization of the epistemic field as a whole. The music is already playing again; and maybe we do not need chairs.

### **Homo historicus**

Christophe Charle's *Homo historicus* is a collection of essays that date from the last fifteen years and are arranged in three sections. The first of these concerns, by and large, the current state of the discipline. It is also in this section that Charle discusses the sociology of history as a discipline (a similar piece, by Marte Mangset and Emmanuelle Picard, is also found in *À quoi pensent les historiens ?*) and the relations between history and social science. The second section, the most voluminous, assembles a set of more specific methodological discussions that pertain to the thematic choices with which the increasingly interdisciplinary work of historical studies can be mastered (in particular, Charle discusses prosopography and the relations between history, literature and the theater). This reflects the methodological choices of many of Charle's well-known works and thus also provides an indirect account of the author's practice. The third section, finally, presents a gallery of portraits of nineteenth and twentieth-century activist (*engagés*) historians – to the reviewer, in particular the revisiting of Charles Seignobos as a *dreyfusard* and pacifist is remarkable – and the intersections between their oeuvres and the political fields in which they were situated. These portraits serve as examples of *homines historici* who practice historical writing, regardless of their chosen subject-matter, “in close touch with living history” (*à l'écoute de l'histoire vivante*, p. 19), that is to say, in some sort of dialogue and engagement with their present. The volume concludes with an interview, in which Charle gives a succinct summary of his overall views on historical writing as it is currently practiced, and the political environment in which it currently finds itself.

Charle is given to very clear judgment; but occasionally one would wish for more elaborate discussion. Whereas Granger emphasizes the joy of working on history as co-existing with, and – in the vein of a Nietzschean *fröhliche Wissenschaft?* – underpinning, the epistemic pursuit of knowledge about the historical past, Charle insists on the normative force of the scientificity of historical knowledge and on the conflictual and political relations such knowledge maintains with its broader environment. Charle's rejection of a pessimist understanding of the current state of the discipline is firm. He dismisses any prophecy of doom for historical knowledge as a cultural practice in general and attacks the Franco-centric “catastrophism” (p. 19) that marks a number of recent interventions on the purported “crisis” of the discipline. Charle's stance inadvertently revisits 19<sup>th</sup>-century commonplaces: the appeal for activism in emphatic

defiance of difficult epistemic conditions as well as the exhortation just to keep working quietly and not to ask for some higher purpose or meaning of historical knowledge were familiar turf already for, say, Seignobos. The same is, certainly, the case for the notion of a current “crisis” of historical writing itself, seeing the extent to which discussions between the 1890s and the 1930s revolved around the “crisis of historicism”. To be sure, in those days, the alleged “relativist” threat of all-encompassing historicity was considered capable of triggering a veritable state of epistemic emergency. Is it, possibly, a sense of nostalgia for the destructive potential history was then still accorded that is at the core of the current eagerness both to diagnose, as well as to deny, a “crisis”? The acute pessimism that fueled those former discussions seems irrecoverable. And yet, neither the ludic perspective of Granger nor the engaged one of Charle achieve, or even pursue, a sense of optimism as regards the future of historical writing. The only remaining option then seems to be what Kant called an “Abderitism”, a notion of the future as not going anywhere and always merely confirming the narrow limits placed on reason as accessible to an incurably ignorant humanity. But with Kant, we may not be able to avoid asking ourselves whether it is enough, for the future of historical writing, merely to embark for Abdera.

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