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Questions and Orientations in History during the last 20 years. Part 1



Introduction

Editorial Committee

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Questions and Orientations in History During the Last 20 Years

What happened to history, the humanities and the social sciences in the two decades from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the outbreak of the world economic crisis in 2008? These 20 years, which marked the transition from one century to another under the seal of the millennium, were characterised by tremendous changes in the economy, technology and world politics. New concepts such as “globalisation”, “transnationalism” and “cultural transfers”, as well as new words defining space, communication and technologies such as “digital”, “virtual”, “cyber”, sprung into our disciplinary fields. The question is how have these changes imprinted the ways of thinking history as well as the concerns and the orientations of historians? What has been the impact on their research agendas? What theoretical paradigms have come into play? The shift from the agenda of new social history to new cultural history, and to the set of ideas known as postmodernism, from the 1960s to the 1990s, has been extensively mapped.¹ But what were the main landmarks of historical research and theoretical reflection in the past 20 years? What was the impact of globalisation in reshaping the past beyond national historical agendas? Did the large and abrupt changes in society find an equivalent in the thinking of how societies changed in the past? During this period, history emerged also as mass demand for the right to remember and as a way to raise claims for the recognition of past sufferings and rendering justice for past injustices. New history and memory wars erupted around the globe and the past debates on how to represent historical truth seemed to be quite irrelevant or

inadequate to meet the new requirements of how to live with the past. This same period also marks the history of the collectivity that has formed around this journal, *Historein*. With common origins in the theoretical discussions of the 1990s, this historical milieu, following different research fields and diverging itineraries, continues to maintain a common concern towards theory, exploring new issues such as public history, the history of emotions, the relationship between history and religion, utopian thinking, critical theory, memory laws and the self-historicisation of historians. Many of the initial ideas, which provoked extensive reaction and tough debates in Greece, became common in this decade or have been absorbed into new orientations. The readiness of the majority of the *Historein* editorial board to participate in the workshop, held in Athens in December 2011, on the “Questions and Orientations in History during the Last 20 Years” is in indication of this engagement. Most, but not all, of the papers published in this and the following issue were presented and discussed in this workshop. In the meantime, during 2012, *Historein* moved to a new website, located on the server of National Documentation Centre, which hosts

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the majority of Greek academic journals. In these hard times for Greece, we need to work together to save our institutional settings. But, and this comes as no surprise, crisis is always a moment of creativity. The richness of theoretical productivity in recent years had led us to the belief that it would be possible to publish *Historein* not once, but twice, a year.

Tom Gallant's piece, "The Past, Present and Future of Social History", is a history of social history, which has dominated the field of historical studies in the English-speaking world since the late 1960s. Gallant describes the differences between old and new social history, focuses on main trends and key moments of the debates between new social history and the cultural history that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Cultural history gave a new breath to social history, and reframed most of its basic categories such as class, race and gender, viewing them as sets of cultural relations. Structuralism ceased to be the prevailing theory and the emphasis on the importance of human agency moved social history towards the humanities. Orientalism and postcolonialism also gave a new impetus in seeing the intellectual history of the west in a new way. Cultural history also resisted the attempt by the new social sciences to view societies through the lenses of rational choice theory, game theory and cognitive psychology. Nevertheless, the big changes highlighted the inability of cultural history to explain historical change and to see historical causality beyond representations and contingency. From this perspective, cultural history was criticised for ignoring the big issues.

Rolf Petri's "The Idea of Culture and the History of Emotions" refers to the recent turn to emotions in historical studies and the humanities and combines three aspects in the field of the study of emotions: the history of feelings through their historical manifestations, the role that emotions played in historical processes and how emotions affect the making of history. He criticises the division of reason and emotion as distinct spheres of thinking and feeling, which canonises rational conduct and marginalises the emotional aspects of human behaviour as irrational interruptions. He adopts an approach which encompasses both spheres, pointing out the analogies between historicising and mourning. Petri's approach has not only historical but also political value. In the present crisis, we have a culmination of the dualism between the rational and the emotional. Economic liberalism and the comportment of the markets, or the needs of the markets, are deemed as rational, while popular reaction is considered populist, irrational and emotional.

