Categories, Classes and Identities in Time. Escaping Chronocentric Modernity

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Introduction

In this article I will mainly explore some questions related to the ways in which historians and other social scientists usually identify, distinguish and classify people from the past, grouping them according to different criteria: economic-social, political, ethnic, territorial, etc. It goes without saying that typical historians, far from creating the classificatory systems with which they operate, generally make do with the large frameworks provided by the historiographic tradition within which they evolved. Precisely for this reason, we are well advised to pause now and then in order to reflect upon these underlying structures, which we have inherited by way of a valuable legacy from our masters and which profoundly shape our work without our being conscious of it.

I will pay particular attention to a specific aspect of this thorny problem, namely: how does the passage of time affect these classifications? Can we apply present-day social categories at a given moment to an earlier era, or do we run the risk of being trapped in blatant anachronisms which significantly distort the past we are seeking to understand? More specifically, I will question the legitimacy of the

retrospective application of certain classificatory criteria arising from particular circumstances and situations, but of doubtful relevance in order to understand the patterns of comprehension by means of which people living several centuries ago understood themselves and their respective worlds.

Our efforts to understand the world around us almost always revolve around those two complementary and contradictory intellectual operations: initially, we gather together scattered perceptions and we associate certain qualities with certain names, which enables us to conceive of intelligible objects. Then, we distribute the said objects amongst a handful of categories that segment, order and internally hierarchise the field of reality under examination.[1]

Historical knowledge is no exception. Although is not strictly speaking an empirical science, we historians also need, employing the discipline's own methods, to resort to both intellectual operations in order to combine the single with the multiple (and vice versa). On the one hand, to reduce multiplicity to unity (or to be more precise, to a series of discreet units); on the other, to regroup these units into categories, in other words, into more complex, abstract and organised units of a superior order. Which makes it necessary simultaneously to mobilise unifying principles and systems of classification.

In practice, both processes overlap and intersect. Seeking differences and discovering coincidences are two inseparable movements. Moreover, some of the most relevant results of these processes find their way into the hands of scientists – and of historians in particular – in elaborated form before they begin their work. In fact, the two intellectual strategies in question mutually overlap and engage, and are distinguishable one from the other only for analytical purposes. The assignment of an object to a category presupposes the attribution the

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1 In the narrative domain, the simplest unit-events imaginable, by definition, must previously be classified and related (Roth 1988). But, of course, categorising and classifying are not exclusively academic operations, but rather basic necessities. Without abandoning our own field, any happening experienced by specific people, before being termed a historical event (should this ever occur), had somehow to be conceptualised by these actors.

said object of a set of traits it should share, at least partially, with all the other objects in the same category (the exact meaning of the Greek root κατηγορία is the quality attributed to an object).

Furthermore, the characteristics attributed to each object normally appear, once the latter is formed, as fragments or facets of this object-totality. And, once grouped together, the various objects that constitute a class may similarly be seen, in retrospective fashion, as *disjecta membra* make complete sense only as ordered ensemble, in other words, when grouped together in that common classificatory category which unites them.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I hasten to add that I am writing from a historicist perspective, according to which it is pointless searching for "authentic" meanings inherent to actual signs, facts or texts, independently of the authors and actors, observers and interpreters who give the meaning. I believe on the contrary that every meaning – like all knowledge – is a situated meaning, linked to certain coordinates of time, place and person, and I cannot conceive of an ownerless semantic content (Bevir 2012). Which does not imply, of course, a denial of the existence and relevance of communities of interpretation, traditions and inherited conceptions that confer upon certain meanings an unquestionable solidity and transpersonal, transspatial and transtemporal persistence (Fernández-Sebastián 2013).

Neither would it be realistic to aspire to achieving a perfectly transparent understanding of past worlds, a complete restitution of the meanings those texts, facts, practices or institutions had for our ancestors. Given that interpreters cannot totally free themselves of their intellective background or of a constantly changing historical horizon, to dispense with their conceptual lenses would be to condemn themselves to cognitive blindness (Gadamer 1989). For this reason, although the passage of time generally concedes an unquestionable epistemic advantage to historians over actors (Phillips 2004, 2013; Phillips *et al* 2013), basic deontological discipline demands that historians attempt to rid

their texts of unacceptable anachronisms.[2] Hence the advisability of making every effort to achieve a faithful historiographic representation, *i. e.* compatible with the ways of understanding the world of the agents of the past. The "faithfulness" of historiographical representations invariably clashes however with an impassable barrier: the impossibility of accessing a non-existent "past in itself" which supposedly one is seeking to re-present. Lacking that "original reference" – a kind of imaginary "historical reality" constituted by "what actually happened" – with which empirically to contrast the accuracy and reliability of what historians write about the past, as Mink (1987, 202) said in a famous expression, "stories are not lived, but told".[3]

