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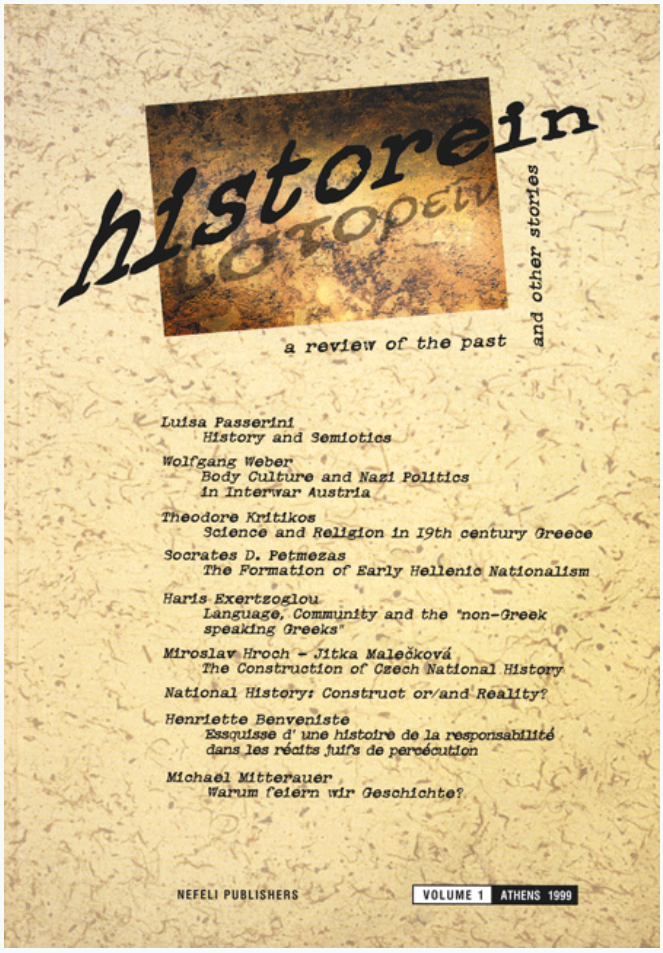

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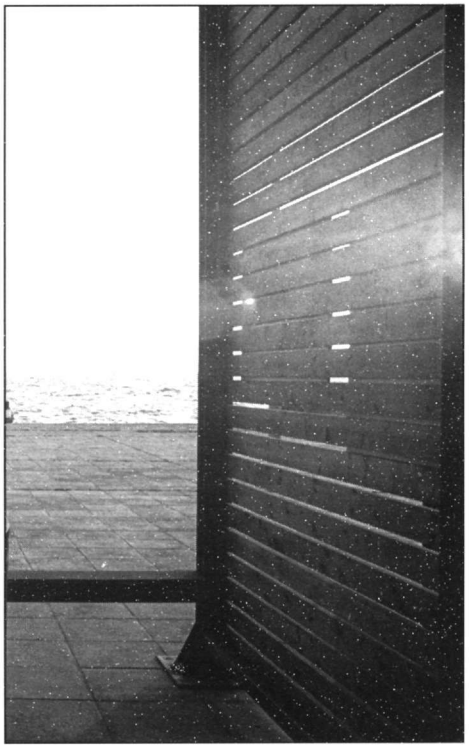
History and semiotics

Luisa Passerini



In this text history is attributed a double meaning: it is conceived as what has happened in the past and, also, the cognition of what has happened. However, this double meaning does not coincide exactly with the old distinction between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum. Res gestae,* i.e., what happened in the past, is not only no longer conceived as a totality, but, in the perspective of a semiotised history (*historia sub specie semioticae*), it is conceived as itself a communicative process. In this sense, the course of history is the process of generation of new expressions in a certain language and their understanding by society, whereby new information obtains diverse reactions from the collective entity (Uspenskij). Language must be understood here not in a strict, literal sense, but in a wide, semiotic one. In Uspenskij's definition, the *text* of events is *read* and interpreted by society, acquiring a meaning shared by the collective whole. Whatever is not described by this "language" is not perceived by society, as if it were not visible.

