
UNIT 14 THE ANNALES SCHOOL

Structure

- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Social and Intellectual Context
- 14.3 Foundation of the *Annales*
- 14.4 New Trends in Historiography
- 14.5 Contribution of the *Annales* School
- 14.6 Summary
- 14.7 Exercises
- 14.8 Suggested Readings

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The *Annales* School of historiography, widely considered as one of the most important developments in the twentieth-century history-writing, formally emerged with the foundation of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (Annales of Economic and Social History) in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. In terms of thematic range and methodological innovations, this School remained foremost in France and influenced history-writing in many other countries for decades and had followers all over the world. In this Unit you will learn about the context of its emergence, its contributions to history-writing, and the various new historiographical trends it gave rise to.

14.2 SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

The decade of the 1920s witnessed two paradoxical developments in France: The First World War had ended and its formal conclusion had occurred at Versailles, near Paris, under the Presidentship of the French Prime Minister, Clemenceau. Symbolically thus it was the victory of France over its traditional rival Germany, much more than the collective victory of the rest of Europe. The great French Impressionist painter, Claude Monet, had done the most renowned of his works, *Les Nymphéas*, the Water Lilies, 'as a bouquet of flowers presented to France after the victory', and a special museum structure, *L'Orangerie*, was built in the heart of Paris to display them. There was therefore an aura of celebration in the French air.

The air, however, was also beginning to show traces of gloom in the latter part of the decade with the spectre of the Great Depression gradually extending its shadows over it; the Depression was soon to overwhelm societies and economies around the world, the more so the ones that had most to lose. France was among them.

There was thus a palpable restiveness around, a puzzle that perplexed everyone: How could it be possible that a nation, which had vanquished an old and powerful enemy so recently, could stare helplessly before a debilitating circumstance? This was an entirely new situation, which posed an encompassing question and waited for a new and encompassing answer. Old answers would by their nature be inadequate. New answers demanded new perspectives and new methodologies. If history was to contribute to this quest, it must first renew itself by self-questioning. This was the social context of the

discipline's self-renewal, marked by the founding of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*.

There was besides an intellectual context. The Nineteenth Century had witnessed the birth of several new disciplines, notably social and cultural anthropology, human geography and psychology. Young and energetic as these were, their practitioners looked at the old discipline of history sceptically. Durkheimian sociology in particular was expansive and ambitious, claiming the capability of a totalising explanation, explaining, in other words, the entire spectrum of societal dynamics. Human geography too was not far from extending similar claims, focusing on social, cultural and institutional forms of organisation.

History came in for a degree of derision for its exclusive concern with 'the event' – the unique, short term, the immediate and transient. This was how history was studied then: focusing on change of a reign or a dynasty, wars, battles, administrative measures. As John Seeley had put it pithily: 'History is past politics and politics is present history.' No long term dynamics interested historians. What then was the point of studying history if all it explained was how one ruler replaced another and how one battle added or deleted a little bit of land from the territory ruled by him? The 'event' was like the surf in the ocean, ephemeral and therefore insignificant; the real 'movement' in the ocean was invisible to the naked eye, below the surface. This, the anthropologists and the geographers felt, was ignored by the historians.

A second question was the use of historical sources. Archives had acquired a sanctity for the historians that became almost a moral precept. All statements made by them must be traced back to some or the other empirical evidence stored in dusty archival files. Anything short of it failed to constitute 'facts', so sacred for the historian. Even as late as the 1970s, historian Jacques Leonard questioned the legitimacy of philosopher Michel Foucault's intervention in the problems of history by threateningly demanding if he had ever soiled his hands in the dust of archival files ('The Historian and the Philosopher') and Foucault responded by making fun of the sanctity of archival dust ('The Dust and the Cloud'). The historian accepted as true whatever was on the surface of the documentary evidence; that the document itself was a cultural construct, a highly subjective construct never bothered the historian. The objective reality lay hidden in the very long drawn formation of human behaviour, their habits, value systems, and their responses to situations in life. All these were formed at the subconscious level within the family, the community, the neighbourhood. None of these was either the result of, or recorded in written documents, nor was any of it obvious. These subtleties were missed out in the discipline of history in its preoccupation with the 'event', the immediate and the obvious. A sort of vision of 'Social Science' was emerging from which history was excluded.

