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Approaches of the “Annales School” From the History of Mentalities to Historical Synthesis*

I would like to dwell on a few aspects of historical methodology, aspects which strike me as most important and which are closely connected with the new trends in our profession. My aim is not so much to speak about the concrete achievements of the representatives of the “*Annales* school”, but rather to express some thoughts inspired by the study of their works. The background to these thoughts consists of my own investigations, as well as of the works of the Tartu school of semiotics and the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin.

1. I would like to begin with an example, and the word *example* should here be taken literally, since what I have in mind is an *exemplum* from the thirteenth century, when the literary genre of the medieval *exempla* flourished. As is well known, *exempla*, short didactic anecdotes, were collected by friars and used in sermons.

My *exemplum* concerns the evil death of a certain lawyer. His colleagues and friends gathered around his death-bed and could converse with him, yet they could hear that he already stood before the supreme Judge of the Last Judgment at that very moment. Through his words, they could conclude that he had to answer questions posed by Christ, and they also understood that he was being charged with grave sins and crimes. The lawyer suddenly cried, “My friends, help me, please, appeal (*appellate*)”. They were filled with horror at feeling themselves quite near the place of Judgment. It is easy to imagine the kind of shock which such an “effect of presence” must have produced. The dying lawyer repeated, “Please, hurry, appeal as soon as possible!” Then, after a few moments of silence, “You have hesitated too long. Now it is too late. All is finished. I received the sentence, I perish forever.” Such was the frightful death of a lawyer whose profession was not too popular at the time.

This tale, one of many similar ones, requires comment.

First of all, it appears very strange that the Last Judgment should take place

* In May 1992, Aaron Gurevich received an honorary doctorate from the University of Lund. *Scandia* publishes here one of the lectures on the *Annales* tradition and view of history which Gurevich has delivered in recent years. Due to the nature of the text, there are no notes.

not "at the end of time", but at the very moment of an individual's death. The Church taught that the Judgment will occur after the Second Coming and the Resurrection, and that the whole of mankind will be brought to trial. The scenes of the Last Judgment decorated the West portals of the churches and cathedrals, and everyone could observe them. In my *exemplum* here, however, we meet quite a different understanding of the Last Judgment. The question concerning the ideas of medieval people on the Last Judgment, its time and form, thus arises.

Secondly, we can detect in such stories at least two conceptions of the human personality. At what point is a given person's biography complete and its final page filled, in the unknown future or rather at the moment of the individual's death? Philippe Ariès demonstrated that this is a highly significant problem. A kind of contradiction exists between great eschatology and individual eschatology. How to explain this dichotomy? Would it imply that two successive judgments will take place? Such an idea makes little sense.

There exists a kind of confusion, not merely in the mind of the modern scholar attempting to understand the attitudes of medieval men towards death and the other world, but indeed also in the medieval minds themselves.

Another example may be employed. There was a custom according to which friends could decide that the first among them to pass away should return to the living friend in order to inform him about conditions beyond the grave. A learned priest died. When he visited his friend a little later, he told him that at the time of his death, the Last Judgment over all dead people took place. His friend replied, "What are you telling me? You were a man of letters and you know quite well that the Last Judgment will take place at the end of time". The deceased friend answered as follows, "My learning and knowledge were of very little help to me."

There thus existed an official Church teaching, yet certain experiences differed from its content. Two distinct versions of death and postmortal fate of the human soul, two contradictory versions of eschatology, and two different conceptions of time and human personality meet here, as they do in numerous other *exempla*, visions of the other world and sermons, i.e. in the Church literature addressed to the mass of believers.

The problem which I have here touched upon, although only briefly, is that of the relationship between two different traditions of medieval culture and religiosity, that of the Church and that of the people. The interpretation of some central themes of Christian beliefs and world values was very different in these two traditions of medieval spiritual life. There was, to be sure, mutual interpenetration and reciprocal influence, as well as contradiction and misunderstanding.

I say this in order to stress that there exist quite a few new problems to be studied. One of these is the problem of the different strata of culture and religiosity, the problem of the divergences inside the medieval world view. These new problems require new mental tools of interpretation, novel approaches as

well as quite a new frame of reference. Where can we search for these new approaches and methods?

I suppose that there is only one way out of the above mentioned difficulties.

