



**HAL**  
open science

## Still a Science? A paradigmatic change in French History

François-Joseph Ruggiu

► **To cite this version:**

François-Joseph Ruggiu. Still a Science? A paradigmatic change in French History. 25th Anniversary Conference of the Academia Europaea, Sep 2013, Wroclaw, Poland. halshs-01539740

**HAL Id: halshs-01539740**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01539740>**

Submitted on 15 Jun 2017

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Paper delivered at the 25th Anniversary Conference of the Academia Europaea, 16 - 19 September, 2013, Wrocław, Poland, revised in 2014.

**Still a Science?  
A paradigmatic change in French History**

**François-Joseph Ruggiu  
Centre Roland Mousnier UMR 8596 (CNRS, Paris-Sorbonne, Sorbonne-Universités)**

The beginning of the 2010s has seen in France a blossoming of publications devoted to the fate, or to the future, of French history as a discipline and as an academic career. Titles with a question mark, like *A quoi sert l'histoire aujourd'hui ?*<sup>1</sup> or *À quoi pensent les historiens ?*<sup>2</sup>, have flourished. Leading senior historians, like Jean-François Sirinelli (Sciences Po), expressed their doubts about the role of the French history in the world, in link with the vanishing place of French as an international academic language, but also about the status of history in the French academic landscape as well as in French society<sup>3</sup>. In the summer 2013, the prestigious monthly journal, *Le Débat*, dedicated an issue to the « difficile enseignement de l'histoire »<sup>4</sup>, especially in high schools. It includes a paper on the hotly debated question of the *Maison de l'Histoire de France*, created, amongst protestations, by President Nicolas Sarkozy and then suppressed by President François Hollande. Faced with this situation, others historians, like Christophe Charle (University Panthéon-Sorbonne)<sup>5</sup> or François Hartog (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales)<sup>6</sup>, felt obliged to express their confidence in the global situation of French history.

This paper try to explain how such a debate has arisen on history, hitherto one of the most respected and prestigious disciplines in France, and what it tells us about the anxieties that historians experience perhaps more profoundly than others specialists of humanities and social sciences. Beyond a complex political context which created insecurities amongst the French academic world, we shall indeed see that history is hit by some specific problems. Two are particularly noticeable. Firstly, French historians appear to have difficulties to keep up with the public. The selling of academic books of history is, for example, falling down since their heights of the 1970s, when Georges Duby, Jacques Le Goff or Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie were able to interest well beyond the scientific community<sup>7</sup>. In bookshops, historical books written by non-academics seem to replace the essays or the monographs produced by professional historians, who are slowly driven out the commercial edition and pushed towards academic publishing houses which are more confidential. In the media, the problems of the modern world seem to call the expertise of sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, or economists rather than of historians. And the success of big public events, like the *Rendez-*

---

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Laurentin (dir.), *A quoi sert l'histoire aujourd'hui ?*, Paris, Bayard, La Fabrique de l'histoire, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Christophe Granger (éd.), *A quoi pensent les historiens ? Faire de l'histoire au XXIe siècle*, Paris, Éd. Autrement, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Sirinelli, *L'Histoire est-elle encore française ?*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Number 175, May-August 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Christophe Charle, *Homo Historicus. Réflexions sur l'histoire, les historiens et les sciences sociales*, Paris, A. Colin, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> François Hartog, *Croire en l'histoire*, Paris, Flammarion, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> A report on the situation of the humanities and social sciences editions, commissioned by the Centre National du Livre, states that « the average number of books sold by the commercial publishers is between 300 and 1200 copies with a median of 450 copies », Marianne Lévy-Rosenwald, *L'édition en sciences humaines et sociales. Pour une contribution du CNL à son développement*, 2012, p. 20

([http://www.centrenationaldulivre.fr/fichier/p\\_ressource/3031/ressource\\_fichier\\_fr\\_rapport\\_shs.cnl.2012.bd.pdf](http://www.centrenationaldulivre.fr/fichier/p_ressource/3031/ressource_fichier_fr_rapport_shs.cnl.2012.bd.pdf)).

*vous de l'histoire*, annually held at Blois<sup>8</sup>, or the love of the French population for local history and heritage, don't veil the estrangement felt by many historians.

