



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS

# Marxism and Historiography

Contesting Theory and Remaking History  
in Twentieth-Century Italy

Paolo Favilli

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“Favilli’s book is a rich seam of cues and threads to follow. Not least among its merits is its constant emphasis on the centrality of the properly historical dimension—this, in a period in which this latter tends to be erased from studies and within universities.”

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# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1	<i>The Present Moment</i>	2
1.1	<i>Politics in the Guise of History</i>	2
1.2	<i>The Crisis of Objectifying Methodologies</i>	9
2	<i>... From Afar</i>	23
3	<i>in the Absence of Labour Movement History</i>	42
<b>2</b>	<b>‘Historiographical Marxism’: Preliminary Questions</b>	<b>49</b>
1	<i>The Thorny Question of the ‘centrality’ of the Economic Sphere</i>	49
2	<i>Which Analytical Truth?</i>	58
<b>3</b>	<b>Long-Term Journeys, Underground Journeys</b>	<b>71</b>
1	<i>History and Economics in Antonio Labriola’s Lesson</i>	72
1.1	<i>The Paradigm Shift in Political Economy</i>	75
1.2	<i>An Economics for Historical Use, and Structural History</i>	85
2	<i>History and Economics in the “Italian Tradition”</i>	89
2.1	<i>The Eclecticism of the Battle Over Method</i>	89
2.2	<i>The Battle Over Method and Its Effects on Historiographical Practice: The Case of Ancient History</i>	91
3	<i>The Long-Term Lineaments of the Battle Over Method</i>	103
3.1	<i>Gino Luzzatto’s Lesson</i>	103

3.2	<i>Intersecting Lineaments: Dal Pane, Sereni, Morandi</i>	114
4	<b>Delio Cantimori's Problematic Lesson in Marxism</b>	129
1	<i>Was Cantimori a Marxist?</i>	129
2	<i>Distinctions</i>	144
3	<i>Historical Method, the Political Dimension and 'non-Actuality'</i>	155
5	<b>A Common Innovating Drive, in Italy and in Europe</b>	163
1	<i>Between Scholarship and Commitment</i>	163
2	<i>The Common Materials of the 'history Under Construction'</i>	176
6	<b>A Programme for the 'New History'</b>	189
1	<i>Ruptures and Continuities with the 'Italian Tradition'</i>	189
1.1	<i>'Croceanism' and 'Historicism'</i>	191
1.2	<i>The Social Sciences</i>	205
2	<i>History and Politics: Further 'Distinctions'</i>	217
7	<b>Economic History as Social History</b>	235
1	<i>'History as Science'</i>	235
2	<i>'... the Science of History'</i>	238
3	<i>Historical-Materialist Initiatives</i>	249
8	<b>The History of Capitalism</b>	271
1	<i>Capitalism as a Historical Problem</i>	271
1.1	<i>Early Tests in the Italian Context</i>	279
2	<i>Agriculture and the Development of Capitalism</i>	294
2.1	<i>The Question of 'Models'</i>	295
2.2	<i>The Model of the Italian 'Transition'</i>	304
2.3	<i>The Italian Industrialisation Model</i>	322
9	<b>Conclusions: The 'Hundred Flowers' of the 1970s</b>	331
	<b>Index</b>	349



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

“You Know, Johann,” said Hemingway, “they keep bringing up accusations against me, too. Instead of reading my books, they’re writing books about me. They say that I didn’t love my wives. That I didn’t pay enough attention to my son. That I punched a critic on the nose. That I lied. That I wasn’t sincere. That I was conceited. That I was macho. That I claimed I had received two hundred and thirty war wounds whereas actually it was only two hundred and ten. That I abused myself. That I disobeyed my mother.”<sup>1</sup>

The imaginary dialogue between Goethe and Hemingway in a paradise populated by ‘immortals’ well illustrates an important aspect of a historiographical attitude which is today becoming ever more pervasive. This historical attitude is, in part, characteristic of the ‘present moment’—a context that whoever *today* ventures to write a book on Marxism and history cannot ignore. Naturally, the motives inspiring a book of this kind are hardly limited to contingency alone, even if they are in some ways conditioned by it. For they most of all correspond to a rationale that ‘comes from afar’. In this introduction, I will try to distinguish between the two levels.

<sup>1</sup> Kundera, Milan, *Immortality*, New York, Harper Collins, 1990, 81.

# 1 THE PRESENT MOMENT

As Kundera's compelling fictional portrayal suggests, our 'present moment' is characterised by a diffuse politically functional history—a history with a retrospective criminalising thrust. However, this is hardly its sole characteristic. For more particularly, the present moment is characterised by a crisis of historical knowledge, of which the kaleidoscope of 'postmodernism' (a term I use out of convention, not conviction) is only the most extreme representation. There is a yawning gulf between the cultural weight of these two aspects: they are in every way asymmetrical, and they have few points of contact, even if the crisis of history *qua* scientific knowledge inevitably encourages the most varied forays into what is now an unprotected terrain. Moreover, whereas the first of these two aspects assumes particular importance in Italy (though it is certainly not absent from the international scene) the second has a greater impact on the main historiographical cultures at the global level.