2. As is well known, History, in contrast to the natural sciences, is in search of meaning. Human beings, the real subjects of historical study, behave consciously and can therefore not avoid placing a certain meaning into their actions, imparting it to their own lives.

The widespread error of traditional historical investigation was that historians imagined that people of the past understood meanings as we have done and behaved accordingly. From this point of view it would appear quite easy to understand their actions. The prerequisite of such an attitude was that man and the human mind were constants in the course of history. No problem concerning the mentality of people of past eras was therefore raised, since these individuals were thought of in terms of present categories.

Contemporary students of the past do not share this position. The meaning which we attempt to decipher in human actions of the past is their own special meaning. It is unique to each particular society and to every given period. Accordingly, it is possible to comprehend this meaning only by studying it in the context of its own culture.

Such an attitude changes the whole situation in the humanities. The necessary precondition of every historical investigation is to decipher the symbolic language employed by the author of the record under study. The first problem of historical investigation is that of mentality, and only when historians have some preliminary model of the epoch's mentality is it possible to tackle a particular topic, however far from mentality this one may lie.

The meaning of human behaviour can naturally be discerned in specific historical sources such as autobiographies, diaries, lyric poetry or confession. Yet it is also possible to search for it in any kind of source, since all are human creations and cannot but yield some information about the behaviour of a certain individual or group. It is especially important when historians study periods for which they have none, or few of the above mentioned categories of sources. Such is the case with the Early Middle Ages, the "Dark Ages" in this very sense.

However, it seems most important to me to reveal human meaning not only in ideological statements or in other intentional expressions, but also and primarily in nonexplicit human orientations. What I have in mind are stereotypes of behaviour, speech, gesture, custom and habit of mind. In studying these stereotypes, we can capture the widespread everyday mentalities. It is here that History meets semiotics. What is crucial to semiotic study is that it pays attention not only to the "level of expression", i.e. deliberately formulated messages, but also, and indeed more so, to the "level of content", that is, such a level of consciousness of which even the author of the message himself may not be aware. A great deal of new information may thus be found.

3. At this point, History meets Cultural Anthropology and becomes its diligent pupil, for it borrows from Anthropology its concept of culture. Culture is understood, in this context, not as a complex of individual achievements in art, literature, science, philosophy etc., but rather as a system of certain mental and psychological conditions of human behaviour existing in a given society at a given epoch, including the above mentioned attitudes and habits of mind, modes of articulation of the world. It is the soil in which rare and precious intellectual flowers grow.

Such an interpretation of culture is connected with the answer to the question, "Who possesses culture?". According to the traditional view, culture is an exclusive property of educated, enlightened people, whereas others remain outside of it. According to the anthropological conception of culture, free of value judgments, it is an unalienable characteristic of the human being as a social creature, and is a quality pertaining to every man, woman and society. The amount of culture which individuals acquire depends on them, their personal abilities and their social and educational positions, but they nevertheless belong to the culture of the epoch, and thus speak and think in its symbolic language.

It is quite clear that, in conformity with the conception of culture, traditional historiography focuses mainly on such layers of culture as have found direct expression in literary texts, art production, and in theological, philosophical and aesthetical ideas and theories.

It is natural that this kind of Cultural History remain separated from general History, and from Social History in particular. It is equally understandable that efforts are being made at somehow connecting the history of culture with Social History, efforts which as a rule lead to sociological oversimplification and are very doubtful and unconvincing. Die *Geistesgeschichte*, or *Kulturgeschichte* remains the territory "uncontaminated" by *Sozialgeschichte*, and attempts to bring them together remain the so-called *Buchbindersynthese*, "the synthesis of the bookbinder."

The new historiography, on the other hand, does not take the epoch's word and is not satisfied with the analysis of the main achievements of the creative mind. Its way leads not so much through the high peaks of ideas and *chef-d'oeuvres*, but rather through the valleys of rites, clichés and dark forests of symbols and signs. It takes into consideration not only ideology, but also verbal expressions, forms of human behaviour, i.e those aspects of culture which lay hidden behind the official screen. Thus, I repeat that new studies in History investigate the sources and above all, the implicit content which the people of the past had not so much intentionally reported as disclosed involuntarily. The immense field of implicit and often unarticulated mental attitudes becomes the subject of historical research.