14.3 FOUNDATION OF THE ANNALES

The lambasting of history left two friends, young historians in a far away corner of the French academia, Strasbourg, very restless. Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre were unhappy with the kind of history they had learnt and were forced to teach; they were sensitive to the insights the younger disciplines could provide. They were dissatisfied that disciplines that were such close kin should be at war with each other and each had erected impermeable boundaries around itself. In January of 1929 they launched a new journal, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. Initially, the journal focused on issues of contemporary concerns to seek to understand the genesis of the emerging crisis; as time passed, it turned increasingly to medieval and early modern history, the ones practiced by Bloch and Febvre.

In the all too brief Editorial in the journal's inaugural issue, the editors movingly emphasised the necessity and the benefits of what later came to be called interdisciplinary research, even as one remained firmly grounded in one's own discipline. 'Of course, nothing would be better than if each one, absorbed in his own legitimate specialisation, assiduously tilling his own patch of land, made at the same time the effort to understand the work of his neighbour. But the separating walls are often so high that they block our view. And yet, what a host of valuable ideas on method and interpretation of facts, what insights into culture and advances in intuition would germinate through more frequent intellectual interaction amongst all these different groups! On this depends the future of economic history, as also the right knowledge of facts which shall tomorrow constitute 'all history.'

'All history' was what *Annales* was keen to constitute, in place of partial history; this will also be the 'true history.' True history was not being counterposed here to false history but to any form of partial history. 'All history' and 'true history' would comprise an ever expansive domain for the discipline; no part of the past and no aspect of it was beyond its purview. Space was thus being created for meeting the challenge of other disciplines as well as incorporating their insights.

Consequently, newer themes opened up for the historian's exploration. Marc Bloch himself created a comprehensive and grand structure in his study of feudalism by looking at all its aspects in one book of two volumes, *The Feudal Society*, 1936. He spent a considerable time living in the French countryside in order to sensitize himself to the remains of that society, whether as abandoned agricultural fields or as cultural attitudes and values. Lucien Febvre on the other hand was more keen to explore the area of emotions and beliefs. His book, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: the Religion of Rabelais* (1942) dwelt upon one central character, François Rabelais, critical of Christianity to the point of unbelief. The character was however a point of entry for Febvre's study of religion in all its myriad aspects in the context of society in the sixteenth century. His celebrated essay, 'Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past' was a watershed in extending history's concerns into new domains. Indeed it starts with the assertion: 'Sensibility and history – a new subject: I know of no book that deals with it. I do not even know whether the many problems which it involves have anywhere been set forth. And yet, please forgive a poor historian for uttering the artist's cry, and yet what a fine subject it is!' In some ways the essay was to set the tone for what was later to be explored on a very large scale by *Annales* historians, i.e. the history of *mentalités*, mentalities.

History was thus beginning to become part of the Social Sciences. In 1903 François Simiand had visualised Social Science in the singular and history outside it, though he had also shown the way for it to enter the arena of social science in his essay, 'methode historique et science sociale':

'If the study of human facts wishes to establish itself as a positivist science, it must turn away from the singular facts and address itself to recurring facts, that is set aside the accidental for the regular, eliminate the individual for the social.'

It was an invitation to historians to learn from Economics, Sociology, Anthropology and Geography to focus on what was then conceived of as the 'laws' of social movement and change which are inherent in the general rather than the particular. The essay was reproduced in the *Annales* in 1960 by Fernand Braudel 'for the benefit of young historians to enable them to gauge the distance travelled in half a century and to comprehend better the dialogue between History and the Social Sciences which remains the objective and the raison d'être of our journal.'

The first responses to the invitation to study the long-term regularities were a merger between Economics and History and the emergence of economic history as an autonomous discipline. Ernest Labrousse's work, *La crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'Ancien Régime et au début de la Révolution* (The Crisis of the French Economy at the end of the Ancient Regime and the beginning of the Revolution, 1944) and Fernand Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, 1949), both sought out the long term trends in history that would help us understand, and to an extent predict, social and economic change. Unlike in the sphere of industrial economy, where overproduction leads to economic crisis, in agriculture underproduction of food grains lies at the base of a crisis situation which then spreads to other sectors of economy and society, was Labrousse's conclusion. Braudel on the other hand had studied the extremely slow change in the ecology around the Mediterranean and the long term and long distance impact of intercontinental trade. Braudel's interest in these themes remained abiding, though through his later works he constantly kept extending their frontiers. The three volume study under the general title, *Civilization and Capitalism* and the titles of individual volumes, *The Structures of Everyday Life*, *The Wheels of Commerce* and *The Perspectives of the World* both continues with his earlier concerns and incorporates new ones, such as the history of the diet, into them. One branching out from the long-term history was the history of the climate, which spans several centuries. Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie was among the early historians of the 60s who introduced this new theme into European historiography.