Not all the "past" objects of study imaginable from our categorical frame are plausible or legitimate. One should not undertake, for instance, a study of *society* and *State* in the Middle Ages, if one applied these concepts with the range of meanings which these two terms only came to acquire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Faced with such a challenge, historians run the risk of composing at best a teleological essay in which events are lined up one after the other, destined to fulfil à la Hegel the "retrospective prophecy" of the glorious advent of a political modernity in which these two concepts must occupy a prominent place (Schaub 1996, 131).

Spaces, times and actors in research and in the writing of history

The evaluation of the relevance of past phenomena worthy of study is invariably undertaken from the present. As a result, Jacob Burckhardt and Benedetto Croce were not so incorrect in suggesting, each in his own fashion, that history "is the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another", and that, in a way, "all history is contemporary history". One of the many ways of describing the specific tasks of histo-

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2 For a discussion of the anachronism in historical writing, see Syrjämäki (2011), who reviews the most relevant literature on this question, including Quentin Skinner's classic article (1969).
3 See also the comments by Frank R. Ankersmit (2012, 13).

rians could be to depict them as professionals specialised in a particular discipline who, via certain techniques of research, interpretation and writing, seek to give an account of collective phenomena, significant events and processes experienced by the men and women who lived in a recent or remote past. To do this, starting off with a jumble of generally fragmented and insufficient data regarding the fraction of the past upon which each historian is focussing his/her attention, historians have to produce texts, normally in the form of more or less complex essays. These texts may in turn subsequently be the object of critical control by one's peers in accordance with the conventions of the scientific community to which one belongs. And the texts remain open to revision and debate, be it in the light of new evidence or alternative interpretations of the same sources employed by the author...

The transformation of signs and raw data, diverse texts and fragmentary sources relating to an infinity of ambiguous happenings into a series of established facts, undeniable events and convincing processes is not an easy task. The complexity of the historiographical operation and the writing of history resides in, amongst other factors, the need to impose limits and a certain order upon the amorphous, infinite and chaotic flow of historical becoming. Indicating processes, representing and interpreting them are tasks that require of the historian considerable skill in order to distinguish between the relevant and the irrelevant, the pertinent and the superfluous, the fundamental and the accessory. And of course that capacity cannot easily be dissociated from the ability to weave together coherent essays that convert the raw material – usually a pile of dusty and half-forgotten files, stored in archives and libraries – into articles, monographs or historiographic texts of interest to specialists (and with luck on occasions to a broader public). As has argued, amongst others, Mark Bevir, narrative is a form of epistemically legitimate explanation: since "we cannot have pure perceptions of given facts", our knowledge is always mediated by theories, concepts and categories that help us to construct our own experiences as our narrative structures (Bevir 2000, 17-18).

The starting point – and sometimes the finishing line – of the historiographic operation tends to be the delineation of meaningful units

which, by assigning limits and frontiers of demarcation to the material, situate readers and historians themselves before a manageable panorama, sufficiently ordered and intelligible, of identifiable objects and subjects. These units or "historiographic individualities", which suggest at one and the same time lines of continuity and discontinuity, are of a discursive nature and do not necessarily correspond to "natural" divisions in time and space, nor to actual people, not even to *personae fictae*: not all the objects and instruments of historiographic study are historical subjects. The Middle Ages, the French Revolution or the Italian Renaissance are obviously not (and neither are Europe or Asia, East or West). In any case, these are less solid and unquestionable historiographic entities than, say, Alfonso X of Castile, Robespierre or Michael Angelo. But, what about the so-called "social classes", like "the serfs" or "the bourgeoisie", to mention two recognisable labels that frequently appear in the European history books of the periods alluded to? What degree of adjustment to "the realities of the past" should we attribute to these denominations to twelfth-century Europe, or eighteenth-century France?