To return to the example with which I began. While studying the attitudes of medieval people towards death, Philippe Ariès took into consideration some specimens of epic, archaeology of the cemeteries, funeral rites and works of

art. However, he completely ignored the entire complex of such texts particularly devoted to "the last things", i.e. death, Judgment, punishment, paradise and hell, as *exempla* or records of the visions of the other world in which the voyages of the temporarily dead through hell and other parts of the *post mortem* realm are depicted. He seems to ignore them first of all because his own conception of culture was, so to speak, highbrow. Culture according to Ariès is the property of the educated élite. The result was that Ariès' picture of medieval attitudes towards death was utterly distorted.

4. The above mentioned change in the understanding of culture presupposes, first of all, the widening of the context of investigation. In other words, the historian should be striving after the synthesis, the ideal of "total history". Instead of separating History into departments of economics, religion, art and politics, we should bear in mind a kind of totality.

The principle of "total history", proclaimed by the "*Annales* school", consists in my mind not of the eclectic description of all possible aspects of social life, nor of the simple multiplication of approaches to it. This principle presupposes, first of all, and it seems to me most importantly, the new study of interrelations between different aspects of historical life, and especially between material and ideal aspects of society. Spheres of social life which were traditionally considered unconnected and quite independent from one another, for example, wealth and religion, or property relations and magic, may prove to be intimately interconnected.

Let me here take a specific phenomenon, namely, the abundance of hoards in Scandinavian countries in the Viking Age. Many thousands of hoards were found with hundreds of thousands of silver and gold coins accumulated by the Vikings. There is a long established tendency of historians and archaeologists to study these hoards exclusively in terms of wealth and accumulation. Not long ago, I took part in the discussion on the doctoral dissertation of an archaeologist who, basing his argument on the great number of coins in the hoards, attempted to establish the amount of economic wealth of the Vikings and their material possibilities to develop feudalism. I rather timidly suggested to him, "But, learned colleague, these valuables were never used during the Middle Ages".

What all historians and archaeologists fail to explain is why so many Scandinavians buried their valuables and why no one during the Viking Age ever tried to dig them out. They failed to explain the widespread Viking practice of hiding their hoards in lakes or swamps, making it impossible for themselves or for their descendants to obtain and use this wealth. These scholars studied their subject in categories of wealth characteristic of their own society, imagining early medieval hoards on the analogy of the modern savings bank. The mentality of a contemporary scholar as an obstacle to the understanding of medieval mentality: This is a great and very interesting problem.

Meanwhile, the explanation seems to me possible only on the condition that

historians widen their intellectual horizons and take into consideration the ideas of the ancient Scandinavians about the other world, the mode of existence of the dead in that world, as well as their ideas of the magic "luck" which was materialized in silver and gold. According to their beliefs, a person could retain his own "luck" and enjoy it as far as its materialization, i.e. hoard, was not alienated or touched by anybody, but remained with him, in this world as well as in the other one.

Icelandic sagas tell stories of dead men who sat in their graves on chests full of silver and gold and defended these from every intruder. We read about the great Icelandic poet Egill Skallagrímsson: feeling his coming death, he ordered two of his slaves to take with them his chests with English silver and go into an inner uninhabited part of the island. From there, Egill returned without chests and slaves, and it is quite clear from the saga that he killed the slaves after they had hidden the hoard. It was not destined for earthly use.

Similarly, "luck" according to the ancient Scandinavian beliefs, remains with a person as long as he retains a sword, or cloak, or silver ring given by the chief. As in many other instances in the Middle Ages, we meet here a special kind of human relation, not between a person and wealth but between person and person, face to face relations not veiled by commodity fetishism.

The phenomena which were considered purely economic and were explained as such prove to be "knots" in which quite different aspects of social life were entangled, material as well as spiritual. It is extremely dangerous to divide people's life into separate compartments, according to the specialty of the scholar, since such an operation makes it impossible to understand their life and behaviour, as well as their ideas about the world. In other words, this compartmentalization leads to loss of the meaning.

We may take another example from the same epoch, namely, the innumerable donations of land to the Church throughout the whole of Europe. The explanation of this most important process in exclusively economic terms cannot be regarded as satisfactory. One of the leading motives compelling landowners to give up their property rights was religious. I cannot but repeat Marc Bloch's dictum that fear was the most mighty social fact in the life of medieval society. People were afraid of hell and tried to obtain heavenly benevolence by means of the reciprocal exchange so natural and habitual in traditional communities. A person gives a saint his plot of land in order to assure his protection both in the earthly and in the other world.