## 1.1 *Politics in the Guise of History*

Recent decades have been characterised by a long and very intense phase of epistemological debate, experimentation, methodological renewal and 'paradigm shifts'. All this has certainly made history, as a mode of comprehension, 'more difficult, delicate and vulnerable than it ever was before'.<sup>2</sup> I think that anyone who experienced the climate that endured through a long sequence of research and questions over research (even if it had its different periods) will share in a common awareness that it is no longer possible to write history like it was *before*. This holds, independently of the different conceptions and methods at which they may have arrived.

Not without hesitations and delays,<sup>3</sup> political history itself has opened up to new demands and thus to new methods. It is no longer, or at least not only, a history of political action, but also a history of 'the political', of political structures, of the limits to political action, of the relationship between the political action of individuals and anonymous processes, etc. At a different level, the political dimension has also been drawn onto the terrain of studies inspired by the linguistic turn, as attention has turned

<sup>2</sup> Bretone, Mario, *In difesa della storia*, Bari, Laterza, 2000, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Orsina, Giovanna (ed.), *Fare storia politica. Il problema dello spazio pubblico nell'età contemporanea*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2000.

towards the political-cultural contents which appear in linguistic forms. And yet the history we mentioned above—a politically functional history with a retrospective criminalising thrust—has remained entirely immune to this web of problems. There is no reflection on its tools and methods, *not even* on the tool of ‘narrative’—the very principle of this way of writing history—*not even* in the terms proposed by Lawrence Stone.<sup>4</sup>

Fundamentally, this is not political history, but directly politics, in the guise of history. In this context, even Niccolò Machiavelli becomes ‘a Machiavelli for *Delta Force*’,<sup>5</sup> as Giuliano Procacci neatly put it. This historiography’s forms of expression, the generally excessive tone of its language, belong to politics. This is, indeed, bound to be the case in a period marked by the ‘poverty of politics’. If historical processes are theorised without structures of change or subjects, then politics itself is nothing but the arena for the struggle for ‘recognition’—the sphere that privileges ‘The self-assertive nature of *thymos*’.<sup>6</sup>

Governmental praxis and the wielding of power are, of course, still with us. But they have been entrusted ‘mostly to “idiots”, in the sense of the Greek root, designating “one’s own” (*idios*), the narrow particularism of the “private” as counterposed to the generalism of the “public”’.<sup>7</sup> In such a context, to repropose a traditional political history would be to condemn oneself to study the merely irrelevant.

All in all, this type of history is not particularly interesting, at least from the standpoint of professional history writing. Even in a moment like the present, when there is a continual proliferation of approaches and proposals on method, when ‘all the analytical procedures mobilised by other themes, of whatever kind (the philosophical, the literary, the scientific)’<sup>8</sup> are used almost as if to exorcise historical knowledge’s supposed

<sup>4</sup> Stone, Lawrence, ‘The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History’, *Past and Present*, 85, 1979, 3–24; and the reply by Eric Hobsbawm, ‘The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments’, *Past and Present*, 86, 1980, 3–8.

<sup>5</sup> Procacci, Giuliano ‘Un Machiavelli per la *Delta Force*’, *Passato e presente*, 65, 2005, 109–114.

<sup>6</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, The Free Press, 1992, 172.

<sup>7</sup> Miegge, Mario, *Che cos’è la coscienza storica*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2004, 224.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Il sapere storico è sull’orlo del baratro? Dibattito storiografico tra Roger Chartier e Gérard Noiriel’, *I viaggi di Erodoto*, 35, September–December 1998, 16–23, quotation from 17.



closeness to ‘the brink of collapse’, this type of history cannot be considered part of these multiple analytical developments. Rather, it should be considered a disciplinary regression, or at most an irrepressible, completely political strand on its margins.

But from the perspective of media exposure—from the perspective of what is called the ‘public use of history’—the problem is posed rather differently.

The ‘public use of history’ in fact operates across an extremely broad terrain: within its terms, very different levels of history writing can take place, with vastly different levels of critical awareness. In Italy, Habermas’s approach to the ‘public use of history’ met with mostly critical reception, in particular among left-wing historians. Nicola Gallerano did not find Habermas’s ‘sharp counterposition’ persuasive.<sup>9</sup> Santomassimo considered Habermas’s to be one of the ‘extreme positions’ it was necessary to ‘reject’.<sup>10</sup> De Luna denounced Habermas and Le Goff’s ‘disciplinary walls’.<sup>11</sup> Ortoleva, who has dedicated years of attention and impassioned studies to history and the media (especially the new media),<sup>12</sup> rejected what he called a ‘binary model’: that is, Habermas’s counterposition between the public and scientific uses of history.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, when these same scholars turn from general frameworks to inspect the real battlefield in front of them, they pass a rather worried—and rather severe—judgement on the current state of the public use of history. Gallerano highlights the fact that ‘history is above all used as a tool in the day-to-day political battle’. He adds that the ‘target is no longer a people to be educated but rather an audience to be reached, by means of history but not only that, but also the spectacle of politics’.<sup>14</sup> Santomassimo argues that the current ‘radical upheaval of climates

<sup>9</sup> Gallerano, Nicola, ‘Introduzione’ in *L’uso pubblico della storia*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 1995, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Santomassimo, Gianpasquale, ‘Guerra e legittimazione storica’, *Passato e presente*, 54, 2001, 5–23, quotation from 9.