Athena Syriatou, in her "National, Imperial, Colonial and the Political: British Imperial Histories and their Descendants", traces the changes in the history of the British Empire by (mostly) British historians. Starting from the appraisal of the empire and colonialism by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians, she follows the itinerary of the history of the empire through the influence of social anthropology, the radical criticism of the 1960s, postcolonial theories after the linguistic turn and the creation of new imperial histories. She gives more attention to the transition from the criticism of colonialism, through the theories of orientalism and postcolonialism, to the new imperial history which researches the idea and the mentality of empire not only in the history of the subalterns but also in the way that politics and culture were conducted in the metropolis. She comments on the resistance such new methods of imperial history faced from the academic establishment and the eventual cohabitation of older and newer histories of

the empire in academia. Throughout the article, she contextualises British imperial historiography in relation to the sociopolitical changes of twentieth-century Britain and its vast empire.

The debates of the last twenty years did not leave archaeology untouched. After all, new archaeology is almost coetaneous with new social history and also draws from the same ferment of ideas in the 1960s. Dimitris Plantzos, in his “Archaeology after the End of History”, describes vividly the windy escape of ideas over excavations and the renegotiation of the fundamentals of archaeology as a discipline, profession and social practice. Archaeology, he writes, has been criticised as an “*allochronic* discourse”, similar to anthropology, in constructing the Other of the modern western world. The impact of the theoretical debates on culture and materiality found their way into archaeology, often shaking the indifference of archaeologists towards theoretical issues and convincing most of them that the way we think archaeology and its relevance to the modern world is not external but internal to the problems they study.

It is impressive, but not inexplicable, that the same itinerary from social history to the debates steered by cultural history is traceable also in fields that traditionally have stood on the border of political and religious history and at the centre of the western European canon. This is the case of the history of the Reformation. Costas Gaganakis, in his article “From the Social History of the Reformation (1960–1980) to the Reformation as a Communication Process (1990–2000)”, explains that during the 1960s, social history invaded the field, applying sociocultural approaches and turning the Reformation into a predominantly “urban event” of early modern European history. The need to explain religious violence, and the focus by new cultural historians on the dissemination of the ideas of the Reformation, led historians to see the Reformation as a “communication process” and focus in the language and the images of propaganda. From this perspective, it became clear that printed words became the weapons of the Reformation and that the Reformation itself was a cultural revolution in communications. The departure from the Weberian image of the Reformation was also encouraged by the history of emotions, which revised the duality between self-containment and discipline, on the one hand, and of emotionality on the other, attributing the first to Protestants and the second to Catholics.

As the core identity of historians since the nineteenth century has been defined by their relations with the archive, what remains since the redefinition of the concept of the archive by Foucault and Derrida? Rika Benveniste, in her article “Lost in the Archive: Foucault, the Historian and the Novelist”, writes that the archive is not only what we read in the documents but also the silences on what could not be said, the coercion over what has been said and the limitations of what and how it could be said. The archives do not contain facts but relations, and in these relations, historians, as researchers and authors, have an active role to play. At the same time, the novel is not something alien to documented history by definition, but it reconstitutes the fragmented text through references to a more complex network of texts inside and outside the archives.

It is more than obvious that the six articles of this issue are signs of the changes in and not a systematic charting of the landscape. They look like medieval itineraria than modern maps. We will continue with the same questions from different research experiences in the next issue. A

crisis situation is a moment to start thinking history in a new way. *Historein* would like to explore further the making of history in the past 20 years and the emergence of new forms of historical practice in relation to globalisation, economic and environmental crises, genocides and extreme mass suffering. After all, historical work is an intersubjective relationship.

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NOTE

- 1 Mainly through books like Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008; Joan Scott and Debra Keates (eds), *School of Thoughts: Twenty-five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000; William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 2005, and numerous special issues in historical reviews.