Such an intention is clearly stated in the preambles to every charter of donation. Nevertheless, the majority of historians who studied the process of land accumulation by the Church ignored the formula. They looked at it and they could not see it. The explanation for this strange blindness is quite simple. The economic process, in the eyes of these historians, requires a purely economic interpretation. Again we meet the same obstacle to real understanding of the meaning of human behaviour, namely, the historian's mentality.

The above mentioned donation charters are not only very important sources

for the economic history of the Early Middle Ages, but also valuable testimonies to the process of the introduction of Christian beliefs into the European countryside.

In other words, contemporary approaches to Social History demand the discussion of the problem of historical context in which a given subject must be investigated. Social, economic, and religious principles separated by historians' thought were united in real history, and it is necessary to reconstruct them in their actual totality.

It seems to me, therefore, that the theory of the "base-superstructure", as well as its modifications, such as the "history of the three levels" (economic, social and ideological or mental) of Pierre Chaunu and some other French historians who seem to be very far from Marxism, are not quite satisfactory tools for the analysis of historical reality. It may be that the idea of the dependence of spiritual and political life on the economic one is sound in a very large, all-embracing and purely philosophical sense. What, however, can historians do with it?

It seems advisable not to forget that the theory of the "base-superstructure" was formed in the course of polemics with idealistic theories of history and was applied, first of all, to modern history, to the capitalistic mode of production. Yet many historians are tempted to use it in the study of all pre-capitalist societies as well. It has seemed necessary to demonstrate its universal applicability. As of yet, however, nobody has succeeded in proving it.

As a rule, the adherents of the above mentioned theory state that the political and ideological "superstructures" are determined by the economic "base" in the long run ("in the last resort"). Does this formula not simply mean that the adherents of the theory cannot demonstrate the postulated causal chains?

The main trouble with theories of this kind is that students of the past feel themselves free from the obligation to search for a real and concrete explanation of historical facts. Every constellation of historical phenomena needs careful, special and individual explanation, and it is a great danger to subject it to some aprioristic scheme. History is the study of the individual and of the general which reveals itself only in and through the individual. What historians need, in fact, are the "theories of the middle range" and not the Procrustean schemes. Let us remember that it was nobody but Marx himself who vehemently protested against any "universal keys".

5. Now I should like to return to the history of mentalities. In their search for firm points in the flow of history, Lucien Febvre and March Bloch have found a new key notion. Of course, the notion of "mentality" is somewhat ambiguous, but it is advisable not to overlook that the very subject itself is rather ambivalent and extremely vast. Besides, one must not forget that almost every general notion used by historians is of necessity far from being as strict and precise as notions of the natural sciences.

The notion of "mentality" is now under attack by a number of historians not

only due to its imprecision but also as a result of the way in which it has been abused. They do not pay enough attention to the fact that a lot of very original and innovative studies were created in the context of the history of mentalities. So I prefer not to waste time and energy on the discussion of the concept, for such discussions have repeatedly proven unproductive, and will instead attempt to clarify the field of research in this area.

What perspectives for historical research are opened by this approach? That is the question.

It seems to me that the core of mentalities studies is the exploration and reconstruction of the world-view of people of the past. This *Weltbild* is in its turn a somewhat ambivalent thing. It is hardly advisable to ask a person, "what is your world-view?", for he could scarcely answer such a question. He has most probably not thought of it at all. However, he does possess a certain world-view, but it is largely concealed from his own understanding. In any case, it is not wholly formulated. It seems to be like Monsieur Jourdain's prose. He uses it, not suspecting its existence.

The world-view is the product of culture in the anthropological sense of the term, and everyone who belongs to a given society shares this world-view. I mean a set of cultural "coordinates" ingrained in the human mind. They are its main categories, and people perceive and model reality mainly with the help of them, and only through them. No conscious activity is possible beyond this system of categories, since they form its prerequisites.

It may be appropriate to stress that the world-view represents reality in a transformed, even unrecognizable form. However, people's behaviour corresponds not so much to their objective conditions as to their world-view.

Accordingly, a study of the categories of the world-view provides a key to understanding the social behaviour and method of articulation of the universe. It is possible to discover these categories literally in all spheres of human activity, in philosophy and religion, in art and science, in economics and politics, in everyday life, in man's relation to nature and in relations between individuals, as well as between individual and society.