The tools that normally serve to control and channel the confusing flow of events in those earlier worlds are basically applied to three dimensions or aspects of the past: space, time and the human factor. As far as the spatial perspective is concerned, upon setting to work historians usually limit their territories of reference, be they cities or continents, monarchies, empires or nations). From the temporal perspective, the most common periodisations (apart from the division into decades and centuries, which many regard as almost "natural") tend to be certain epochal notions and colligatory concepts – meaningful collections of many events and processes – which often incorporate interpretations of the set of facts thus grouped together (and sometimes they do not lack an ideological content): the Age of the Atlantic Revolutions, the Ancien Régime, the Restoration, the Age of Enlightenment, the Cold War, etc. There is a typically European chronology and chrononimy, largely Western, and also chronologies unique to each country or re-

gion.[4] The third classical perspective refers to the manner in which the human beings constituting the object of research will be classified; these classifications mould in advance the collective actors or groups of people to whom presumably would have corresponded significant roles in the processes and events being studied and who, consequently, feature in the narratives resulting from the research. These classifications may be, amongst others, of an ethnic, religious, socio-economic or political-territorial nature.

Nonetheless, classifying, "territorialising" and periodising are not innocent actions. Far from being considered merely instrumental arrangements, intellectually anodyne, António Hespanha underlined years ago the poietic, creative potentiality, of categories and classifications. Given that the same things can be conceptualised in one way or another, categories do not reflect "the world as it is", but rather constitute and give it shape (Hespanha 2003).[5] So not only is it true that "attempts to recategorise are a kind of revolution"; it could also be said, conversely, that revolutions, insofar as their leaders subvert established classifications and come to exercise an irrevocable "power to define" (a corollary of which is the demiurgeous right to classify), involve a more or less radical recasting of the political and social order. As if the act of defining, in the Aristotelian style, *per genus et differentiam*, would performatively produce the genera and the differences indicated in the definition.

On the current crisis of classificatory systems

Maybe because, as has occurred many times in history, we are experiencing a period of considerable uncertainty and accelerated transition towards an unknown future, in recent times traditional classificatory criteria have either grown obsolete or are being seriously questioned. It seems that the clothes historians have dressed Clio in suddenly strike

4 See Bacot *et al* (2008), Thompson (1967), Whewell (1847), Walsh (1951, 1974), Cebik (1969), McCullagh (1978), Dray (1964), and my own Fernández-Sebastián (2014d).
5 This interpretation is resumed in his article in the current issue.

us as old-fashioned, and we are eager to tailor her some new garments. The body of history in growth, moreover, threatens to burst the seams of certain items of clothing that have become too small. There is an urgent need, then, to restock its wardrobe with designs and sizes appropriate to these new requirements.

From the territorial point of view, for years now a broad sector of historiography, dissatisfied with the traditional national frameworks that have shaped so much historical writing over two centuries, advocates transcending state frontiers, even going beyond comparative international history. I refer to the various modalities of transnational history, such as the so-called global or world history, connected histories, entangled history or *histoire croisée*.[6] With respect to the arguments regarding conceptualisation of certain European meso-regions, about a decade ago people began to speak of a *spatial turn* in history and social sciences.[7] Though it is true that these debates have been particularly lively in central-eastern Europe, in other zones and continents there have also been movements in that direction. The new but not so new Atlantic history is a tangible example; one of its main advocates referred to its pertinence as follows:

> the concepts we use, in periodizations and classifications, reflect the state of our knowledge, our public concerns, and our ways of thinking; and they change from time to time as circumstances shift, as knowledge grows, and as new terms of analysis become available which we use in the search for greater understanding. (Bailyn 2002, xix)

With regard to the temporal dimension, the traditional formats of "chronological packaging" of historiography are also under attack from

6 See McGerr (1991), Bayly *et al* (2006), Budde *et al* (2006), Saunier (2008, 2009), Yun (2007), Middell and Roura (2013), Martykánová and Peyrou (2014).

7 See Schlögel (2004), Middell (2005), Bachmann-Medick (2006), Schenk (2006), Döring and Thielemann (2008).

various flanks. To begin with, countless authors of the so-called postco-
lonial history have criticised the prevailing periodisations for their obvi-
ous Eurocentric bias.[8] But not even in Europe does the usual schema of
the three or four ages – ancient, middle, modern and contemporary, in
the formulation most familiar to us – escape devastating criticism. Now
that even postmodernity has become obsolete, many believe that the
so-called "contemporary age" is no longer strictly speaking our *contem-
porary* and is crying out for an end (or a new beginning). Furthermore,
some historians advocate changes to this classic schema, for instance Le
Goff's insistence upon extending the Middle Ages and eliminating the
Renaissance on account of its being a historical period lacking truly dis-
tinctive features in comparison with preceding centuries (Le Goff 2014).

