



**Jacques Le Goff, Josef Tancer**

## The history of innovation and revolt

*Interview with Jacques Le Goff*

The influential historian Jacques Le Goff talks about competing approaches and interdisciplinary challenges to the study of history today. Structural methods aside, he outlines to what extent historians can or should engage actively into current day political life.

**Josef Tancer:** Despite the iron curtain, the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) where you worked for years tried to communicate with East Bloc countries. The works of the *Annales* historians have considerably influenced Polish and Hungarian historiography. What type of contact did you maintain with colleagues in Czechoslovakia where you spent some time after the Second World War?

**Jacques Le Goff:** At the end of the 1950s, Fernand Braudel, who was president of the VI<sup>e</sup> Section, Economic and Social Sciences of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* and director of the journal *Annales*, had signed an exchange agreement with Czechoslovakian authorities as he had done with Polish authorities. Myself, along with the late François Furet, accompanied Fernand Braudel to Warsaw and Prague in 1969 to find out more about the possibilities of continuing this agreement after the dramatic events of 1968. While our Polish colleagues asked us to continue the exchanges, which did not encounter any serious obstacles in Poland, our Czechoslovakian colleagues asked us, on the contrary, to sever connections with the Czechoslovakian authorities who had suppressed the freedom of Czechoslovakian historians and students. During these years, I was able to maintain relations with a few Czech historians: with Frantisek Grauss, first in Prague and later, after he left Czechoslovakia, at Basle in Switzerland; with Josef Macek with some difficulty, and especially with Frantisek Smahel with whom I became reacquainted after the fall of communism and who was responsible for my being awarded the *Palacky* medal in Prague in 1992. It was after this ceremony that I went to Bratislava. While my relationship with Czech and Slovak historians is limited at present, I remain very attentive to historiographical work being done in Slavic countries, and in particular in these two countries.

**J. T:** Traditionally, historiography situates the end of the Middle–Ages around the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century while the study of modern history usually begins with the French Revolution. You situate the end of the Middle Ages in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Why?

**J. L. G:** I think, in fact, that apart from the discovery of America – a significant event for sure that brought about a first globalization – the essential economic, social, political, and cognitive structures of the Occident and the

rest of the world did not fundamentally change around the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Middle Ages have gone through many rebirths, the epoch of Charlemagne, and the 12<sup>th</sup> century for example, and the great Renaissance is but one of these. The historiography of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century seems to me to have exaggerated the novelty of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Even the Reformation did not bring about fundamental transformations. The real changes came about with the beginnings of modern science and the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, socially and politically with the French Revolution, and economically with the Industrial Revolution.

**J. T:** It is surprising that despite this extended conception of the Middle Ages (4<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century), the *Annales* historians studied the 19<sup>th</sup> century very little. Was this a question of personal and institutional priorities? Or was it because the study of modern history is radically different from that of the Middle Ages and one must adapt the approaches of the *Annales* historians to the study of modern history?

**J. L. G:** The "new" history which the *Annales* historians wanted to promote could be shown more evidently for the Middle Ages and the period between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries than for the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When it comes to documents in particular, historians' sources change both qualitatively and quantitatively from the French Revolution onward and it is rather modern history that no longer finds its place. The extended Middle Ages is followed by a period which, from the French Revolution on, can be called contemporary and which engenders a form of history very different from that elaborated by the first *Annales*.

**J. T:** As a historian of mindsets or mentalities and a medievalist, do you find elements of the mindset of medieval man that continue to exist in the man of the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century ?

**J. L. G:** You know that from the very beginning I expressed reservations about the history of mindsets or mentalities and especially the use that is made of it. I prefer the notion of an historical anthropology which includes material culture as much as ideas, feelings, and values. Ideas having an intrinsic tendency to endure, it is normal to find even today fundamental tendencies that originated during the Middle Ages. For example, in studies about money where a mix of openness and apprehension dominates in Europe, and in relation to work, which becomes the object of ambiguous feelings ranging from valorization to depreciation.

**J. T:** Interdisciplinarity is one of the characteristic traits of the work of the *Annales* historians. Lucien Febvre invites historians to become geographers, jurists, sociologists, and psychologists. Marcel Mauss extends a similar invitation to ethnologists and sociologists. What did you have to become as a historian of the Middle Ages?

**J. L. G:** Interdisciplinarity remains an essential watchword for the present *Annales* historians and I share this concern. Of course I have not been able to make myself a geographer or a jurist, but I have granted a great deal of importance to space and law in my way of doing history. I did not see any fundamental distinction between an anthropological sociology à la Marcel Mauss and history as I conceived it. On the other hand, I have serious apprehensions about psychology, even collective psychology which in my opinion is more of a literary than a scientific domain.