Such semiotisation of history, inherent in historical perception, transforms the objects it perceives into historical events. At this point, it might appear that the separation between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum* is more nuanced than it would be if the two processes were thought of as pertaining to different orders of reality. *Historia rerum gestarum* is made possible by and based on the textual nature of *res gestae*; recurrences and patterns present in the text of passed history condition or resist interpretations from the present. At the same time, the textual reading of new historians reformulates the past as a text. This does not

imply that the whole past is reduced to acts of wording; the connection with other aspects–from emotional drives to economic forces–is a horizon that history can never lose sight of, although it is not the direct object of its exercise.

Semiotisation of history as we understand it opposes the structuralist definition of history as an amorphous myriad of psychic and individual movements that, in the end, could be resolved into cerebral, hormonal, nervous, i.e. physical or chemical, phenomena (Levi-Strauss). This type of structuralism reduced history to a pulverisation of infinitesimal events, to which only the subjective choices of the historian intervened to give some sense. "Subjectivity" was therefore casual and arbitrary, since it could not find any correspondence in the patternless complex of apparently identical entities, devoid of any specific human character. Only if the historical process (*res gestae*) is conceived of as the product not only of physical and chemical determinations, but also of acts of decision and understanding–a text including stories about a partial and conditioned freedom–only then can the subjectivity of historical choices in *historia rerum gestarum* show its whole strength as a new understanding with the past, a dialogue that was not possible before and has become possible now thanks to the development of new languages.

Plurality and discontinuity of history conceived as a communicative process

One of the characteristic aspects of historiographical attitudes in the last half century, and particularly in the last twenty years, is the insistence on plurality: of choices, of objects, of methodologies. This implies giving up any illusion of studying history as a totality or by a total approach; on the contrary, the historical attitude always requires choices. "Since the 1960s, all the regnant absolutisms of the XIX century have been dethroned" (Appleby et al.). The awareness has grown of history as a relentless making of choices, where each choice implies the responsibility of the historian, both in a professional and a moral sense (Kula). It is as part of this attitude that recent historiography, even when it assumes as its object "the world", has given up claims to totality. Wallerstein reminds us that the very term "world" changed its meaning from 1450 to 1650, and justifies its usage on the basis of the insufficiency of terms like "state", "national society", and "social system". "World" is therefore to be taken as a simplificatory concept that allows one to deal with certain historical realities, for example, states as unities within other unities. It is a unitarian concept, but not in an absolute sense; rather, it is historically dated, referring primarily to that type of world economy that originated in Europe in the nineteenth century.

At the same time, the debate about "microhistory" has indicated that the definition of what is relevant to history is not a matter of scale; on the contrary, it depends on the very conception of history. This may be shown by one example coming precisely from the debate over microhistory, i.e. the work by Robert Darnton on the great cat massacre. For Lévi-Strauss history was a discontinuous ensemble of different zones, each defined by its own frequency and different code of time. This assertion might be taken as the basis for justification of one of the most interesting forms of history that has appeared in the last decades, microhistory, if microhistory were understood in a postmodern perspective as evidence of the pulverisation of

history and the weakness of any generalisation. We prefer an interpretation that stresses the ambivalence of microhistory. It is true that, on the one hand, it flirts with postmodernism, showing the contradictions between the general and the particular as well as inverting the hierarchies in the relationship between the two. On the other hand, microhistory can be a serious challenge to traditional ways of defining that relationship and of understanding the historical process and its internal connections.

When Robert Darnton studies the great massacre of cats that took place at the end of the third decade of the eighteenth century, he justifies how one can study his object with the same spirit as one could study the *Discours préliminaire* of the *Encyclopédie*. On the level of general theory, Darnton eludes the question, inviting readers to enjoy the trip, and thereby stressing the skill of the historian, able to master his style as well as relationships with other disciplines, like anthropology. But, within the narration, after having brilliantly described the Sabbath where the workers submit to trial and condemn to death many cats, including one beloved by the wife of their employer, Darnton expresses general judgments of great relevance. He maintains that, in submitting to trial, condemning and hanging a crowd of cats, the workers were pillorying the whole juridical and social order, and that, half a century later, the artisans of Paris would have acted in a very similar way with trials and massacres. What is implied is that an antecedent on the symbolic plane may have meaning even for facts of another nature and relevance. The "zone" of history–to use Lévi-Strauss's word–studied by Darnton, however "small", can have meaning and relevance for another zone, however "big" it could be considered. And it takes its meaning not only from its past, containing beliefs concerning witches and animals, but also from its future, containing nothing less than the Great Revolution.