But these worries, which are common in Europe, are enhanced by a contestation of the very role of history and historians in the national community. French society is indeed currently crossed by ethnic tensions which sometimes take the shape of conflicts about interpretations of the past. Professional historians struggle to position themselves in regard of the "devoir de mémoire" in which some parts of the French society and sometimes public authorities try to lock them up. These conflicts can be trivial, like the controversy triggered by the public success of a book written by a young comedian, about the French history seen through the stations of the Parisian subway<sup>9</sup>. They can be secondary, like the endless discussions around the late personalities which should be honored by an official burial inside the prestigious Pantheon amongst the "grands hommes"<sup>10</sup>. But they also can be articulated to major interrogations about the organization and the working of the French society as a whole. The burning issue of the integration, assimilation, or promotion of the "émigrés", and of their descendants, is particularly at stake here.

This paper tries to show how these different issues - higher education politics; the social difficulties of a country trapped in the globalization; and a feeling to be rejected to the background of the academic and public scenes - merge to explain the anxieties of professional historians. I shall suggest that some of them are nevertheless willing to explore new forms of writings, which are more likely to touch the public, while still providing an accurate (i.e. in conformity with the general rules of the historical profession), reading of the past. This evolution towards a more personal way to write history breaks nevertheless with some of the most ancient trends of the French history: its claim to be a science<sup>11</sup>.

## **A challenging political context**

The first issue is the general insecurity which permeates the whole French academic system and especially humanities and social science for ten years. It comes from several important reforms on higher education, launched by the centre-right government of President Sarkozy. They have been strongly challenged, including in the streets, in 2007-2009, but they have nevertheless been implemented and, in many ways, they have been confirmed by the centre-left government of President Hollande<sup>12</sup>. Amongst them, featured the development of the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche*, a national funding agency created in 2005, which funds individual or collective projects selected through a competitive process; the vote of the

---

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.rdv-histoire.com/>

<sup>9</sup> Lorànt Deutsch, *Métronome. L'histoire de France au rythme du métro parisien*, Paris, Michel Lafon, 2009. Lorànt Deutsch sold two millions of copies and an adaptation was broadcasted on France 5, a branch of the French public television. Lorànt Deutsch consequently published a sequel, *Hexagone*, Paris, Michel Lafon, 2013. These books, and especially the second one, have been blamed (see William Blanc, Aurore Chéry and Christophe Naudin, *Les historiens de garde: Lorànt Deutsch, Patrick Buisson et le roman national*, Editions Inculte, 2013) for offering a monarchical and chauvinistic view of French history. I would like to thank Odile Contat for indicating me this last reference.

<sup>10</sup> Faced with the difficulty to pick out suitable personalities, President Hollande instructed the president of the *Commission des Monuments Nationaux* to prepare an official report on the subject. A public consultation has been organized and the report has been released on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2013 (<http://www.monuments-nationaux.fr/fr/actualites/a-la-une/bdd/actu/1649/consulter-le-rapport-sur-le-role-du-pantheon-dans-la-promotion-des-principes-de-la-republique/>). But the debate recently soured, with a public controversy in *Le Monde* on the respective merits of Pierre Brossolette, a resistant who has been singled out to be buried in the Panthéon, and Jean Moulin, who received this honor in 1964.

<sup>11</sup> See François-Joseph Ruggiu, « A Way Out of the Crisis: methodologies of early modern social history in France », *Cultural and Social History*, volume 6, n°1, 2009, p. 65-85.

<sup>12</sup> Through the *Loi relative à l'enseignement supérieur et à la recherche* passed on the 9th of July 2013.

*Loi relative aux Libertés et Responsabilités des Universités* (LRU, 10 August 2007), which emancipated Universities and others Higher Education institutions from a close supervision of the Ministry for Higher Education, but triggered a redistribution of power and influence within them, and did not provide the expected budgets to support their actions and their development; and, eventually, the launching of the “Investissements d’Avenir”<sup>13</sup>, which was aimed to concentrate funds on eight to ten major academic clusters of institutions in order to promote “national champions” for challenging Oxford or Harvard. The creation of the *Agence d’Evaluation de la Recherche et de l’Enseignement Supérieur* (AERES, now the Haut Conseil de l’évaluation de la recherche et de l’enseignement supérieur), which investigated the results of all the academic institutions in France, of their formations and of their research laboratories, completed this global scheme. The traditionally poor place of French universities in the famous “Shanghai ranking” – scrutinized each year by politicians, journalists and scholars – was not foreign to these evolutions. Yet humanities and social sciences were not well prepared for such major transformations and suffered through the process, even if money was nevertheless available for specific projects and teams.