But above all, on the basis of some seminal works by 20th-century
philosophers and historians (Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Braudel,
Koselleck, Ricœur, amongst others), the reflection upon temporality
and historicity has grown richer and more complex in recent decades.
Time has ceased to be regarded as simply a neutral container of the
succession of events, and, beyond the hackneyed controversies over pe-
riodisations, the reflections upon the length and scale of historical time,
orders and ruptures of time, chronotopes, experience of temporality or
regimes of historicity have become considerably more sophisticated.[9]
More and more authors (e.g. Jordheim 2012) believe that a system of
multiple temporalities, allowing for different rhythms depending on the
question being studied, is more appropriate than the rigid patterns of
linear periodisation favoured by traditional historiography. Moreover,
recently in this field new doors are opening to empirical research, which
is becoming increasingly dynamic. Some case studies on the history of
historicity and the experience of time have started to be developed in
a coordinated and systematic fashion.

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8 Bentley (1996) is a revealing example of how periodisations can vary radically if a global
point of view is adopted.

9 See Ricoeur (2004), Hartog (2003, 2013), Ankersmit (2012, 29-47), Charle (2011, 2013),
Revault d'Allonnes (2012), Lorenz and Beverbage (2013), Sánchez and Izquierdo (2008), Fer-
nández-Sebastián (2011), Mudrovcic and Rabotnikof (2013), Nicolazzi *et al* (2011), Delacroix
et al (2010). I have addressed this question in greater detail in Fernández-Sebastián (2014c).

In the field of categories of social classification too we have witnessed in recent times nothing less than an earthquake. The "crisis of adscriptive macrocategories", thus termed by Francesco Benigno (2013), is without doubt a principal characteristic of the so-called crisis of history and it has prompted some major methodological debates some nearly forty years old. Behind these debates often lies the disjunction between two approaches that produce very different – sometimes opposite – descriptions of identical phenomena: 1) the *etic* perspective, which projects upon agents the explicative scientific categories of the outside observer; 2) the *emic* perspective, which seeks to understand things in a manner closer to the native's point of view.[10] In the field with which we are dealing, the first approach would correspond to an "objectivist" logic, which assigns human beings of the past to one group or another by applying the historian's analytical tools; the second one would respond to a "subjective", self-attributive logic: what matters above all then is the sense of belonging of the agents involved, their shared self-definition.

The eighteenth-century literati, fascinated by classifications of both the natural world and human realities, invented some of the most successful and durable taxonomic systems (it is very significant that terms like *classification* or *classify* were coined in the 1700s). In their wake, the leading theorists of positivist and scientifist modernity, at its peak between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, were convinced that there existed only one "correct" way of ordering and classifying each sector of reality according to "the nature of things", and that the demarcation lines between different classes of objects should be very clear-cut (Koposov 2009, 103, 255). For Karl Marx, for example, the correct way of classifying men according to the feudal system of production was into lords and serfs, whilst in a capitalist system the main conflict was that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

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10 It is usual to highlight a certain parallelism between that linguistic-anthropological dichotomy of Kenneth Pike and the classical Droysenian-Weberian distinction between *Erklären* and *Verstehen*. Whilst the *etic* approach is clearly compatible with the search for causal explanations, the *emic* perspective is more a quest for an interpretative understanding, in keeping with the meanings attributed to their own behaviour by the agents involved.

Today we have also awoken from that "dogmatic slumber". We have been aware for some time of the ambiguity inherent to many cultural, political and social scenarios. And we cannot ignore the fact that the same phenomenon may well be classified under two or more different headings, which may even be contradictory and mutually incompatible (Gil 2010, 390-91).

From class to identity

The emphasis upon the cultural construction of social, ethnic and political categories has over the last three decades pushed a new meta-category to the forefront of research in this field. I refer to *identity*, an elusive notion the dramatic expansion of which – in parallel to others like *memory* or *gender*[11] – cannot but come as a surprise to the observer interested in the epistemology of social sciences. "Identity", understood as "an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals or groups" aimed at common action and which is at the origin of a *we*, *i. e.* of a new social actor, appeared as a sociological concept in the 1960s, accompanying the growth of what then began to be known as "new social movements" and soon met with enormous success.[12]

Transformed into a new key to interpreting social realities, this type of identity (group, social or collective) also has the advantage of its apparent plausibility from both the *etic* and the *emic* perspective. For though it is true that for the social scientist any collective identity is a cultural construction, those who embrace and appropriate an identity of this kind tend to regard it as something quasi-natural; so natural that often they in no way see it as something constructed. Identity could, then, be regarded in general as an analytical macrocategory, "objective", and, at the same time, in each of its specific applications, as a form of belonging, be it to a social, ethnic, national or age group, etc., subjec-

11 Let us recall that the launch of the (cultural) concept of *gender* as analytical tool in Anglo-American academia of the 1970s was linked to certain prominent leaders of the feminist movement, in their efforts to "denaturalise" sex so it might no longer be considered in its purely biological aspect (Scott 1986).