Darnton's operation is a textual one that challenges openly the hierarchies of relevance normally accepted by historians. Thanks to the new language that it develops, the operation creates a new text, establishing new continuities in history. Where one could see only atomisation, separation, and difference, now we can detect links and relations. If the definition of history as a discontinuous ensemble appears too narrow, equally inadequate would be the opposite, assuming a total continuity as a feature of history. The exclusive insistence on continuity would actually reproduce the idea of a whole composed of identical elementary particles, whereas by introducing quality into the historical process–as one inevitably does by comparing it to a text–discontinuity is also introduced. Among the structural characters of the historical process one should in fact include break, death, and change of a radical kind, as the famous metaphor by Walter Benjamin, the angel struck by a storm, reminds us powerfully.

Plurality has to be understood as including the possibility of radical change.

It is not by chance that a thinker like Hannah Arendt, thoughtful of the importance of freedom in history, has insisted on this. For her, plurality has something to do with the definition of history as a public sphere, where newborn spheres appear all the time. The new generations innovate the course of history–and, we could add, its languages–bringing new subjects and new discourses to the forefront.

The multiplication of the subjects (in the double sense of "topics" and "agents") of history is a relevant feature of the trend toward plurality: they have given rise to a series of new forms of history, such as *women's history*, *black history*, *gay history*, *chicano history*, asserting the dignity and the subjectivity of many who had not been seen as historical until very recently. This type of plurality is a condition of historical knowledge as the possibility to make historiographical choices, change past priorities, enlarge the "territory of the historian" on the one hand, and on the other stress the subjectivity of any historiographical research. At the same time, the conceptual categories introduced by these new forms of history have radically altered the historiographical act: "gender" as a way of understanding women and men of the past has brought awareness of the changing historical nature of subjectivity in the course of historical time.

Subjectivity has been recognised as a source of history–as well as of the so-called hard sciences–in a twofold way. First of all it is empirical subjectivity, having to do with one single individual to whom it dictates or suggests choices of various nature; on this basis, one could build an interesting *ego-histoire* of many historians and find there illuminating aspects of their relationships with their epochs as well as of the unique features of their personalities. Second, however, it is a type of collective subjectivity, accumulated through practices of historians in their travels through documents. These practices include techniques and methods shared by historians of many generations, for example the critique of sources and the reference to disciplines which change according to the research, from philology to anthropology, statistics, law, etc. According to Kracauer, they also include what he calls "historical ideas", i.e. interpretations of historical processes that seem to go further than the material from which they have been deduced. Among such hypotheses Kracauer lists the concept of Renaissance as affirmation of the individual in the sense of Burckhardt, as well as the theory of the relationship between structure and superstructure as proposed by Marx. Historical ideas are not generalisations, but intuitions, with roots in the facts, which however are not the only basis of their validity. They are universals, whose objectivity is due precisely to their being openly and actively subjective.

These considerations are a useful background to the debate on the Renaissance, an idea "invented", as Lucien Febvre used to say, by Michelet. Peter Burke has argued that many renaissances have existed, and has followed Toynbee in writing the word with a small "r", in order to underline the continuities between that phenomenon and other similar ones in the

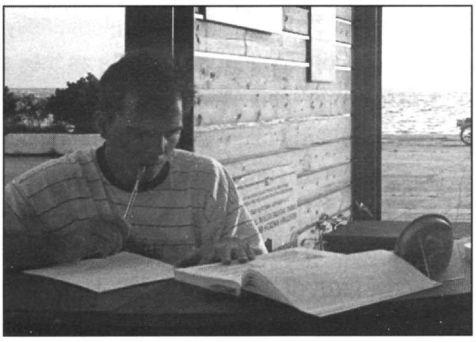
middle ages; thus the Renaissance changes proportions and is considered more as a movement than as a period, characterised by the effort to give new life to antiquity. Here too, the refusal to accept the simple opposition between the Renaissance and the middle ages indicates that the challenges posed by structuralism have been accepted in a positive way, by recognising the complexity and multiplicity of history, rather than in a negative way, by negating continuity in favor of a total pulverisation of the historical process. The recognition of spaces of maneuver, decision and freedom, even if intermingled with forms of moral and material determination, is crucial to this approach.