The second element of insecurity is globalization to which French historians are particularly vulnerable. Until now, historians’ academic career in French Universities was informally regulated by two major elements: to demonstrate a capacity during the Ph. D. to work on archives, and especially on local archives; and to have succeeded, before (or, more rarely after) the Ph. D., to a one-year competitive exam, called *agrégation*. In France, a half of the working time of an academic is due to research and the other half to teaching, and Universities put a strong emphasis on this last part of duties (as well as on administrative chores). *Agrégation* is destined to recruit teachers for high schools, but this exam uses to be requested for an academic career in several disciplines, because it is seen as the ultimate proof of the ability of a candidate to assume the role of a teacher as well as of a researcher. It is especially true for historians, who are rather conservative in this matter and for whom *agrégation* is like a kind of *rite de passage*<sup>14</sup>. So the average lecturer or professor in a French University, in Paris as well as in provinces, was, and still is, an *agrégé*, who has done his or her Ph. D. on a political, social, cultural or economic topic based on local or national French archives.

People with a different background do exist in the French academic system: foreigners or French nationals who chose to do a Ph. D. abroad or to work on topics needing, for example, the mastering of foreign languages rather than *agrégation*. But they prosper rather outside Universities: in the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (whose researchers have no formal obligation to teach) ; or in prestigious, but numerically small, institutions like the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, or the Institut national des Langues et civilisations orientales. On such a situation, the globalization of the beginning of twenty-first century – characterized by the emergence of global history; by the development of new international topics; by the enlargement of the academic prospects of scholars, well beyond the traditional links the French professors were used to establish... – clearly dismayed a lot of us.

## History versus Memory

---

<sup>13</sup> The French *Ministère de l’Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche* launched three national calls : *Equipex* for major scientific infrastructures; *Labex* for scientific projects of excellence; *Idex* for clusters of Universities and institutions. See <http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/pid24578/investissements-d-avenir.html>.

<sup>14</sup> It must be reminded here that a lot of disciplines in France don’t have *agrégation* (like anthropology for example) because there are not taught in high schools, or don’t use *agrégation* in the same way than historians.

A third factor of insecurity is the development of several political and social debates which make evident the growing gap between “history” and “memory”. Until recently, history was in France the basis of the national narrative (“le roman national”), which was itself one of the cements of the social cohesion of the country<sup>15</sup>. History has consequently suffered from the contestation since the 1960s of this narrative, even if historians helped to dismantle it by the implementation of the critical dimension of history. At the same time, great social evolutions, which then occurred in France, related to decolonization, regionalization and globalization, but also to the growth of a new era of information, joined to change the relation of the French society to the past. According to François Hartog, the past is by now constantly rewritten to meet the needs of the present<sup>16</sup>. The professionalization of historians, the growth of the number and of the qualities of specialized publications, and, ultimately, the fragmentation of the historical field, caused that academic history got more and more aloof from the French society. Inside it circulate more and more easily, through Internet, a wide range of cultural, regional, ethnic and religious claims. These claims are organized through a communitarian memory which is founded in a past that their bearers scrutinized and interpreted differently from historians. These claims powerfully sustain specific social identities and, often, political demands. Among others, can be mentioned here two major arenas, where different visions of the national past currently struggle: the place that the populations originated of the former parts of French Empire must have in the national community; and the (geopolitical, economic and cultural) position of France in a globalized and multi-polarized world.