Therefore, one cannot adequately understand any of the spheres of social life, if one does not attempt to decipher these categories. Otherwise one is exposed to the danger of distorting and modernizing historical reality.

A tremendous amount of work in the study of the particular aspects of the world-view of medieval and modern people has already been done, for example:

- attitudes of a given society and different groups and classes towards labour, property, wealth and poverty;
- the picture of the social whole and the perception of different groups and estates;
- understanding of law and custom, evaluation of the law as a social regulative mechanism;
- nature and the means of its knowledge, the tools of action vis-à-vis nature,

from technological to magical;

- assessment of the ages of human life, in particular in childhood and old age; attitudes towards death and illness; the place of women in society; marriage and family, sexual morals and practice — in short, all subjective aspects of historical demography working on the border between culture and nature, biology and mentality;
- the relation of the earthly world to the transcendent one, connections between them, the role of supernatural powers in the life of human beings and collectives;
- interpretation of time and space, which until recently were comprehended not as abstractions, but as the mighty powers exerting influence on man and having ethical meaning;
- understanding history and its movement, progressive or regressive, repetition or development;
- different layers of culture, their conflicts with and influence on one another, in particular the relationship of the official and intellectual culture of the élite which controlled knowledge, and popular or folk culture;
- the religiosity of the different strata of society;
- the psychology of the educated and of the illiterate who continued to live in the world of orality;
- social phobia and collective psychoses and fears, for example, the witch hunt;
- the relationship between the "shame culture" and the "guilt culture", i.e. orientation to the person's inner world, or to society;
- the history of feasts and calendar festivities which gave the rhythm to the community's life, including carnival and charivari;
- national, tribal, state identity, stereotypes of the national contradictions and their utilization by the state and other social manipulators;
- the main problem of the history of mentalities, human personality as a structural unit of a social group; the grade of its individualization; the means of human self-consciousness; the place of man in the structure of the universe.

The list is not full and comprehensive; it is open in principle, and it has its own axis. All aspects of the history of mentalities mentioned above may seem to be disparate and unconnected, were they not centred around the main problem, that of human personality structured in connection with the type of culture. A kind of strategy of anthropological investigation is developing amidst this seemingly chaotic movement. Therefore, the study of mentalities, the study of some mental habits and abilities, is now being transformed into historical anthropology, or anthropologically oriented history.

The problem is not so much the concept of mentalities as the essence of our profession. It is strange to say but it seems to me quite clear that historical science, in undergoing the natural and inescapable process of inner differen-

tiation, has lost its main subject. In fact, Social History studied structures of society, Economic History investigated production and distribution, Art History concentrated on aesthetic ideas and works of art, the History of Religion deepened into the dogmatic doctrines, etc. "An infinitely small unit" was neglected, namely, man, the human being who produced and consumed all material and spiritual wealth, who held religious beliefs and was a member of a social group. His existence was ignored by the specialists, and the reason for this is understandable. What can be done with this human being, with all his passions and disordered ideas, with his unpredictable conduct? Is it not much easier to treat him as a material object like every other object of the natural sciences?

The main feat of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre was that they demonstrated the impossibility of this kind of inhuman history. We must now examine and evaluate the results of the new approach.

Historical study has acquired new dimensions. Side by side with the "outer" description of the phenomena of the past as they are seen by contemporary historians, there appear the outlines of human personality, its social and natural worlds as they were comprehended by the people of the past. The so-called "objective" image of history expressed in the notions and categories of contemporary science is combined with the so-called "subjective" world-vision of the people of the epoch under study. The problem is how to combine and coordinate both visions in order to make the picture of history stereoscopic and more truthful. This procedure may help us to escape anachronism and to prevent us from implanting into the heads of people of other historical epoch ideas and feelings which were not theirs, but which are instead characteristic of us and our contemporaries.

Moreover, the study of world-views demands that historians behave according to the very nature of the historical profession, i.e. study their subject not as physical or natural phenomena, but in the capacity of a thinking and feeling human personality. The historian cannot but try to establish a kind of a dialogue with the people of the past (Bakhtin), to ask them (i.e. the sources) questions which are of importance to the modern researcher, and to decipher the answers.

The process of development from the history of mentalities which began 60 years ago, with the founding of the *Annales*, to the anthropologically oriented history of today is in my opinion the process of the search for the real subject of historical studies and humanities in general, the search for man as a historically and culturally determined social being.