12 See Melucci (1989; 1995) and Benigno (2013, 55-82).

tively self-assumed (and, to the degree to which it has materialised, as a construction which is unaware of itself as such a construction).[13] This alleged compatibility with both approaches *etic* and *emic* would seem to resolve the dilemma between the two poles of the disjunction. The very fact that the word (collective) *identity*, initially employed as *terminus technicus* by the theorists of the old "new social movements", has entered into common usage serves to blur the contrast between both perspectives. However, things are not quite so simple (see two examples of incisive criticism of the abusive use by social scientists of "identity" as an analytical concept: Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Jullien 2016).

A panoramic vision of the debates that have arisen over the last half century amongst French historians concerning the theme of social classifications is highly illustrative of the developments in historiography in this area. In the 1960s a famous debate broke out in France between various well-known historians over what was the most appropriate way of classifying the people who lived under the *ancien régime.* They were attempting to establish nothing less than the "true" hierarchy or social stratification in the centuries preceding the Revolution. While Ernest Labrousse or Pierre Vilar, from a socioeconomic perspective, adhered to the classical division into classes that corresponded to that period of late feudalism, Roland Mousnier and others argued that it was preferable to abide by legal criteria (orders, estates), in accordance with the terms of social demarcation prevailing at that time. The alternative between a model of *société d'ordres* and another of *société de classes* may in principle be interpreted as another case of the disjunction between the "subjectivist" and "objectivist" approaches mentioned above, even though the final strands of the discussion, oscillating between social, cultural and linguistic constructivism, lend further complexity to the dispute (Koposov 2009, 73-105).

The comparative analysis of a sequence of essays published intermittently from the 1970s onwards in various reference works of French

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13 This division partially overlaps with the classic debate between two alternative ways of understanding collective identity: either as a process or as a product of social action (see, for example, Fominaya 2010, 396-98). And also, to some extent, with the distinction Ricœur draws between *idem* identity (or, rather, identification) and *ipse* identity, the former diachronic, objective and external, the latter synchronic, subjective and internal (Ricœur 1995).

historiography enables us to infer the main lines of that debate.[14] The reading of these texts reveals the gradual eclipse of the old structuralist paradigm of social history and its replacement with a variety of approaches in which the role of symbolic, discursive and cultural factors is ever larger. In fact, since the mid-1970s, when the proponents of the *nouvelle histoire* of the third generation of *Annales* advocated a shift towards the *histoire des mentalités* until the current debates over memory and the social function of history a great deal of water has flowed under the bridge. The general sense of this evolution, as far as our subject is concerned, could not be clearer: the cultivators of social history were showing a growing interest in social practices and languages, representations and imaginaries, customs and the world of symbols in general, gradually abandoning not only the concept of class *itself*, but every kind of collective identity of an objective nature.

In opposition to certain purely analytical group categories which appeared to breathe life into fictitious or improbable actors, historians emphasized more and more the idea that any social classification is not a natural or objective given, but always the result of a sociocultural construction. Whilst Jean-Claude Perrot says in 1978 that "social groups are at one and the same time what they think they are and what they are unaware that they are" (*apud* Chartier and Roche 1978, 581), Antoine Prost categorically states in 1997 that "le groupe n'existe que dans la mesure où il est parole et représentation, c'est-à-dire culture" (Prost 1997, 137). Simona Cerutti, meanwhile, criticised the projection onto the past of current socio-professional nomenclatures, hinting at the deleterious consequences that anachronic classifications may have with regard to our knowledge of the societies of the ancient regime. To use stratifications unrelated to the era in question is to employ a misleading frame of reference. On the one hand those vocabularies make us see non-existent groups in those times as if they were real; on the other, they conceal from us significant characteristics of the societies we seek to analyse (Cerutti 1995, 225-27).

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14 See Duby (1974), Chartier and Roche (1978), Lequin (1986), Cerutti (1995), Cohen (2013).

Criticism of the socioeconomic approaches inspired by Marxism intensified following the collapse of the Soviet system, leading to the abandonment of the Labroussian paradigm. The new sociocultural history and the diverse historiographical trends associated with it were accompanied by an unusual multiplication of objects and approaches (and also of collective subjects). Rather than the old *annaliste* ideal of a *histoire totale*, this was a fragmentation or "crumbling" of historiography (*histoire en miettes*, according to François Dosse's celebrated essay, 1987). Since then, if one thing is clear it is that historians long ago abandoned the ambitious objective of developing a *histoire totale*, which had once inspired the *Annales*, and settled for more modest projects, though I would say that in recent years a sector of historiography has gained in reflexivity what it has lost in scientifist certainty.