A new territory was being explored here, the territory of long-term history of the economy and its ramifications in society. The new problematics also demanded new visions of history, new sources and new methods of investigation. Economic changes were not left to general impressions: they had to be based upon quantitative data, a new concept, further buttressed by the coming of computers in the 1960s. Of sources too, Lucien Febvre had reacted to the assertion of Fustel de Coulanges in another context, 'History is written through the use of texts', by declaring: 'texts, certainly, but all kinds of texts... and not texts alone...' Marc Bloch, as we have noted above, lived in the French countryside in the mode of an anthropologist to get insights into the working of the feudal system.

Fernand Braudel had taken seriously the criticism of the historians' preoccupation with the 'event', the immediate and therefore with the single, unidimensional conception of Time. His own studies took him a long distance away from the immediate. He was therefore able to conceptualise different rhythms of historical time in different problematic contexts. In an influential essay, 'History and the Social Sciences: the *Longue Durée*', 1958, Braudel earmarked three temporal rhythms: the *long term*, or the structure, which moves ever so slowly as in writing the history of ecology and social and economic systems, such as capitalism; the *conjunctures*, which provide the method for mapping the history of medium term change such as inter-decennial change in patterns of long distance trade; and the *event*, the immediate.

14.4 NEW TRENDS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Three offshoots of these new ventures were the history of mentalities, the history of groups at society's margins and comparative history.

Lucien Febvre had already embarked upon the territory of mentalities in his essay on 'Sensibility and History'. Marc Bloch himself had explored the theme of royal thaumaturgy in *Le rois thaumaturges* in 1924, the healing powers of kings, translated into English as *The Royal Touch*, 1973. The early explorations had ignited enough

interest and the study of mentalities began to grow substantially. Michel Vovelle extended the quantitative method to the examination of testamentary wills preserved in church records to map the changing attitudes towards death in medieval and early modern France. Jacques Le Goff looked at how attitudes towards Time were changing in the Middle Ages in his highly celebrated essay, 'Merchant's Time and Church's Time in the Middle Ages.' Church's time was cosmic, immeasurable, extending from the Creation of the Universe to the Day of Judgment; merchant's transactions on the other hand required Time that was precise, measured to the day and was a commodity open to sale through commercial transactions. The conflict between the two was a major social conflict in the Middle Ages in Europe. Le Goff is a towering figure in the *Annaliste* historiographical tradition, extending its boundaries far into the field of the history of mentalities.

So too was Georges Duby until his death in 1996. Beginning with the history of land and labour in the medieval European context, (*Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*) Duby went into the study of marriage, family and women, the Cathedrals and the study of medieval imagination, especially the values that guided the working of the medieval society.

Philippe Ariès loved to call himself 'an amateur' historian, for even as he was a practicing historian, he was yet outside the profession. He was the initiator of some major new themes in history. He constituted the notion of death and the attitude towards children as veritable subjects of historical investigation. He brought the history of the family centrestage, with the issues of sexuality, the household and interpersonal relationships at the core. His works, *Centuries of Childhood*, 1962, traced the history of the recognition of childhood and its separate needs, for the child had hitherto been treated merely as a young adult; and *The Hour of Our Death*, 1981, dwelt upon the perceptions of death. These were major interventions in redefining social history. The renowned Cambridge group on the history of the family led by Peter Laslett and Jack Goody in the 1970s and 80s followed up these breakthroughs and published some astoundingly innovative research works: Peter Laslett and Richard Wall, eds., *Household and Family in Past Time*, 1972; Peter Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations*, 1977; Richard Wall, J. Robin and P. Laslett, eds., *Family Forms in Historic Europe*, 1982; Jack Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe*, 1983.