<sup>11</sup> De Luna, Giovanni, *La passione e la ragione. Fonti e metodi dello storico contemporaneo*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 2001, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Ortoleva, Peppino, *Mediastoria: comunicazione e cambiamento sociale nel mondo contemporaneo*, Milan, Nuova Pratiche, 1997; ‘La storia nel sistema dei media che cambia’, *Contemporanea*, 3, 1999, 495–499, quotation from 495.

<sup>13</sup> Ortoleva, Peppino, ‘Storia e mass media’, in *L’uso pubblico della storia*.

<sup>14</sup> Gallerano, Nicola, ‘Storia e uso pubblico della storia’, in *L’uso pubblico della storia*.

and contexts ... is taking place on the basis of an absolute politicisation, which is superimposed upon the genuine work of historians'.<sup>15</sup> De Luna compellingly describes the rise of a 'pop-historian'<sup>16</sup> with an immediate political project. In a lucid reaction against what he called 'a political offensive by adventurers flanked by their soldiers of fortune', Gabriele Turi concluded that there is no option but to relegate this political operation to a historiographical status even lower than the 'so-called public use of history, which at least presupposes a minimum of professional awareness'.<sup>17</sup> But are we so sure that such a distinction is still possible, under the current reign of indistinction? Does the obvious differential impedance not lead to a short-circuit in almost any discourse that has any minimal analytical ambitions?

Indeed, there seems to be a real short-circuit between the approach (which we can wholly agree on) of those who call on the professional historian to take seriously the public use of history, the relationship with media and the essential function of the scholar of contemporary history as a 'historian-narrator'<sup>18</sup>—the historian as narrator and mediator—and then the concrete manifestation of the dominant level of communication in the public use of history.

A break from the self-referentiality of professional history writing runs the risk of instead accepting the self-referentiality of the media, which have long since given up on providing any *mediation* between high culture and public opinion. As one scholar open to the public use of history aptly puts it, the arguments advanced in the media by a politically functional history—almost the only history of interest, in the media's logic—can disregard 'totally the paths of research, the scrutiny of new facts that had earlier been unknown or concealed, and the need to provide proofs to back up one's interpretation'.<sup>19</sup> If the only alternative is between these two types of self-referentiality, then for the professional scholar the choice is obvious.

<sup>15</sup> Santomassimo, Gianpasquale, 'Dopoguerra storiografico e astratti furori', *Passato e presente*, 1, 2005, 157–167, quotation from 158.

<sup>16</sup> De Luna, 'La passione e la ragione', 100.

<sup>17</sup> Turi, Gabriele, 'La storia sono io', in *Passato e presente*, 52, 2001, 83–86, quotation from 83.

<sup>18</sup> De Luna, 'La passione e la ragione', 63.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

At this level, we can fully understand the position of those who consider it necessary ‘at this point, to introduce salutary elements of distinction, of separation ... to set up a clear and insuperable barrier [separating] the realm of research from chatter by talking-head professors, the arrogance of journalists who have read some book, and the petulance of ideologues who venture to tell us how we ought to think the past and behave in the present. We should not go on accepting the possibility of confusion between the scientific practice of history and the various manipulators of public opinion’.<sup>20</sup>

This author believes that the theme of *distinction* has lost none of its analytical value. In today’s circumstances, the complex set of *distinctions*—and very many are necessary—could take the form of a real medicine for the mind. In such a perspective, the judgement condemning Habermas’s approach as ‘extreme’ and ‘out of touch’ ought to be reconsidered.

As we shall see, the theme of distinction is a hardly secondary aspect of this book on Marxism and historiography in Italy. Rather, especially thanks to the efforts of Delio Cantimori, this theme became a methodological element essential to the lesson on which a whole generation of young scholars drew deep. Indeed, when it comes to what was not yet called the public use of history—it was practised, though generally at a level that would today be unthinkable—Cantimori anticipated Habermas’s position by some three decades. In his famous review of Carlo Antoni (whose intellectual standing was and is beyond doubt), Cantimori expressed his critiques in extremely harsh terms, precisely because the Crocean professor had elaborated his theses without regard for any criteria of distinction. The first of Antoni’s indistinctions lay in his blurring of the different levels of intervention: the polemical, the journalistic and the scientific, in a confusion between the level of ‘serious studies’ and that of ‘contemporary cultural phenomena’.<sup>21</sup>

Plainly, Cantimori’s own preferences (and capacities) were entirely oriented towards ‘serious studies’. But the use of a term like ‘contemporary cultural phenomena’ also evidently expresses a certain consideration

<sup>20</sup> Bevilacqua, Piero, ‘Storia della politica o uso politico della storia?’, *Meridiana*, 1988, 165–182, quotation from 182.