The transformation of the public image of Napoléon Bonaparte is a good example of how history and memory could conflate. When the celebrations of the French Revolution in 1989 had been endorsed by the state and highly publicized, nothing similar was made for any of the achievements of the French Emperor. The reason is that his public image has been altered during the 1990s and 2000s: the restoration of civil order after the Revolution, the foundation of many surviving French institutions, or the fathering of French *Code Civil*, were balanced by the human cost of his never-ending wars and, especially, by the restoration of slavery in French West Indies joint to the abortive, but bloody attempt, to retake control of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in 1802-1803. A fierce debate was engaged between ultramarine activists and historians on this topic<sup>17</sup>. Another example is the ways President Sarkozy and his followers have used historical characters, like Jean Jaurés or Guy Mocquet, for achieving political aims<sup>18</sup>.

I don’t have enough room here to evoke accurately all the public controversies around the distant or recent past of France, in which were at stake the positions of professional historians. They include, during the 1990s, a debate on the role of historians during the trials of some famous war criminals, like Paul Touvier or Klaus Barbie<sup>19</sup>; a fierce dispute which arose during the 2000s around the so-called “rôle positif” of the French colonization,

---

<sup>15</sup> See Nicolas Offenstadt, *L’Histoire Bling-Bling. Le retour du roman national*, Paris, Stock, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> *Régimes d’historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Seuil, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> See the pamphlet written by Claude Ribbe, *Le crime de Napoléon*, Paris, Privé, 2005, and the answer from the president of the Fondation Napoleon, Thierry Lentz (with Pierre Branda and the collaboration of Chantal Lheureux-Prévot), *Napoléon, l’esclavage et les colonies*, Paris, Fayard, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> See Nicolas Offenstadt, *op. cit.*, or Christophe Prochasson, *L’Empire des émotions, Les historiens dans la mêlée*, Paris, Demopolis, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, « Vérité historique et vérité judiciaire », *Le Débat*, n° 102, novembre-décembre 1998 ; Henry Rousso, « L’expertise des historiens dans les procès pour crime contre l’humanité », in D. Salas et J.-P. Jean (éd.), *Barbie, Touvier, Papon, des procès pour la mémoire*, Paris, Autrement, 2002, p. 58-70 ; Jean-Paul Jean, « Le procès et l’écriture de l’histoire », *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines* [En ligne], #09 | 2009, online 25 november 2011, read 30 december 2013. URL : <http://traces.revues.org/4344> ; DOI : 10.4000/traces.4344 ; Olivier Dumoulin, *Le rôle social de l’historien. De la chaire au prétoire*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2003.

acknowledged by a law in 2005, which was quickly nullified<sup>20</sup>; or a public dispute about a book blamed for understating the weight, and the impact on Africa, of the European slave trade<sup>21</sup>. There are many other historical events, like the *guerre d'Algérie*, or the role of France in Africa, that may at any time trigger such controversies, which are, in the aforesaid cases, deepened by the hastiness of politicians to legislate on these subjects.

### The challenge of renewal

French historians are even more sensitive to these situations than French historiography has nowadays difficulties to produce new concepts. To be honest, the powerful trends like the *Ecole des Annales*, during the 1950s and the 1960s, or the *Nouvelle Histoire* of the 1970s<sup>22</sup>, around the exploration of new themes for history and new methodologies, have not been replaced in France. The dynamics created by these movements have gradually diminished, as researchers pushed them to their limits. They entered an iterative logic which, if it continued to expand knowledge, eventually exhausted their potential for innovation. This trend is encouraged by the huge fragmentation of the discipline into fields, sub-fields, topics, with boundaries between the periods (antiquity; medieval history; early modern and modern history), which are stronger in France than elsewhere<sup>23</sup>. Besides, the major international topics of our time – like global history, environmental history or gender history, just to take a few examples – are not originated from France and had, and have yet, a lot of problems to develop there. History, more than other social sciences, like sociology, seems indeed to be threatened by an evolution which could subordinate it to external objectives: to propose a catalogue of examples useful for the understanding the present and for solving the pending social problems like the integration of children of migrants; or to serve some political purposes like to strengthen the sentiment of belonging to the European Union.

