

Modern French Historiography

Twentieth century French historiography cannot be conceived of as a single unit. It has nonetheless been identified quite often with what some called “the *Annales* School”. Founded in 1929 by the historians Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the journal *Annales* has strongly influenced historiographical production up to the present in France and elsewhere. To speak of a “school” of the *Annales* nevertheless risks obscuring the differences, or even oppositions, between those who claim to represent the ideas of this journal. Of course, not every French historian since 1929 has followed the programme or, more precisely, the successive programmes, defined by the journal. Rather than simply identify French historiography of the twentieth century with the *Annales*, modern historiographical production of France must be analysed in terms of both continuation of and deviation from the initial project of this journal.

The journal *Annales* was born as a self-proclaimed break with what it saw as the “positivist” school of history. In this it did not set itself up to oppose the historians who drew their inspiration from the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte. Rather, it sought to oppose the scholarly practices of the majority of historians of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, that are now referred to as the “*école méthodique*”, in order to distinguish them from the “real”, short-lived, positivist school. The amalgam shows the vehemence with which the founders of the *Annales*, in particular Lucien Febvre, aimed to initiate a new approach to history. But the break they claimed from despised predecessors was less radical than it might first seem, concealing strategies of conquest. As for the aim expressed by the two founders of the *Annales* — to follow the example of the dynamic new social sciences —, it was shared by a good many historians for years. Within these limitations, and once it is understood that 1929 was not an absolute break, one can nevertheless see it as an important symbolic step.

The strength of the *Annales* — of which the complete name was originally *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* — lay in successfully building an alliance between historians, sociologists, economists and geographers. Taking into account the methodological contributions of these disciplines, historians were able to rethink their approach to the past. By centering their research on social and economic aspects, historians thus began to give priority to regular and mass phenomena rather than to contingencies linked to individual destinies. More precisely, instead of a focus on famous men, battle fields and political events in general, this new history substituted the examination of past ways of living, working, or thinking, and the slow processes that reflect deep social transformations. Toppling the three idols of the “*tribu des historiens*” — the political, the individual and the chronological — which were denounced in 1903 by the sociologist and economist François Simiand, the *Annales* also sought to sever the link between historical discourse and the cult of the Nation. Under the Third Republic, historical discourse had often been used to maintain national memory. The founders of the *Annales*,