<sup>21</sup> Cantimori, Delio, review of Antoni, Carlo, ‘Ciò che è vivo e ciò che è morto nella dottrina di Marx’, in *Considerazioni su Hegel e Marx*, Naples, Ricciardi, 1946, 35–59; the review appeared in *La Rinascita*, 1946, 174–175, quotation from 174.

of the importance of these phenomena. It was nonetheless necessary that these spheres should remain distinct, for they corresponded to different logics and needed to be studied with different tools. These spheres were not unable to communicate with one another. But distinction was necessary also in order to better understand the system of relations between them.

So, to insist today on the *distinction* between professional history and the public use of history (within which further distinctions would also have to be made) is not to deny the importance and the influence of this latter for the formation of the various historiographical cultures. Or, indeed, its importance for historical consciousness (which is also plural)—a historical consciousness which in the modern era ‘arrives from the pulpits and tribunes’.<sup>22</sup> We could hardly ignore the essential ‘contemporary cultural phenomena’ that so decisively influences our sense of the past. This sense of the past does not only concern the writing of contemporary history. Of course, the study of modern, medieval and ancient history does not seem directly concerned by the public use of history. But outside of the inner circle of specialists, the end-users are ever more turning into the Americans described by Gore Vidal, those conceiving the past as ‘a separate universe with its own quaint laws and irrelevant perceptions’.<sup>23</sup>

In the last two decades, public discourse has taken for self-evident the notion that Marxist (or at least, left-wing) historiography was ‘hegemonic’ for at least three decades following the Second World War. We may well wonder whether the question of ‘hegemony’ really pertains to professional history writing, or perhaps ‘contemporary cultural phenomena’—or the *Zeitgeist*?

That said, the problem of historiographical ‘hegemony’ remains an open problem, and it needs to be unpacked at various different levels. How did this hegemony supposedly manifest itself? For over two decades in the post-1945 period, ‘Marxists’ controlled neither university chairs nor journals comparable to those of the academic establishment, which was moreover an establishment of a very high level. They were in certain aspects ‘hegemonic’ *in tendency* given their leading role in a wide-ranging and profound process of disciplinary innovation. But even then, what

<sup>22</sup> Miegge, *Che cos'è la coscienza storica*, 206.

<sup>23</sup> Vidal, Gore, *The Golden Age*, New York, Vintage, 2012, 459.

real possibility did they have to influence the historiographical common sense? Using what tools? What was the 'spirit of the times'? Given the current state of studies, we can give only rather uncertain responses to these questions.

Today, the 'Marxists', or better their heirs, do hold university chairs, do have very important scholarly journals and have great influence in professional history writing circles. Yet the historical common sense seems unaffected by this. Here we see problems and questions emerging, which it would take another book (and a *different one*) to answer.

What we can say, for now, is that these levels of discourse have to be *distinguished*. Historiographical discourse has widened its tools of expression—newspapers, the Internet, TV, etc.—and the awareness that 'it is impossible to resist the power of the mass media' has become widespread.<sup>24</sup> These are all very important considerations, but they are aspects *different* from the ones which we are dealing with, here.

Moreover, if it is accepted that all the possible mediations, all the forms of public use, should nonetheless stand on the results of research constructed according to the rules commonly accepted by the scientific community, then the sphere of 'serious studies' remains central to any discourse on history and/or based on history. Doubtless, this is no guarantee of success in any political-cultural battle involving the multiform expressions of the public use of history. Even a critic of Habermas like Nicola Gallerano, one of the first scholars in Italy to address the problem of the public use of history, felt compelled to conclude his analysis by recognising that 'the measure of the success of a political-cultural battle does not, sadly, lie solely in the strength of the arguments one can deploy. Yet this is the main weapon available to intellectuals ... loyal to the values of the Enlightenment'.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, even a specialist in cultural history<sup>26</sup> like Roger Chartier, so keenly interested in the new media<sup>27</sup> and the possibilities which they

<sup>24</sup> Detti, Tommaso and Marcello Flores, 'Introduzione' in Gallerano, Nicola, *La verità nella storia. Scritti sull'uso pubblico del passato*, Rome, manifestolibri, 1999, 9–33, quotation from 27.

<sup>25</sup> Gallerano, *La verità nella storia*. 69.

<sup>26</sup> For instance Chartier, Roger, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993.

