

# THE NEW WAYS OF HISTORY

Developments in Historiography

Edited by

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## The Encounter of History with the Social Sciences

*Paschalis Kitromilides*

### I

A distinctive feature of the intellectual history of the twentieth century has been the encounter of history with the social sciences. This encounter could be considered, without risking a very serious exaggeration, one of the great developments in the intellectual history of a century that has been catastrophic in so many other respects. It has been a fertile meeting, adding meaning and depth to research in the various branches of the social sciences. As for history, the encounter has added conceptual richness and motivation in breaking new grounds of research.

Let me illustrate these claims with a few examples. Few will disagree that the classic case of the encounter I am talking about is provided by *Annales* historiography in France: a meeting of historical research with economic thought, demography, geography, anthropology, which has produced the inspired and imposing works of Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel – a veritable ‘*defi Latin*’ for historiography, as it has been described by an American reviewer of Braudel’s *Mediterranean*.<sup>1</sup> The encounter of history and the social sciences in *Annales* historiography has been appraised as a major development in intellectual history by a leading American historian, H. Stuart Hughes.<sup>2</sup> Many other examples could be cited:

- a) The encounter of history with sociology has produced impressive works in historical sociology, with the emblematic writings of Barrington Moore Jr serving as models for a whole school of historical sociology

- in America. The focus of this tradition of research on the state has profoundly influenced the field of political sociology as well.
- b) History has also had a very happy encounter with anthropology, as attested by the school of symbolic anthropology initiated by Clifford Geertz: the refinement and perceptiveness of his writings on cultures and symbolic expression in historical settings acted as an excellent corrective to anthropology's earlier ahistorical tendencies and found a very fertile response in the work of historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginsburg.<sup>3</sup> It is to be regretted that the total capitulation of anthropology to the paroxysms of postmodernism, more recently, has really destroyed the creative dynamic released by Cliff Geertz's work in this field.
  - c) The encounter of history with political theory has brought about a major revolution in the study of the canon of political philosophy and political science. This has been the achievement especially of the Cambridge School of the history of political thought and of its offshoots in the USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere. In a sustained effort since the 1960s, the Cambridge historians of political thought have brought about a veritable new substantive understanding of political ideas and their trajectories in historical time, and have considerably expanded the canon of political thought.

What can be achieved by the encounter of history with the social sciences and what is missed by the absence of the salutary contribution of history could be illustrated more concretely by a brief look at the study of nationalism, the ubiquitous motive force of modernity.

All social sciences, political science, sociology, anthropology and literary criticism, even psychology – although somewhat earlier on in this case – are keen to pronounce on nationalism, proffering what their practitioners think are causal explanations, interpretations and critical judgements. Yet, if one considers the final products of such initiatives what one is left with in most cases is just a sense of belabouring the obvious. The explanation of the futility of such exercises has to do, I believe, with the cavalier use of history and historical evidence: most social scientists working on nationalism fail to look at primary sources, they often ignore specialized secondary literature and tend to base their observations on textbook materials. The consequence of this is a serious pathology – misinformation, misunderstanding, arbitrariness and partial explanation – a pathology that often just confirms the myths of nationalism and plagues a good deal of contemporary writing

in this field of research, including a considerable part of the recent literature – mostly produced by anthropologists or literary critics – on Greece.

What can be retorted to this tendency? I do not think that a historicist or a theoretically agnostic empiricist history could provide the answer. Such a history could not even raise the questions in the first place. What is needed is the reasoned but professional use of history to test, control and modify theoretical approaches, and turn then from Procrustean beds into sources not of all-encompassing explanations but of illuminating insights into regional or particular manifestations of broader phenomena. I dare to suggest that this is where the challenge and the promise lie for the future of scholarship in the human sciences.

## II

Turning to a consideration of the case of Greece and of historical writing on modern and contemporary Greece, one might ask what can be said about the fruits of the encounter of history and the social sciences in contemporary scholarship?

A point of departure for exploring this question could be provided by the proceedings of the Historiography Congress organized in the autumn of 2002 by the Institute for Neohellenic Research at the National Hellenic Research Foundation. The Congress lasted just under a week and included over 70 papers and interventions in the concluding Round Table discussion. The contents of the two imposing volumes of proceedings, running to over 1,300 pages, provide a good basis, I think, for a first attempt at stock-taking on the condition of historical writing on Greece today and in particular on the question of the encounter of history and the social sciences.<sup>4</sup> At the Congress we even had a special session on history and the social sciences. With the exception of the paper on history and anthropology, by Peter Loizos, this session turned out to be quite different from what I, at least, as convener of the Congress, expected. In it, nevertheless, in an interesting although very short paper, George Dertilis, in order to voice his criticism of the tradition of academic historiography in Greece – its ossification, its ideologically preordained character, its penchant for rhetoric rather than criticism – reminded us of the seminal contributions of professionals from other disciplines, mostly economists and lawyers, to breaking new ground and opening new fields of research in historical writing on modern Greece, especially in the first half of the twentieth century.

Let me just share with you a few impressions that force themselves upon the reader who reflects seriously on these proceedings but also on

the broader picture of academic practice in the field of history in today's Greece, by considering three encounters:

- a) history and economics;
- b) history and anthropology;
- c) history and political science.

*(a) History and economics*

The encounter of history with economics in contemporary Greek historiography has produced a field of economic history that is multifarious and quite active in scholarly output. Although one of the participants in the historiography congress was rather critical, suggesting that the field – especially banking history – has been marked by a low degree of professionalization, there can be little doubt that the field of economic history as a whole has been well ploughed in the last quarter century<sup>5</sup> and some of its subfields in particular have been producing interesting results with a wider relevance for international scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

One special feature of the field has been the presence of personalities with a broader sense of the historian's task, who bring a more comprehensive historical culture to the definition of economic history. Such has been the distinctive character of the contribution of Spyros Asdrachas to the definition and growth of this field of research. He has been the inspiring teacher of a whole generation of Greek economic historians and is one of the founding fathers of the History Department of the Ionian University.