In such a context, it is not really surprising that French historians are trying to find new paths to do history and to attract again the attention of the public. Pluridisciplinarity is one of the most often evoked amongst them. Pluridisciplinarity is here understood as the crossing of two or several disciplines from humanities or social sciences and which is to be differentiated from interdisciplinarity which designate the crossing between social sciences and humanities and the other fields of sciences like biology or mathematics. Is the participation of historians to the redefinition of the social sciences' boundaries set out at the end of the nineteenth-century, a good move to calm their anxieties down and to give them a better position in the relation between science and society? It is really difficult to say. Indeed pluridisciplinarity is a fundamental part of the historical project in France since the birth of the *Ecole des Annales*. The form of this pluridisciplinarity changed over time and according to topics, but French historians have ever continued to heavily rely on other sciences. Economy strongly inspired the quantitative history, or the “histoire sérielle”, put forward by Ernest Labrousse and, afterwards, illustrated by Pierre Goubert, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and many others. Linguistics gives historians methods for quantitative analysis of texts used, for

---

<sup>20</sup> Amongst other provisions, the law passed on the 23rd of February 2005, asked to the curriculums to acknowledge the positive role of the French colonization, especially in North Africa. This specific provision had been nullified on the 15th of February 2006 (<http://legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000444898>).

<sup>21</sup> Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Les traites négrières: essai d'histoire globale*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004. The book, or, more precisely, the declarations of its author to a newspaper in June 2005, have been accused of violating the law passed on the 21<sup>st</sup> May of 2001 (“Loi Taubira”) on the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier et Jacques Revel (dir.), *Dictionnaire de la Nouvelle Histoire*, Paris, Retz, 1978 ; Jacques Le Goff et Pierre Nora (dir.), *Faire de l'histoire. Nouveaux problèmes, nouvelles approches, nouveaux objets*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, 3 volumes.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Faut-il vraiment découper l'histoire en tranches ?*, Paris, Seuil, 2014.

example, in medieval history. Anthropology was at the roots both of the *histoire des mentalités*, developed by Robert Mandrou, and of major trends of French family history. Literature studies inspired since the 1980s reinterpretation of the French political culture under the Ancien Régime. His links with the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu shaped the conception of cultural history successfully developed by Christophe Charle and his school since the 1990s. Recently, space and territory, thus far rather marginal, burst in history, for example about the distribution of administrative and legal power in early modern French towns or on colonial history. So, pluridisciplinarity is already widely practiced by French historians as a way to regenerate methods, topics and historical theme.

Of course, it is ever possible, and desirable, to encourage a pluridisciplinarity, that follows different and new paths. The first one is to develop communication between fields, which do not ordinarily communicate a lot: law and literature for example; or ethics and geography... But history was traditionally at the crossroads between social sciences and humanities and the mutual fertilization has already been huge. It is clear that the mere circulation and (more or less skilful) adaptation of concepts are not enough to regenerate our disciplines born in the late nineteenth century. The second path is the reorganization of disciplines around specific scientific objects: “classic studies” are a good case. “Classics” try to articulate philology, literature, archaeology, history of sciences and history to produce new knowledge about the ancient world. This kind of collaboration is really fruitful but often comes up against the traditions of academic positions. A third path is linked to new methodologies. Over the past decade, the growth of digital humanities and especially the formation of huge corpuses of texts and images transformed the way to do, for example, medieval history<sup>24</sup>. In the future, big data projects will lead to similar evolutions. But, the most dynamic processes occur by now at the boundaries between social sciences and sciences. The development of visual studies, associating art history, neurosciences and data processing, is a good example of this movement as well as the association of computing and heritage studies. Again the position of history is insecure because others social sciences or humanities, benefit more than it of this new course of things: linguistics with language processing; economy with neuro-economics; geography with studies on mobility or on natural hazards and environmental risks; even philosophy, through ethics, is now able to pervade scientific fields like studies on energy, studies on environment or biology. The place of history in these trends is not obvious.

So, pluridisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity must be encouraged but they are not a solution to the current crisis of French history firstly because it is not so easy to historians to join the fray and also because it is basically a professional answer. Pluridisciplinarity has no real appeal outside the community and do not grasp the main problem which is, I repeat, the relation between history and the national community. For five or six years, nevertheless, some middle-aged scholars have experimented new modes of historical writing. Even if there are not representative of the bulk of the historical production, I chose to present them together because it appears to me that they envision new ways to address to the public.