<sup>27</sup> Chartier, Roger, 'Readers and readings in the electronic age', Paper presented at the Virtual Symposium, Bibliothèque Centre Pompidou, from 15 to 31 October 2001.

open up for writing and reading, maintains that one of the most urgent tasks facing the various scientific communities is to ‘refasten the ties which have come undone between History as the scientific praxis of a specialist community and history as a critical tool for comprehending the present’.<sup>28</sup> This operation is not a call for the citadel of ‘serious studies’ to be pulled down, but instead demands its reinforcement. Indeed, if it is necessary that historians write for different audiences, this ‘translation’ effort itself demands a ‘continuum between works destined for the community of “peers” and those addressed to a wider public’.<sup>29</sup> Unless there are strong reference points also within the citadel, no such continuum is possible.

Making history into a ‘critical tool for comprehending the present’, useful for a broad public opinion, really is both an urgent and essential task. It is also a huge task which only partly depends on scholars of history. Yet, as far as possibility allows, they must seek to become leading actors in mediation processes at all levels, even while preserving a full awareness that the logics of the media and the logics of ‘serious studies’ diverge for reasons that have very little to do with mediation itself. A constant attention to this dimension must therefore draw on a rationale very different to that of those who seek to be ‘pop-historians’ or propose this as a model. Unless, that is, the professional scholar wants to turn into the ‘brilliant ally of his gravediggers’.<sup>30</sup>

## 1.2 *The Crisis of Objectifying Methodologies*

The second aspect of the current situation regards the sphere of ‘serious studies’ itself. To speak of ‘contingency’ is rather imprecise even when we are speaking of the most political uses of history. And this term is outright problematic when used with regard to the combination of cultural factors which have decreed the crisis of objectifying methodologies—a crisis which can hardly be reduced to the ‘present moment’ alone. Yet this combination of factors is an important aspect of the ‘present moment’, and thus in this sense—and only this sense—the term ‘contingency’ is justifiable.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Il sapere storico è sull’orlo del baratro?’, 23.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Ibid.’, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Kundera, *Immortality*.

The object of this book is the emergence of an entirely different cultural ensemble—one based on the objectifying theories and methodologies of historical knowledge. This object appears to stand in contradiction with contingency. It is plainly obvious that we can write the history of something that lies entirely in the past, something that is entirely ‘non-actual’. Yet this author does not consider this a fitting description of the proposal of objectifying methodologies. This poses the problem of the contradiction with the ‘present moment’.

The object of this book is a conscious innovation process in historical culture—a process with few precedents. Did this innovation become a traditional history? What stance should then be taken towards positions that reflect an old approach of Edoardo Grendi’s? Paolo Macry remembers how, ‘One time after reading the proofs of an article of mine [Grendi] said, “Don’t you think it’s a bit traditional?” And this was a merciless excoriation, because traditional meant useless’.<sup>31</sup>

At the end of the 1970s, Grendi had ‘provoked’ an important discussion in *Quaderni storici*. Here, he proposed themes that would subsequently become commonplaces of historiographical debate, such as the value of fragmentation and the rejection of relevance. All this was laying the bases for a paradigm shift.<sup>32</sup> Among the many interventions, especially striking, for its balanced character, is the one by Sergio Anselmi. While he was part of the journal’s editorial team, this scholar had always rather stood aside from theoretical-methodological disputes. Faced with Grendi’s ‘provocation’, Anselmi noted:

Is there anything easier than proposing from time to time (with each intensification of the social dynamic) a new *discourse on method*, a new *ratio studiorum*, the child of the negative experience (though it is not entirely negative) of what went before? If this is necessary (as it would seem to be today), then for sure, let’s propose this. But we should equip ourselves with a ‘provisional moral’ that can at least ... shelter us from the rain until we have rebuilt the new home on top of the remnants of the old. I understand that there is no fit of passion in this, it does not mean burning

<sup>31</sup> Macry, Paolo, ‘Trent’anni di storia sociale (con vista sul mezzogiorno)’, in D’Orsi, Angelo (ed.), *Gli storici si raccontano. Tre generazioni tra revisioni e revisionismi*, Rome, Manifestolibri, 2005, 29–52, quotation from 41.

<sup>32</sup> Grendi, Edoardo, ‘Del senso comune storiografico’, *Quaderni storici*, 2, 1979, 698–707.

bridges behind us ... but I do not see why historiography ought to be heroic and suffer recurrent identity crises.<sup>33</sup>

The question of innovation is anything but simple.

The criteria of innovation cannot be measured by direct reference to temporal sequences, as if the fact of one thing succeeding another were in itself a guarantee of its qualities. That which comes after is not necessarily innovation. Moreover, when it comes to real innovations—the ones that dig down deep—it takes a very long time for their sediment to settle. The innovation studied in this book needed to take some decades—through rather tortuous and at times even underground routes—before it could establish itself.