Three sets of recent collaborative endeavours have taken the history of mentalities further: Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, general eds., *A History of Private Life*, 5 vols., Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, general eds., *The History of Women*, 4 vols., and Giovanni Levi and Jean-Claude Schmitt, general eds., *A History of Young People*, 2 vols. A large portion of each of these works dwells upon mentalities.

G. Vigarello followed up the theme of mentalities in his delightful book, *The Concepts of Cleanliness*, Cambridge, 1988, while Jean-Claude Schmitt had edited a special issue of the journal *History and Anthropology* on the theme of gestures in 1984.

The groups at society's margins had been a point of attraction for the historian for long; what was lacking until the 1960s and 70s was a conception of marginality and its relationship with mainstream society. The marginals were not merely those who were poor, without means; they were the ones living not only at the mainstream society's territorial margins – at the borders of the village, in hermitages or hideouts in the forests or the hills etc. – but whose norms of life were at variance with the mainstream norms whether perforce or by choice: The beggars, the lunatics, hermits, thieves and robbers. It was Michel Foucault, the philosopher, who set the parameters of this problematic especially in his *Discipline and Punish* and *Madness and Civilization*. The study of

marginality, he argued, was important because it was the ‘other’ of the mainstream; the study is an entry point into mapping the contours of the mainstream itself. Foucault introduced the central concept of the relation of power in the study of social phenomena. The creation of marginality was an emphatic expression of the relation of power in that the elite values at the mainstream determined the notion of marginality. Whoever does not conform to those values gets excluded into the margins as prisoners or lunatics or whatever. The birth of Psychiatry for him was the chief expression of the creation of marginality as a relation of social power.

In setting up this perspective, Foucault was questioning a fundamental assumption of the discipline of history, i.e. that the ‘facts’ recovered from the archives possessed an unassailable objectivity. For Foucault ‘facts’ were culturally constructed: they expressed a relation of power. The objectivity of history was then at one go relativised. This was a serious challenge to *Annales* as much as to positivist history. Some of the *Annalistes* incorporated Foucauldian insights into their study of marginality. The Polish historian Bronisław Geremek’s major work, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, originally published in Polish in 1971, in French in 1976, and in English in 1987 was written under Foucault’s influence.

The comparative history framework was implicit in the *Annales* vision from the inception. Comparative history was not quite an invention of *Annales* historiography as Marc Bloch had emphasised in his famous essay, ‘A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies’ (1928). For him the comparative method rested on dissimilarities underneath apparent similarities between two phenomena or situations. A comparison between these two would highlight the salient features of each and therefore become a very useful tool for developing each one’s profile. However, the study of phenomena such as feudalism or capitalism as a large, comprehensive theme itself makes it comparative inasmuch as their conceptualisation could only result from a comparative study of their vast and varied structures.

14.5 CONTRIBUTION OF THE ANNALES SCHOOL

Any assumption that *Annales* historiography has since its inception over seven decades ago has proceeded along a straight line and a single strand, without much variation and without much inner conflict and contradiction, would clearly be quite mistaken. Indeed, the several alterations in the titling of the journal during its life are pointers to both its innate tensions and its dynamism. Even as the term *Annales* gave the journal a permanent identity, its original subtitle, *histoire économique et sociale* gave way to *économies, sociétés, civilisations* and lately to *Histoire et sciences sociales*.

Some of the major tensions arose from the *Annales*’ own project. In some important ways *Annales* historiography was on one hand opposed to the legacy of Positivism as well as Marxism and on the other inherited this legacy. Positivism as well as Marxism envisioned a dichotomy between an objective truth in history and a subjective perception of it by the historians. Positivism predicated the unveiling of the objective truth upon scientific rationality: the objective truth is embedded in historical records; through the employment of reason the historians will be able to uncover it bit by bit and this will bridge the gap between the observer, the historian, and the observed, the objective reality. Marxism reached the same end through the prism of class struggle. All history can be explained thus.

Annales historiography too dreamt of some day capturing ‘total history’, which will be ‘true history’. But the telling difference between them was that if Positivism rested all historical explanation on scientific reason and Marxism on class struggle, in *Annales*

historiography there was no such permanent structuring of historical explanation. That is, not all historical phenomena or episodes or movements were 'in the last instance' brought down to either economic base or politics or psychology or whatever. It rather preferred to study moving conjunctures, each phenomenon, episode or movement with its own causal hierarchy. Yet, however muted, the very vision of the ability to compose a total and a true history some day was not without the underpinnings of Positivist and Marxist assumption of objective reality.