### **Could history be a game?**

In 2008, five well-known specialists of the nineteenth-century published a short book entitled: *Le dossier Bertrand. Jeux d'histoire*<sup>25</sup>. Using the same archives, left by a Mr. Bertrand, the son of a farmer who made a career at a French bank, the Crédit Lyonnais, during

---

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the special issue « Le métier d'historien à l'ère numérique. Nouveaux outils, nouvelle épistémologie », *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 2011/5 (n° 58-4bis).

<sup>25</sup> Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini, Philippe Artières, Dominique Kalifa, Stéphane Michonneau, Sylvain Venayre, *Le dossier Bertrand. Jeux d'histoire*, Paris, Manuella éditions, 2008.

the nineteenth century, each of them gave his, or her, lecture of his life. Stressing on the differences between these several accounts, the book displayed the diversity of historical approaches, and the weight of the subjectivity of the historian. All these scholars belong to the same milieu, around Alain Corbin, one of the founders of French cultural history, whose influence was, and still is, huge. They are either specialists of nineteenth-century like him or they lecture at University Panthéon-Sorbonne (Paris I) where he taught himself<sup>26</sup>. Using a real case which had occurred at the *agrégation d'histoire* in 2011, Patrick Boucheron and Sylvain Venayre published in 2012 *L'Histoire au conditionnel: Textes et documents à l'usage de l'étudiant*<sup>27</sup>. They narrate the complex story of a text given to be commented at the *agrégation d'histoire* in 2058 and presented to the students as a lecture given at the end of the nineteenth-century on the virtues of the French colonization. Soon after the exams, the text is exposed as a pastiche written in 2011 by an historian whose authorship, although openly acknowledged, had been missed by the jury. Patrick Boucheron and Sylvain Venayre use their satire to lampoon the failings and the scientific pretensions of the community of historians. What is interesting here is that the historian they mention as the real author of the text is none other than... Alain Corbin.

These historians induce us to take seriously the word “game” which appears in the subhead of *Le dossier Bertrand: Jeux d'histoire*. The first page of the book gives to the reader a genuine rule for the game which was played by the five historians, a game inspired by the collages, or the “cadavre exquis”, of the surrealists. At the end of the game, which is the end of the book, each historian has given his, or her, version of the story of Daniel Bertrand. A table of the discordances between these five versions highlights the uncertainties of the writing of history. So doing history could be a game rather than a science, and this very statement runs counter to all the exertions of French historians since the end of the nineteenth-century. Indeed, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the status of history as science was not well ascertained. In 1903, the sociologist François Simiand violently attacked the pretensions of the French historical school – the *positivisme* – to be working according to scientific methods and therefore to be of equal value to the methods of this comparatively new field that was sociology<sup>28</sup>. Simiand denied history a scientific status because he considered history to be the study of particular actions that occur only once, and therefore simply a narrative, when sociology was the study of actions that re-occur and are subject to laws. Therefore he stated that sociology is a science like the natural sciences or linguistics and was rejecting history as drawn from a subjective, or a psychological, perspective. During all the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the great majority of historians, each in their own way, have struggled to reply to François Simiand, and to affirm the scientific status of history. In the wake of Ernest Labrousse<sup>29</sup>, quantitative history, for example, considered series – i.e. “the regular repetition of data chosen and

---

<sup>26</sup> It is the case for Patrick Boucheron, Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini, Dominique Kalifa and Sylvain Venayre (now professor at the University of Grenoble 2).

<sup>27</sup> Paris, Fayard, Mille et une nuits, 2012. Sylvain Venayre also wrote *Disparu ! Enquête sur Sylvain Venayre*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, « L'histoire de profil », 2012.

<sup>28</sup> F. Simiand, ‘Méthode historique et science sociale. Etude critique d’après les ouvrages récents de M. Lacombe et de M. Seignobos’, *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, 6, 1903, p. 1-22 et 129-157. See C. Charle, ‘L’historien entre science et politique : Seignobos’, in *Paris, fin de siècle. Culture et politique*, Paris, 1998, p. 125-151; M. Rebérioux, ‘Le débat de 1903 : historiens et sociologues’, in C. O. Carbonell and G. Livet (ed.), *Au berceau des « Annales »*, Toulouse, 1983, p. 219-230; A. Prost, ‘Seignobos revisité’, *Vingtième Siècle*, 43, Jul. 1994, p. 100-117 ; J. Revel, « L’histoire sociale », in J. Revel and N. Wachtel, *Une école pour les sciences sociales. De la VI<sup>e</sup> section à l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* (Paris, 1996), p. 49-72.