The critique by Burke is convergent with the one that the feminist historian Joan Kelly has made of the idea of the Renaissance understood as a general and omnicomprehensive historical horizon. Kelly, posing the provocative question of whether women ever had a Renaissance, has given a negative reply, since the progress of law, economy, and customs that took place between the fifteenth and seventeenth century was not coupled with a corresponding progress of women's conditions, defined on the basis of reproductive functions and family roles. From all this, Kelly deduced the limits of the historians' operations; she did not, however, deny their validity, but rather argued that they are circumscribed and conditioned.

The insistence on plurality is very relevant to our understanding of history as a communicative process. Without plurality–of subjects, of cultures, of areas–history could not be at the same time continuous and discontinuous, allowing both freedom and determination. Plurality is the basis for languages and texts of various sorts, for dialogues and interpretations that keep changing with the passing of time. Hannah Arendt derives from Kafka the metaphor of the present as a *lacuna* between past and future which human beings keep open by their efforts, forcefully pushing back the pressure of the past as well as resisting the pressure of the future. Only in this *lacuna* can there be space for the discourse of history and the discourses on history.

A long way to go

The nature of history as a communicative process is shown at its best by the recent developments that have seen many social historians (let us remember that social history had become since the 1960s the most important area of research in history) become increasingly interested in the history of culture, a shift already present in Edward P. Thompson's work on *The Making of the English Working Class*. The step forward was to be the criticism addressed to Thompson for the direct relationship he established between social being and social consciousness, the sort of criticism that Stedman Jones raised in connection with the need to understand and analyse the "discursive nature" of political language and not simply its correspondence to the supposed consciousness of a particular social group (Hunt).



An increasing distance from the materialist reductionism of both Marxism and the Annales school brought history closer and closer not only to anthropology, but to literary criticism, philosophy, and linguistics. Alongside came the increasing realisation that a history of culture cannot be reduced to the product of economic and social transformations nor, at the same time, can it be made to return to a world of ideas cut totally free of them (O'Brien). The emphasis on the literary dimension of social experience and the literary structure of historical writing expanded historical scholarship beyond its traditional limits, reaching the conclusion that history can never be entirely separated from literature or philosophy or other disciplinary languages, although it can never be identical to those other discourses (Kramer).

The suggestion has come forward that these tendencies still have not been brought far enough, due to the traditional character of the historical discipline so largely linked to hegemonic relations within the profession. However, many significant declarations as well as important works by well known historians have gone in this direction. Just to take a few examples, Natalie Zemon Davis has evinced the fictional aspects of sources such as the royal letters of pardon and remission in seventeenth century France, "fictional" meaning here the forming, shaping and molding of elements, i.e. the crafting of a narrative. Davis has brilliantly shown that the rules for plot in the judicial tales interacted with wider contemporary habits of explanation, description, and evaluation, and that the capacity of invention was widely distributed in all social classes and throughout society, where it held an essential role: by turning an action into a story people could take some distance from it and come to terms with it.

Roger Chartier has built his interpretation of cultural history on a redefinition of the process of representation, studied through the interconnected practices that constitute it. That history comes to be understood as a series of relationships between discursive forms of cultural appropriation and differentiated interpretations. This approach significantly implies a rediscussion of the relationship between representation and the represented, the sign and the signified, as it was understood in the classical theory of signs of *ancien régime* society; in so doing, Chartier attempts to comprehend representations in connection with a plurality of differentiated practices and contrasted uses.

Simon Schama has deliberately reproposed the form of eighteenth century chronicles, following a chronological scheme that he defines as "out of fashion". For him, this form of narration intentionally corresponds to the way in which actors of history constructed events as they saw their actions in between models of a heroic past and expectations of future generations. In positioning his own narrative, Schama takes care to differentiate it from previous ones: for instance, in relationship to Tocqueville, his story presents itself more as a testimony than as a judgement, while listening in a similar way to the voices of citizens whose lives it wants to describe. Therefore, Schama concludes, to the authority of the traditional form of historical narrative, he prefers the chaos of authenticity.