Along with these debates about history and its methods, various studies have insisted upon the need for historians to undertake a critical reflection upon the cognitive precepts and the underlying concepts that tacitly guide their work. Four decades ago, Paul Veyne (1978, 95) argued that "le rangement d'événements dans des catégories exige l'historisation préalable de ces catégories". Authors like Pocock (1963) or Bourdieu (1995) have also advocated in similar words a propaedeutic historisation of the instruments of knowledge of social sciences.

In fact, concepts as fundamental to our discussion as history, individual or society, class, race or identity – but also science, objectivity and many others –,[15] have in recent times been the subject of rigorous and enlightening historical analysis.[16] Instead of taking these categories for granted and using them as a starting point for the study of social and institutional phenomena, they themselves become a primary object of research. These analyses enable us to understand, for example, that the concept of *society*, in a sense that is recognisable to us, did not

15 A number of works have shown that quite a few typically western basic concepts in fact resulted from the clash between the Europeans and other cultures and from colonial practices, in such a way that modernity and colonialism may be seen as two sides of the same coin.

16 For instance, on the concepts of society/social and of class, see: Wagner (2000; 2001), Kaufman and Guilhaumou (2003), Mintzker (2008), and Piguet (1996).

begin to develop until the second half of the eighteenth century, and only became an object of scientific study in the next century. It was not until the first decades of the nineteenth century when *class* became the conventional term of social stratification, heralding a break with previous hierarchical imaginaries. And, in similar fashion, in the turn of the century, coinciding with so-called postmodernity, we have witnessed the irresistible rise of the notion of *identity* in diverse disciplines and academic scenarios of social sciences. From the early-modern to the postmodern period, passing through the late modern age, we have seen, then, three macro concepts or categories in succession, fundamental in order to establish differences and classify people – *estate, class* and *identity* – each of them based upon a different criterion, respectively legal, economic and cultural.

At this point, it is time to begin to discuss the question posed at the start of these pages, namely, the problem of anachronism in categories of classification. Is it legitimate to use concepts and categories that did not exist during a specific period to identify, qualify and classify from a distance those who lived at that time? And, in a more general way, is it appropriate respectively to apply patterns of comprehension alien to vanished people and communities, who while in existence saw themselves in a substantially different manner in order to explain their own behaviour?

Let us not forget that the *raison d'être* of conceptual history consists in helping the reader and the historian to distinguish as clearly as possible between the analytical language of today's social sciences from the language of the sources (that is, from the discourses that record the ways of understanding the world of past generations and have reached us as vestiges of a more or less distant past). This distinction enables us to combat that form of epistemological narcissism we call presentism, and which, from the perspective of interest to us here, essentially consists in assimilating the past into the present.

In order to keep at bay the presentist temptation it is necessary to confront several types of anachronism, including one of a cognitive nature and another that is axiological. According to the former we should

ask ourselves, for instance, whether the modern concepts of *race, gender, identity, class or nation* are applicable to a distant past in which such notions did not exist.[17] The second risk is that of using (generally pejorative) moral or political labels derived from these concepts. Can we qualify as *nationalist* or *racist* certain behaviour of our ancestors that seems to resemble what we describe as such today, although it does not strictly speaking correspond to those denominations given the absence during the era in question of the concepts upon which these attitudes are based?[18]

Thus, if one considers the case of Europe, were there or were there not *class* struggles in Antiquity, feminine *identity* and women's movements in the Middle Ages, *racial* conflicts and *nationalist* wars in the early Modern Age?

Historicity of classificatory concepts and methodological chronocentrism: the case of Karl Marx

The question of the "retrojection" of concepts and categories was incisively raised by Karl Marx a century and a half ago. A historicist thinker by education like Marx was undoubtedly fully aware that as we "immerse ourselves" in the past epistemological obstacles appear which make it more difficult for us to comprehend those ever more distant worlds. Historians should not cross these "conceptual thresholds" without shedding part of his intellectual baggage. To be more precise, they would be well-advised to leave to one side those concepts which had not yet been invented, and were therefore literally unimaginable in the age to which one seeks to go back. This principle of intellectual irretroactivity would thus be the least caution which, as historians, we would be advised to apply if we truly wish to understand the actors in their own terms. Naturally, Marx never formulated this principle in this fashion. Nonetheless, according to the tenets of his materialist conception of history, which declared production to be the basis of all social order, he

17 See for instance Burke and Hsia (2007, 7-8) on the retrospective use of the concepts of "policy" and "propaganda".
18 See Torres (2003-2004), Schaub (2007).

believed that changes in ideological level are the consequences of prior transformations in economic infrastructure. As we will now see with respect to a very specific point of Aristotelian philosophy, the possibility of certain concepts being invented and perfected ultimately depends on production conditions.