<sup>29</sup> M. N. Borghetti, *L’œuvre d’Ernest Labrousse. Genèse d’un modèle d’histoire économique*, Paris, Editions de l’EHESS, 2005.

formulated for the purpose of comparability”<sup>30</sup> – instead of events, deemed to fall within the category of the particular and therefore of the unfathomable, as object of history.

### **A new approach to narration**

Two recent books seem to have shaken another well-established habit of the French historical writing: the denial of the “I”. In 2012, Ivan Jablonka, now professor at the University Paris 13, and specialist of nineteenth-century childhood and education, went further in this way, when publishing *Histoire des grands-parents que je n’ai pas eus*<sup>31</sup>. This flawless historical enquiry, relying on archival sources and oral testimony, narrates the lives of two communist activists Matès and Idesa Jablonka. They were born in Poland at the beginning of the twentieth-century; they settled in France during the 1930s and they were murdered at Birkenau after being arrested in Paris, by the French police, in 1943. This superb book follows all the rules of the historical profession but the fact that these people were his paternal grand-father and grand-mother gives to it an emotional dimension that Ivan Jablonka openly acknowledges. He presents the book as a way to fill the personal lack that he has felt during his infancy and adulthood and as a memorial for his own children. He pictures himself leading his historical and personal research on the trail of his family, scattered around the world when its Polish *shtetl* began to be destroyed. And he punctuates his findings by existential thoughts, giving to his book a human dimension, which is absent from the great majority of historical works<sup>32</sup>. Even if it adds no general knowledge about international migrations in 1930s’ France, or about the Shoah, the story of Matès and Idesa Jablonka, narrated by their grandson, embodies the vanishing hopes and the sufferings of a whole generation. The book received several prestigious academic prizes<sup>33</sup> and hit a real public success. The following year, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, directeur d’études at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, made public an essay entitled *Quelle Histoire. Un récit de filiation (1914-2014)*. In this short text, this leading specialist of the First World War, who greatly contributed to renew in France the scientific approach to this conflict, tells us what the Grande Guerre made to his own family, especially to his grand-father, Robert, whose picture illustrates the front page, and to his father, Philippe, despite the fact that he was born in 1924, after the war. Like in the case of Ivan Jablonka, but more intensely, this book appears to be, for Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, a way to engage a personal dialogue with his father<sup>34</sup>. It reveals also the interrogations shared by the third generation of the descendants of a traumatized group, whose contacts with the original historical event are remote, but who are not, at the difference of the survivors themselves or of their children, stuck in a position of rejection or obliteration of the past<sup>35</sup>.

In these books, it is the attraction of literature which leads to a determination to play down the scientific dimension of history<sup>36</sup>. Before everything else, the books of Ivan Jablonka and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau are indeed a powerful and heartbreaking narration, a *récit*, to

---

<sup>30</sup> F. Furet, ‘L’histoire quantitative et la construction du fait historique’, *Annales ESC*, 1 (Jan-Feb 1971), p. 63-75, p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> Ivan Jablonka, *Histoire des grands-parents que je n’ai pas eus*, Paris, Seuil, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> See especially p. 368-374.

<sup>33</sup> Prix Guizot de l’Académie française ; Prix du Sénat du livre d’histoire ; Prix Augustin Thierry de la Ville de Paris.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, p. 63.

<sup>35</sup> This remark is worth for many other communities: the descendants of the French population of Algeria, or the subjected populations of the French colonies, for example.