*(b) History and anthropology*

The story of the encounter of history with anthropology in scholarly writing about Greece has been marked by paradox. It had very auspicious beginnings, especially in the work of John Campbell, a great scholar who really brought together history and anthropology in a most serious manner in his work in the 1960s. Yet Campbell has been more successful subsequently in training at Oxford historians rather than anthropologists.<sup>7</sup> We were privileged in this meeting to have among us some of his prominent students. Anthropology in later decades, especially since the 1980s, has taken the strange and convoluted ways of postmodernism, producing work marked by arbitrariness and subjectivism. The most catastrophic results in this direction have been produced by the special curiosity anthropologists have shown in nationalism in Greek society. In considering this subject they tend to generalize from the partial impressions of ethnographic research,

and draw conclusions without having read the literature, let alone primary sources. What we witness, therefore, is precisely a divorce between history and anthropology, which is not at all reassuring, at least from the perspective from which I have been discussing the subject.

I cannot resist the temptation to add here that the same pathology marks other branches of postmodernism as well, especially literary criticism and so-called cultural studies. If anything, in these fields, as practised mostly in America, things are worse. Scholars read texts in a total historical vacuum and write about nationalism only through secondary literature – if that – they despise chronology, prosopography and, of course, bibliography, with the inevitable qualitative consequences. It is disheartening to note that the pathology is spreading to Greece, through the local emulators of postmodernism's glories.

*(c) History and political science*

The meeting of history with political science in writing on modern Greece is a mixed one, also marked by paradox and inconsistencies. When political scientists read and use history seriously they can produce important and interesting work – in some cases even seminal works. The same is true of historians: when they use concepts drawn from political science to organize their historical analysis they can produce real classics, such as the work of the late John Petropoulos, who in his book on political parties in the Othonian period<sup>8</sup> has left us a unique model of scholarship – a model and a source of inspiration for us all.

At the same time, the preoccupation with the possibilities offered by the social sciences for organizing conceptually historical materials and narratives has led to a desertion of political history. Thus, one of the marks of contemporary historical writing on Greece is the paucity of political history. An exception has been the writing of diplomatic history, in the sense of the history of the foreign relations of Greece. In this domain important work has been and continues to be produced by the most eminent practitioner of the genre, Professor Constantine Svolopoulos, who carries on the distinguished tradition of Driault and Lheretier, enriching it with insights from the approach of Renouvin and Duroselle. In this field too, developments have been marked by division and paradox: when the subject is negotiated by scholars with international-relations backgrounds the results are qualitatively poor, and this has marked most of the writing on Greece's European trajectories or on Greece's Balkan entanglements. But there are exceptions, the most reassuring provided by the work of younger scholars with history backgrounds, who, using international relations

approaches, have managed to develop a critical perspective on the history of Greek foreign relations, mostly in the twentieth century.

### III

Let me conclude by making explicit just a few thoughts. After all that has been said, I do not think I have to repeat, in closing, my conviction that the way forward for historical writing on Greece has to be a continuing dialogue with the social sciences. The reverse is also true, especially in the case of my own field, political science, in which the serious dialogue with history, and also with philosophy, is not just essential for qualitative work but its abandonment could be lethal for a field which is besieged, to an extraordinary degree, by the temptations of many sirens pointing to the slippery way of superficiality and current-affairs commentary. My main worry comes precisely from the attraction such sirens exert upon historians as well, including many of the younger generation, who seem keen to imitate their gurus' bad example. We witness too much of that today, as some historians try to gain visibility not through serious work but through power games, projects of hegemony, manipulation of intellectual values and total submission to the logic of the mass media. On the altar of such pursuits, the first sacrificial victims are, of course, professional ethics and the rules of scholarship. This is what really puts the future of serious scholarship at stake. But I assure you that some of us, at least, will resist and will persist in serving and promoting the critical agenda of scholarship. I put my hopes in this and in the younger generations who will choose to follow this difficult path.

### Notes

- 1 Armstrong, John A., 'Braudel's Mediterranean: Un defi Latin', *World Politics* 29 (1977), pp. 626–36.
- 2 Stuart Hughes, H., *The Obstructed Path. French Social Thought in the Years of Desperation 1930–1960* (New York, 1966), pp. 29–64.
- 3 See Molho, Tony, 'Carlo Ginzburg: Reflections on the intellectual cosmos of a 20th century historian', *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004), pp. 121–48.
- 4 Kitromilides, P.M. and T. Sklavenitis (eds), *The Historiography of Modern and Contemporary Greece* (Athens, 2004), vols 1–11. The Congress and its proceedings provoked an extensive debate. For appraisals see Livanios, D., *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 8 (2008), pp. 75–7; Arvanitakis, D., *O Politis* 135 (July–August 2005), pp. 139–41; Augustinos, G., *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 26 (2008), pp. 227–30.

- 5 See e.g. Asdrachas, Spyros I. and collaborators, *Greek Economic History 15th-19th Centuries*, transl. by Doolie Sloman (Athens, 2007), accompanied by Vol. II: *Sources*, ed. by Efthychia D. Liata, transl. by John Davis (Athens, 2007).
- 6 An example of this is the work of Gelina Harlaftis in the field of maritime history.
- 7 The collection *Networks of Power in Modern Greece*, edited by Mark Mazower (London, 2008) brings together studies by John Campbell's students in their teacher's honour.
- 8 Petropoulos, John A., *Politics and Statecraft in the Kingdom of Greece 1833-1843* (Princeton, 1968).

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