Any suggestion that this innovation has ceased to produce fruits is sure to remain controversial. A recent attempt at a balance sheet, which surveyed the general tendencies in Western historiography at the beginning of the 2000s, identified this innovation as a still very fertile terrain, on which contemporary historiography's most vivacious plants—the ones most full of life—are growing. One such plant is the *fourth* generation of the *Annales* school, which has overcome the ambiguous theme of the history of mentalities, typical of the 1969–1989 period, and picked up the thread of the 'social history of cultural practices'. Another is that of the heirs to Britain's great tradition of Marxist historiography, and in particular, *Past and Present*, in its work recovering 'concepts present in Marx's *oeuvre* but little-analysed by the Marxists of the [postwar] era', for instance, as it addresses certain themes of cultural history. Another such plant is that of Italian microhistory, which, through the reduction of scale, has made it possible to recover 'an enormous, indeed staggering variety of intellectual inspirations, including, among others, the contributions of Anglophone anthropology as well as the lessons of the Frankfurt School, the teachings of Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel, and the proposals of the Warburg Institute' while at the same time 'radically opposing post-modernism in all its variants'. And lastly, the group around the Fernand Braudel Center at the State University of New York, as represented by Immanuel Wallerstein, who has in the last quarter-century developed

<sup>33</sup> Anselmi, Sergio, 'Ricerca storica e didattica: da una metafisica all'altra', *Quaderni storici*, 2, 1979, 711–719, quotation from 713.



the now very widespread methodological perspective of World-Systems Analysis.<sup>34</sup>

This is certainly a partial line of reasoning, and some of the practitioners of microhistory would struggle to fit into Aguirre Rojas's portrayal of them. But his arguments are hardly lacking in foundation.

The poles of historical culture which Aguirre Rojas discusses really are an active force in Western historiography, and they often produce effective results. Those scholars who are, by definition, 'traditional', on account of their weak propensity to reflect on the theoretical-methodological implications of their work, are also active and operating in doubtless large numbers. And yet the crisis of 'objectifying methodologies' is certainly real. How are we to explain this contradiction?

An aspect internal to the discipline needs taking into consideration, in this regard. Carlo Ginzburg emphasises that, 'Rarely has the divergence between methodological reflection and real historiographical practice been as deep as it has been in recent decades'<sup>35</sup>; and this has doubtlessly fuelled the crisis in question. Arnaldo Momigliano has called it an 'asymmetrical relationship between historical thought and research.'<sup>36</sup> Those who highlight this crisis are in the majority among the theorists of the discipline, among analytical philosophers and history scholars adjacent to this dimension, choosing a sort of functional contiguity. So, it should be no surprise that the theoretical-methodological dimension is heavily influenced by this. And yet this is a very, very partial explanation. Aguirre Rojas sets out an optimistic picture of a historiography which is generally holding steady on the basis of objectifying methodology. But he also points to the boundaries beyond which the winds of a profound crisis are blowing. Microhistory, he says, has experimented with all possible innovations, but any innovation has a limit: namely, a radical opposition to 'postmodernism in all its variants'.

<sup>34</sup> Aguirre Rojas, Carlos Antonio, 'La historiografía occidental en el año 2000. Elementos para un balance global', *Obradoiro De Historia Moderna*, 10, 2001, 143–171, quotations from 157, 159, 163.

<sup>35</sup> Ginzburg, Carlo, *Rapporti di forza. Storia, retorica, prova*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2000, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Momigliano, Arnaldo, *Tra storia e storicismo*, Torino, Einaudi, Pisa, Nistri-Lischi, 1985, 96.

Given the inexhaustible semantic breadth of the term ‘postmodernism’, here I will limit my remarks to some of its historiographical expressions. In particular, to its theorisation of historical narration as explaining itself alone—and thus the conviction that there are no substantial differences between historical narrative and literary fiction. All the analytical schemas to make sense of history turn out to be no more than ‘meta-narratives’. The presumption that we can look for an explanation of the past bearing an even relative ‘truth’ is to be abandoned. ‘Any time we go searching for causes in this way we are bound to be disappointed’.<sup>37</sup> The narration is reduced to itself and nothing more—a narrative, rhetorical, cultural procedure. And there are not even to be criteria of relevance. The rhetorical grid of the narrative is what determines its coherence. Through those of its elements which deny a correspondence between language and reality, the ‘linguistic turn’ becomes a moment in postmodernism’s advance.

‘... Dr Miller doesn’t consider Middle-East history a discipline unto itself, just the random raw material that helps him to amuse himself fashioning theory’. This is how Abraham Yehoshua’s professor Rivlin, a historian of the Middle East, sees an exponent of the new generation of historians who emphasise a ‘new linguistic sensibility’, of a postmodernist stamp (whatever the obscure meaning of that term might be).<sup>38</sup>

Such is the ‘wild’<sup>39</sup> version of sceptical relativism in historiography, the result of postmodernism and the linguistic turn. It also has various ‘mild’ variants, but the ‘wild’ version is the one that inspires books to be written ‘in defence of history’.<sup>40</sup> From this point of view, the considerable confusion that reigns under the banners of ‘postmodernism’ and ‘the linguistic turn’ is not important. An author who in any way concerns themselves with ‘representations’, ‘writing and textualities’, ‘discursive formations’ or ‘language’ is bound to be immediately enlisted under those banners, regardless of the mode or the context of their interest in these questions. Even historians like Roger Chartier and Quentin

<sup>37</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Yehoshua, Abraham, *La sposa liberata*, Turin, Einaudi, 2002, 487 and 530.