<sup>36</sup> We must of course distinguish these books from novels or from plays written by historians who use their academic knowledge of the period they ordinarily study ; see, for example, Arlette Farge, *La nuit blanche*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.

remind the subhead chosen by the second author. But the *récit* does not relate only the history of the actors who are investigated. It narrates the story of the historian who investigates his subject i. e. the past of his own family. The kind of enquiry that they have led could have been done for any people who experienced these tragic periods of French and world history. It is particularly striking when we compare these works with *Le monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot*, an Alain Corbin's book retracing the life of a nineteenth-century ordinary man, chosen almost at random in the archives of the département de l'Orne. The novelty of this fascinating reconstitution, where Corbin had tried to demonstrate the sustainability of such an approach, has been hailed by historians but the try has also showed its limits<sup>37</sup>. Indeed the paucity of the sources had often led Alain Corbin to infer or to presume a plausible behavior for Louis-François Pinagot rather than to document it. And he sometimes superimposed on the unknown and unremarkable life of his main protagonist, facts of national and local history, giving to the book an impersonal and general tone. But in Jablonka's and Audoin-Rouzeau's books, these blanks are filled by the historians, who speak at the first person. They do not hesitate to represent themselves, making hypothesis, evoking possibilities, or conjecturing on the fate of their subjects.

It is not surprising that all historians mentioned in this paper affirm their interest for fiction. Ivan Jablonka, for example, claims his proximity with Georges Perec. Patrick Boucheron and Sylvain Venayre evoke Philip K. Dick in the foreword of their satire. In the same manner, François Hartog, quoting W. G. Sebald and Olivier Rolin, told to *Le Monde*<sup>38</sup> that 'now novelists seem to me, in some ways, more able than historians to say what is History because their relation to time is more suitable to our societies than historians' one. This fascination for fiction is also mentioned in a completely different field. In 2012, a special issue of the online journal *Labyrinthe*, directed by Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, cautiously explored the possibilities opened by counterfactual history: what would be happened if? In their defense of counterfactual history, they pinpointed two main elements: firstly, they present counterfactualism as an ordinary part of the traditional historical analysis; secondly, they emphasize the link between history and fiction. Like in *Le Dossier Bertrand*, they told us that the counterfactual approach allows the "implementation of pedagogical and ludic exercises"<sup>39</sup>. These historians participate to a wider trend which affects all social sciences. Vincent Debaene, in *L'Adieu au voyage. L'ethnologie française entre science et littérature*<sup>40</sup>, asked the same question for anthropology, and Pierre Lassave, in *Sciences sociales et littérature*<sup>41</sup>, assessed the links between the writing of sociology, history and ethnology on one part and literature on the other. And a new relation to narration seems designated more and more as a mean to bridge the gap between the academics and the public<sup>42</sup>.

This paper has thus tried to embrace a wide range of difficulties which are currently annoying professional historians: the upheavals of the French academic landscape through the fast succession of public laws; the ever-growing conflict between history and memory and the re-appropriations of the past for social and political uses; the disaffection of the public, which

---

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, the review by Sabina Loriga, in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2002, vol. 57, n° 1, p. 240-242.

<sup>38</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Quentin Deluermoz et Pierre Singaravélou, « Explorer le champ des possibles. Approches contrefactuelles et futurs non advenus en histoire », *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, n° 59-3, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Paris, Gallimard, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Pierre Lassave, *Sciences sociales et littérature. Concurrence, complémentarité, interférences*, Paris, PUF, 2002.

<sup>42</sup> For a general assessment of this trend, see Nicolas Weill, "Sciences Humaines. 'Ecrire comme Flaubert'", *Le Monde*, 17 janvier 2014.

prefers more entertaining form of knowledge. Each of them is shared with other communities of social sciences and humanities but historians are perhaps the only group which concentrates all of them. It is clear that they are left in a stalemate. Despite their great creativity in the past and the excellent quality of the works they produce, they tend by now to be ruled by traditional topics and specific professional standards, which enclose them, and cut them off from other social sciences and humanities, from other sciences and from the national community. The books evoked here have tried to bridge these gaps. Are they a solution for a new conquest of hearts and souls? So it will be interesting to see if the path Ivan Jablonka and Stéphane Audouin-Rouzeau have chosen will be followed by others historians and to examine if they have their counterparts elsewhere.

**François-Joseph Ruggiu**  
**UMR Centre Roland Mousnier**  
**Université Paris-Sorbonne, CNRS**  
**Sorbonne Universités**  
**francois-joseph.ruggiu@paris-sorbonne.fr**