One of the passages in which Marx demonstrates his sharp awareness of the historicity of concepts is to be found in the opening pages of *Das Kapital*. There the German theorist explains that Aristotle did not fully understand that the value of goods is the expression of the quantity of human labour necessary to produce them. In spite of his perspicacity, Aristotle was incapable of understanding this, maintains Marx, because he ran up against an insurmountable epistemological obstacle: the absence of an appropriate concept of value. In order to form this concept, it was first necessary to be able to imagine the fundamental equivalence of all the work performed by human beings. This equivalence, in turn, was inconceivable in a context of slavery like that of Ancient Greece, and could not be contemplated "until the notion of human equality has already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice". However, this prerequisite was only satisfied in the capitalist society of the period when Marx was writing. Therefore, he concludes, "the peculiar conditions of the society in which he [Aristotle] lived, alone prevented him from discovering what, in truth, was at the bottom of this equality"; and subsequently prevented him from understanding the labour theory of value (*Das Kapital*, book I, section I, chap. 1, § 3). This materialist historical-conceptual sensibility, however, did not prevent Marx himself from sometimes indulging in blatant anachronisms. Moreover: he vehemently defended the pertinence for heuristic purposes of a form of methodological anachronism.

In his manuscripts of criticism of political economics (better known as *Grundrisse*), Marx writes that

> even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs,

are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.

Thus, he continues, given that

bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production, [t]he categories which express its relations [...] thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it...

At this point he resorts to the following unmistakeably Darwinian biological-evolutionist metaphor:

Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient...

And he concludes with the following sentence, which is the very epitome of teleological reasoning: "The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself" (Marx 1973, 106). In short, Marx acknowledges in a Hegelian manner the legitimacy of the systematic projection onto the past of recently invented new categories, specifically interpreting that past as the path that leads to the present with the "discovering" (and gradual unfolding) of these catego-

ries, which paradoxically would shed light upon the time prior to their advent. Although historically specific, the invention of a concept is then re-described as "discovery". As we know, the owl of Minerva only flies at dusk. Thus, the observation of the conflicts between bourgeoisie and proletariat in the mid-nineteenth century leads Marx to outline his theory of the class struggle and extrapolate it to the past of mankind as a whole. Universal history, according to Marx and Engels' famous *dictum* in the *Communist Manifesto*, would in essence be nothing other than the history of the class struggle. And, as we have seen a little earlier with regard to his value theory, 19th-century capitalism retrospectively illuminates distant history, permits an understanding, for example, of the aporiae and insufficiencies of Aristotle's doctrines upon the value of goods.

Insofar as Marx assumes European industrial modernity – and the anticipated overcoming of its capitalist contradictions by means of socialism – as the terminus station for all the convoys of the past, he adopts a methodological anachronism, a kind of radical "futurist presentism". His point of view is not only Eurocentric, but completely "modernocentric". Capitalism and socialism appear in his work – in the present and in a hypothetical future – aligned as the vanishing point where all the paths of universal history converge, in such a way that all the segments of the past are seen as a series of imperfect drafts of the present, leading to a splendid future of emancipation.

This tendency to use a certain stereotyped modernity as a benchmark for all historical processes ultimately implies disdain for and lack of comprehension of the past in its unchangeable otherness: "We 'oscillate between dismissing medieval people as barbarians and revering them as the creators of our civilisation'. We fail to respect their differences" (Hunt 2013, 210, quoting Fasolt 2004). From this perspective, the Marxist philosophy of history is but one example of a widely extended intellectual attitude, strikingly prevalent during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, which we might term "theoretical (auto) chronocentrism". An attitude that no doubt appeared totally justified to our predecessors in times during which reigned a blind faith

in "the laws of progress", but which some today are beginning to regard as inadmissible, narcissistic and self-indulgent.

Concluding remarks. For a more historical history

In fact, what this discussion raises goes far beyond the question of "social" classifications. The presentist arrogance alluded to at the end of the previous section –when Marx interpreted his own vantage point, that of a mid-nineteenth century European theorist, as a universally valid transhistoric criterion – incorporates a principle that until recently brooked no doubt for the vast majority of scientists. I refer to what, to employ a political simile, we might call "epistemic sovereignty of modernity", in other words the dogma – which many regard as unquestionable – that our scientific parameters constitute the only legitimate form of knowledge.