<sup>39</sup> Ginzburg, *Rapporti di forza*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> Evans, Richard, *In Defence of History*, London, Granta, 2018.

Skinner, who have forged effective weapons to be used *against* post-modernism, have seen themselves thus enlisted because of their interest in ‘cultural history’, linguistics and hermeneutics. Fundamentally, such generous offers of recruitment are attempts at hegemony. Was the scholar who explored the twists and turns of the iconic-linguistic function of words also a postmodernist?<sup>41</sup>

The reflection on the degree of ‘signification’ in linguistic expressions—perhaps with a little confusion between the ‘signifier’ in Saussurian linguistics and that proper to logical empiricism—has a very long history. Its history has unfolded not only at the level of linguistic theories and epistemology more generally, but also in its practical use as a tool of the social sciences. When, at the beginning of the twentieth century the young economist (and former revolutionary syndicalist) Alfonso De Pietri Tonelli wanted to enter the citadel of *true* science, ‘he began to use a stripped-down, unvarnished language, imitating Galileo’s style, with long phrases and repetition of the same terms, so that no phonic or visual appeal would disturb the singular purpose of a rational, knowledge-focused approach. He replaced common terms in order to initiate himself in, and initiate, a *neutral* technique of expression’ (my italics).<sup>42</sup> In this, De Pietri Tonelli followed the teachings of the *maestro* he had then chosen, Vilfredo Pareto. And yet as both economists and mathematicians pointed out, Pareto himself had evident difficulties in escaping polysemy. This problem is inescapable even for an economist’s prose, dominated by the principle of reality.<sup>43</sup>

If, in the present context, a journal like *Studi storici* is defined as a ‘communist periodical’,<sup>44</sup> then even beyond the accuracy of the single words in this expression, what does this term as a whole signify with regard to the scientific reliability of this publication? It is plainly intended to suggest that *Studi storici* is *not* a scientific journal.

<sup>41</sup> Pozzi, Giovanni, *La parola dipinta*, Milan, Adelphi, 1981.

<sup>42</sup> Giacalone Monaco, Tommaso, ‘Pareto e A. De Pietri Tonelli’, *Giornale degli economisti e annali dell’economia*, 1963, 687–694, quotation from 693.

<sup>43</sup> Bocciarelli, Rossella and Pierluigi Ciocca, ‘Narrare l’economia. Un’introduzione’, in *Scrittori italiani di economia*, Bari, Laterza, 1994. See also the afterwords by Cesare Cases and Tullio De Mauro.

<sup>44</sup> Simoncelli, Paolo, *Renzo De Felice. La formazione intellettuale*, Florence, Le Lettere, 2001, 263.

The theoretical reference points for postmodernism's linguistic aspect are anything but new. Even without needing to mention the *querelles*, during the second half of the nineteenth century, between history as a science and history as an art, or the tradition of analytic philosophy, which essentially consists of an analysis of languages, already in the post-1945 period, the polemic against Carl Hempel's rigid neopositivism<sup>45</sup> was anything but theoretically marginal. And the books by Arthur Danto<sup>46</sup> and Hayden White<sup>47</sup> date back to 1965 and 1973, respectively. Another extremely important perspective on this line of reasoning, albeit one which would be difficult to assimilate to postmodernist terms, is Chaim Perelman's work from 1958.<sup>48</sup> This is, then, not a new hermeneutic proposal. 'What is new is not its existence so much as the that its practitioners are now extremely numerous and that they refuse to be marginalised'.<sup>49</sup> The element of novelty also owes to the fact that today there are also many historians standing with the linguistic philosophers.

This should not be surprising. For what had long been above all an epistemological problem, has begun to be conjugated with real-life experiences which reflect a 'postmodern' condition of knowledge and existence. First, through a use—which however long remained under control—of the 'crisis of reason', and then, particularly from the early 1990s, the definitive loss of confidence in the possibility that reason could give a sense to an experience of individual and collective life, to an experience of history. This loss of confidence was premised on a 'total acceptance of ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity and the chaotic'.<sup>50</sup>

When the 'crisis of reason' began to become an object of discussion also in Italy at the end of the 1970s, it was not 'modern reason' per se

<sup>45</sup> Hempel, Carl, 'The Function of General Laws in History', *The Journal of Philosophy*, XXXIX, 1942, 35–48, reproduced in Gardiner, Patrick, *Theories of History*, Glencoe, The Free Press, 1959, 344–356.