**J. T:** *Annales* history was that of innovation and revolt. It was especially the revolt against the domination of political and military history, against a too narrow and materialistic conception of culture, etc. What are the *Annales* historians in revolt against today ?

**J. L. G:** The current struggles being waged by historians in the *Annales* tradition are less harsh than those of the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but we are combating what I have referred to as "returns", the return, for example of biographies (my *St. Louis* is rather an anti-biography), historical narrative (we are primarily interested in structures), current history (we are constantly guided by Braudel's conception of the long term "longue durée" and by what has been called history in bits. We are still trying to realize a difficult global history.

**J. T:** In his book *The French Historical Revolution*, Peter Burke talks about the end of the *Annales* school. The plurality of methods and objects of research as well as the large number of researchers from different disciplines identifying themselves today with the inspirations of the *Annales* make it impossible to perceive these researchers as a school, a movement, or a model. Can one speak of the end of a historical revolution?

**J. L. G:** I think that the idea of the end of the historical revolution of the *Annales* derives primarily from its success. Furthermore, it did not and does not today see itself as a school or a model, but as a movement and an inspiration, and it seems to us that we will always need the *Annales*. We are struck by the number of articles sent to us from historians from around the world, and by the fact that the harshest critics of the *Annales* have not succeeded in launching a rival journal.

**J. T:** In your article "Is Politics still the backbone of history?" from the 70s, you called into question the primary role of political history in historiography. In the book *Imagination du Moyen Age* from the 1980s, you pose this question again but provide a different answer: the conception of a political anthropology. Why have you returned to political history?

**J. L. G:** I have in no way returned to political history. In the article you refer to "Is politics still the backbone of history?" I argued for an evolution of political history towards an historico-political anthropology. It is to this that I have dedicated my efforts. It seems to me that this is a struggle to pursue. It remains that there is an historico-political anthropology that can be replaced neither by sociology nor by that conquering history known as cultural history.

**J. T:** The *Annales* grouped together and attracted a large number of personalities. Now most of these, like Michel Foucault, were never at the centre of the movement. Did Michel Foucault's conception of power influence your attitude towards political history?

**J. L. G:** The *Annales* have been influenced by great thinkers and intellectuals like Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss, but have always claimed a primacy for history in the social sciences. We have had exchanges, been subject to influences, but we have never abandoned our fundamental interest for time and duration. We have always advocated and tried to practice a history in motion, a dynamic history.

**J. T:** There is more and more talk about the need to elaborate a European constitution, founded on common European values. What do you think of such an intention? Is it possible to realize it? What are, according to you, the values

on the basis of which we can "make" Europe today?

**J. L. G:** That's a big and difficult question. I ask myself the question about the opportunity that may or may not arise out of developing a European constitution. I see two essential values which in any case have to form the basis of European union: secularism and democracy. I think the battle cry launched first by the American Revolution and later and especially by the French Revolution have still not finished imbuing themselves in the life of European societies. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity may require redefinition, but they must remain fundamental values, and, happily, we have added the rights of man to them. Moreover, these values cannot be limited to a European incarnation. They are valuable for all humanity but Europe must be, if not a model, at least a stimulus for the global realization of its ideals.

**J. T:** The *Annales* movement transformed historical research on the Middle Ages. Did these changes also have a marked impact on the method of teaching history in universities and high schools?

**J. L. G:** This is a delicate problem as well. The *Annales'* conception of history is a program of research and historiographical production. More difficultly, it is also a method of teaching, in particular in secondary schools. I participated with Fernand Braudel in meetings with those responsible for history programs in secondary schools and universities, and I have to admit that the result was more or less a failure. I do not think that these efforts should be continued on the basis of a compromise between the historiography of the *Annales* and history as taught in schools and universities, but that it is necessary to pursue a renewal of university programs and primary and secondary school curricula.

**J. T:** In general, Slovak historians and intellectuals do not voice their views on questions that concern society as a whole. Now your activity never limited itself to the domain of research and teaching. Do you think that engagement should be a natural component of the job of an historian?

**J. L. G:** I suppose that Slovak historians and intellectuals have been discouraged by the sad experiences of the communist era and by the uncertainties of the post-communist period. However, I think that the historian, whatever the period he concerns himself with professionally has to be a man of the present who is engaged in that present, either to introduce it into his long-term professional reflection, or if his temperament leads that way, into active engagement. It seems to me that the intellectuals of the Middle Ages who I once studied also engaged themselves in their present. History must shed light on society, must shed light on society's choices. The historian must maintain a position, not of neutrality but of truth or at least make efforts to attain it, and his engagement in his profession in itself, if done with a sense of social responsibilities is already, I think, an engagement.

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