These are narrative choices which have become more clear within the background debate between history and literary criticism, the latter acting as a theory of culture for our times. To what extent history has gone all the way in the direction indicated by theory is of course debatable. Much has been done in terms of a critical understanding of historical attitudes, such as the reformulation of the history of historical thought since the nineteenth century in terms of discourses and modes of argument, e.g. the seminal work on *Metahistory* by Hayden White. But results in actual historical production–such as the ones we have cited before–are scattered in a vast landscape of traditional attitudes, remnants of positivistic thought, and fear of innovation. This is particularly true of the institutional aspects of history, like the organisation of historical knowledge in university departments, and its subdivision in chairs, doctorates, steps of academic careers, etc. By and large, these still reflect a conception of history prior to semiotics, as a reflection of what happened in the past, which in turn is sometimes confined, at least in some countries, to events before World War II.

Some years before *Metahistory* was published, White had reproached historians for their timidity and ambivalence, and their lack of willingness to participate in the general intellectual and artistic life of their times, which he attributed to their shyness in using modes of representation from the scientific and artistic domains. These days, many argue that history has gone too far on the road of even hosting talk of representations and subjectivity, to the expense of other types of research. We would argue, in stark contrast, that much is left to be done in order to draw out the full consequences of a semiotic conception of history as a communicative process. If the restlessness of history is the same as the restlessness of the time that weighs "on our hearts and spirits," then the "fragile art of writing history," as Braudel put it, is a relevant piece of the puzzle of culture today. The development of a semiotics of history might be the essential step that historians have to take in order to assume their role on the cultural scene of the present.

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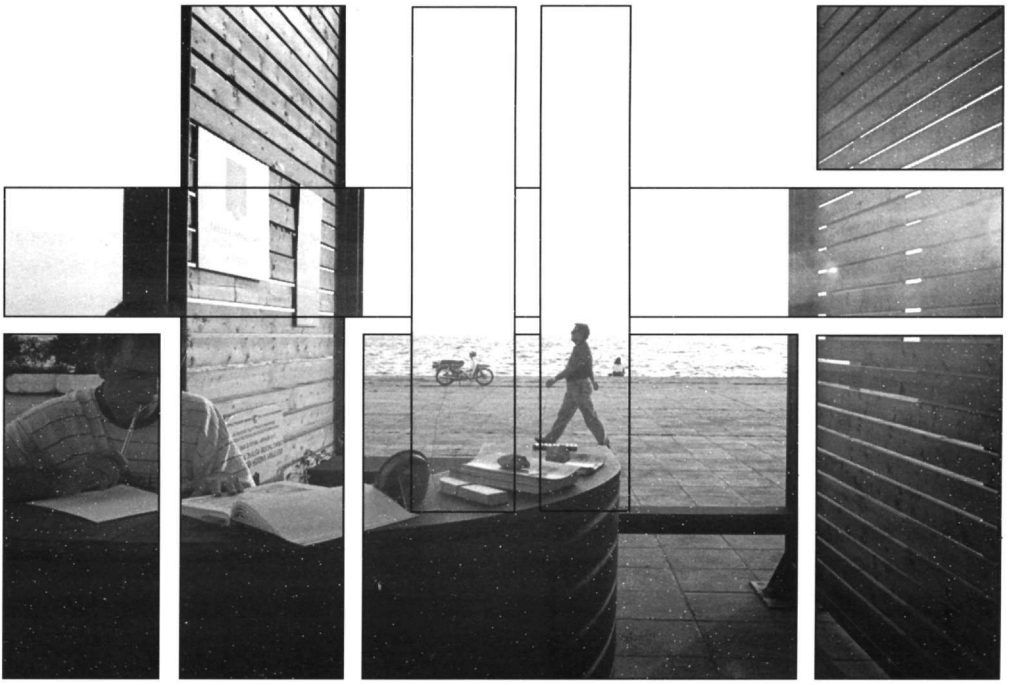
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