<sup>46</sup> Danto, Arthur, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1965.

<sup>47</sup> White, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

<sup>48</sup> Perelman, Chaim and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Burke, Peter, 'Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future' in Burke, Peter (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Cambridge: Polity, 1991, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Touraine, Alain, *Critique of Modernity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995.

that was subjected to critique, so much as the model of reason based on a ‘natural, binding and a priori structure’.<sup>51</sup> The contributions by Ginzburg, Bodei, Viano, and others, pointed to a plurality of ‘rational’ trajectories. Ginzburg developed a proposal for a ‘different paradigm’ which would still ‘hinge on scientific knowledge’. At the same time, he insisted that ‘the very existence of a deeper connection that explains surface-level phenomena is reasserted in the very moment in which it is claimed that direct knowledge of such a connection is possible. If reality is opaque, there exist privileged zones—clues, symptoms—that allow us to decipher it’.<sup>52</sup> Marx had said the same thing, in a different language. Bodei expressed his strong opposition to cognitive relativism, and still favoured criteria of relevance.<sup>53</sup>

All in all, the critique of reason remained internal to the critical reason of the Enlightenment: ‘reason, summoned to critique all knowledge and human institutions, must in the first place critique itself, know its limits’.<sup>54</sup> This critique of reason, using the tools of reason, could become extremely radical, as in the Frankfurt School tradition, from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*<sup>55</sup> to Habermas’s books around ‘89.<sup>56</sup> This was a critique of Enlightenment modernity that remained internal to a project for an as yet incomplete modernity. There was a substantial distance separating the Italian discussion on the ‘crisis of reason’ from the lineaments that had emerged from Jean François Lyotard’s famous short book on the postmodern condition from this same moment (1979).

<sup>51</sup> Gargani, Aldo, ‘Introduzione’ in *Crisi della ragione. Nuovi modelli nel rapporto tra sapere e attività umane*, Turin, Einaudi, 1979, 5–55, quotation from 6.

<sup>52</sup> Ginzburg, Carlo, ‘Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario’, in *Crisi della ragione. Nuovi modelli nel rapporto tra sapere e attività umane*, 59–106, quotations from 77 and 91.

<sup>53</sup> Bodei, Remo, ‘Comprendere, modificarsi. Modelli e prospettive di razionalità trasformatrice’, in *Crisi della ragione. Nuovi modelli nel rapporto tra sapere e attività umane*, 199–240, see in particular 217–219.

<sup>54</sup> Pedroni, V., ‘Moderno e postmoderno: un itinerario fra filosofia e sociologia’, in Ghisla, G. and F. Merlini (eds.), *Oltre il postmoderno. Idee per una lettura critica del presente*, Locarno, Armando Dadò Editore, 2004, 19–66, quotation from 44.

<sup>55</sup> Horkheimer, Marx and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Habermas, Jürgen, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, New York, John Wiley and Sons, 2018.

The ‘wild’ version of postmodernist sceptical relativism, and a hardly negligible part of its ‘mild’ version, operated on a different terrain to the *internal* investigation into the ‘crisis of reason’. Decisive in this regard was its denial of the possibility of giving, even through the use of multiple rational tools, a sense to the unfolding of complex real processes. Any search for such sense was reduced to ‘grand narrative’. In particular, it was denied that macrohistorical processes (and the scale that counted as ‘macro’ tended to shrink ever further) had any kind of internal system of relations, even a highly unstable one, and especially that such a system of relations might have any ability to explain the process itself.

In something (if not too much) of a paradox, it has been said that ‘For some postmodern theorists, the term “plurality” has too singular a ring to it. They thus prefer “pluralities”. But this may also sound a little restrictive. Perhaps a “pluralism of pluralities” would be rather less monolithic’.<sup>57</sup>

This connection between the historical cycle and the ‘crisis of reason’ was established already in 1948 by the authoritative British economic historian Sir Michael Postan, in times that seem near-prehistoric compared to today’s continual acceleration. Postan was wholly part of the academic establishment: from 1935 to 1965, he was a Cambridge professor; he was a key pillar of the Economic History Society and, together with his wife Eileen Power, a major figure behind the *Cambridge Economic History* and the *Economic History Review*. As he put it:

Distrust of reason is indeed a perennial feature of conservative thought ... Periods of great intellectual and political unsettlement, of painful or disastrous revolutions, are thus almost inevitably succeeded by periods of conservative revulsion.<sup>58</sup>

Postan outlined some of the distinctive parameters of the climate of the denial of reason, including ‘the appeal to intuition against reason, blood against intellect, communion with the people against personal judgement’.<sup>59</sup> He set them within a long history, indeed within a ‘family

<sup>57</sup> Eagleton, Terry, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, New York, Wiley, 2013, fn 14.

<sup>58</sup> Postan, Michael, ‘Reason in social study’, in *Fact and Relevance: Essays on Historical Method*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971, 1–14, quotations from 1, 2, 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.