Indeed, the *Annalistes*, with their professed antipathy towards teleology, have nevertheless shown an astonishing, if implicit, long term hierarchisation of historical explanation. The early works in this genre mostly pertain to what might be located broadly in the area of socio-economic history, barring of course Lucien Febvre's precocious explorations in the history of sensibilities and unbelief etc. Once the 'foundation' had been laid, the 'superstructure' of the history of mentalities followed in its wake. Nothing evokes this implicit structuring more forcefully than the assertion of one of the most celebrated practitioners of *Annales* historiography, Georges Duby, that he had turned to the study of marriage, women, the family etc. of medieval Europe, *since* he had already established his grasp over its economy, production process, distribution and so forth.

Annales historiography has remained somewhat ambivalent too with regard to a problem it had itself raised, that of history's ties with chronology. If it intended to transcend the temporal bounds in its search of a true history, it implied rethinking on the conception of time and chronology: History dealt with time, for sure, but was not, and should not be, led on the leash by chronology. Indeed, if chronology was artificial, time itself was fluid. Fernand Braudel's conceptualisation of differing rhythms of historical time and Jacques Le Goff's demonstration of time as culturally constructed and therefore relative as well dynamic, rather than absolute and fixed, constituted major landmarks in redefining the dual relationship of the discipline of history to time and chronology. Inherent in the conception of 'total history' or 'history in its entirety' was a suspicion of the sanctity of strict chronological divides between antiquity, medieval and modern, for many of the themes are hard to tie down to these divides. The rhythm of change in mentalities, social values or family structures transgresses virtually any temporal boundaries set around it. Implied in the investigation of these themes was the assumption that the historian needs to rise above the terror of evidence, especially archival evidence and depend upon imagination and anthropological insights, much as Marc Bloch had done. Yet, most practitioners of this genre of historiography have adhered rather tightly to the chronological boundaries set by their evidence. Nothing expresses this tension more evocatively than the title of Fernand Braudel's major book *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. On one hand, Braudel seeks to cover a vast canvas of history in the two volumes; on the other, the temporal boundaries are tightly set 'in the Age of Philip II'. The diktat of evidence exercises as much terror for them as it did for their predecessors in the nineteenth century and keeps them forcefully on chronology's leash, their ambition under considerable restraint.

Nevertheless, the explorations that could be encapsulated within what has virtually become an umbrella term, the *Annales* historiography, have opened to the historian's craft vistas that allow the discipline an all-encompassing domain. At the heart of its concerns are human beings with all their life's tensions, struggles, their ambiguities, indecisions, conflicting and competing emotions, thoughts, experiences and mentalities; the study of the structures of life is subordinated here to the study of human beings rather than as self-contained, impersonal phenomena, as the subject of study themselves to which human beings relate merely as programmed actors. The expanse of the domain itself, and the complexities of explorations of its ever-growing dimensions, should ensure

the relegation of any teleological project deep into the background, whether or not the *Annalistes* have confronted it with deliberation.

14.6 SUMMARY

As we have learnt from the foregoing discussion that the *Annales* School established one of the most important historiographic traditions in the twentieth century. Historians such as Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, Georges Duby, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Robert Mandrou, Jacques Le Goff, and many others redefined the historical practice time and again by constantly innovating in themes and methods. History of economic structures, of long-term developments, of mentalities, micro-history and cultural history have all benefited by significant contribution from the historians of this School.

14.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the context which led to the establishment of the *Annales* School.
- 2) Who are considered as the founders of this School of historiography? Discuss their works.
- 3) What are the thematic innovations made by the historians of the *Annales* School over the years? Discuss with examples.

14.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Peter Burke (ed.), *Economy and Society in Early Medieval Europe: Essays for Annales* (London, 1972).

Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* (Middletown, 1975).

T. Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* (Ithaca, 1977).

M. Harsgor, 'Total History: The Annales School', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.13, 1978.

Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (eds.), *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology* (Cambridge, 1985).

Maurice Aymard and Harbans Mukhia (eds.) *French Studies in History*, 2 vols. (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1988 and 1990).

Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Oxford, 1992).