However, what happens when modern western rationality displays the historicity of its epistemological bases, and in a sense historicises itself? What happens when that same rationality is confronted with other ways of making sense of the world? This problem, which for anthropologists is their bread-and-butter, is beginning to be considered pertinent by historians too. When both of us, historians and anthropologists, seek to understand other ways of thinking and understanding the world, we come up against the limits of our own rationality. When the researcher has to give an account of the interpretative systems employed by those strange "natives of the past" who are our ancestors without renouncing his "scientific" perspective, if he/she takes seriously the discourse produced by the human beings under observation, the historian must indeed reflect upon the very foundations of his/her academic approach (in other words, he is obliged to turn his attention to his own observation point). In this sense, the reflexivity of history is not very different from that of anthropology: just as the anthropologist "antropologises" himself by placing himself in a given context, the historian "historises" and relativises himself via his awareness that his observation point – mobile and ephemeral, like all – is located at a certain moment and in particular

historical circumstances. And, for this reason, one of the essential functions of history, as of anthropology, is to afford us a degree of familiarity with symbolic worlds and exotic conceptualisations, which contributes to expanding and improving our knowledge of human realities (Geertz 1973, 13-16; Wineburg 2001, 3-27).

Let us consider, for instance, the study of religious phenomena in the past. This is a field, particularly that of the connections between religion and politics in the Ibero-American world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – a theme which, incidentally, may in no way be reduced to that of the Church-State relationship. Michel de Certeau wrote some very interesting pages on this question (Mendiola 2012; Zermeño 2013a). For us, twentyfirst-century scholars, religion is but one ideology amongst many. For most Europeans and Americans in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this was certainly not the case: religion was not only the *supreme truth*, but the foundation of society and the key to understanding all that existed.

To think historically, in this as in other cases, demands of the historian-interpreter an enormous effort of empathy with the actors. It is not easy to approach the mentality of such different people. For, as was brilliantly noted by De Certeau (1975, 172-73) with regard to the religiousness of the Europeans of the eighteenth century, while we seek to understand religion as a historical phenomenon and as a "representation" emanating from society, they understand, quite to the contrary, that religion constituted the very foundation of society. Although as heirs of the Enlightenment many of us have no doubt whatsoever as to the "superiority" of our system of comprehension of the world over that of our ancestors, this does not render any less remarkable the intellectual operation consisting in understanding a distant age, organised around so different a principle of intelligibility, via a logic that was so alien to it. So drastic an inversion of the codes for reading the world in the space of only two or three centuries (a brief period, in historical terms) allows us to speculate over the possibility that in the near future a new regime of intelligibility might replace that which is currently operative. Is it not rather unsettling to conjecture that, in a few decades'

time, all our scientific endeavours might be re-evaluated and disqualified in accordance with parameters completely different from our own?

I am well aware that many historians – probably the majority – are not in the least bit concerned about these issues. Totally focused on the analysis of their favourite objects of research, rarely do they pause to reflect on inherited frameworks of comprehension (and less still the epistemological precepts upon which the discipline is based). Many of them merely apply the classificatory systems learnt during their academic training, and appear to be writing from some mysterious and hidden location, as if they were able to see and describe from an exclusive vantagepoint how things really occurred and who were the subjects participating in said events. Rather than a conventional historiography, naively positivist and claiming to speak on behalf of a timeless reason, what interests me is a more historical history. A reflexive history capable of understanding that – until there is evidence to the contrary – historicity and "linguality" (*Sprachlichkeit*) form a part of the unsurpassable horizon of the human condition. Moreover, a less ideological history, which under no circumstances contemplates the past as a battlefield in which to settle current political disputes. Instead of looking to the past with the angry expression of somebody breaking into an arsenal in search of ammunition, the historian should approach those vanished worlds with the respect, calm and piety of he who hesitantly enters a vast, labyrinthine cemetery. In the words of the Brazilian writer and politician Homem de Melo, the historian should enter the sacred territory of the past like someone setting foot inside a great necropolis where extinct generations are laid to rest, striving to leave aside the preconceptions of his/her own age.

Hermeneutics and historical semantics constantly remind us that our lives are interwoven with history, and that is no Archimedean point beyond time and language from which to render an account of human affairs. A century ago, almost 200 years after the publication of the Vico's *Scienza Nouva*, Wilhelm Dilthey wrote that "we are historical beings first, before we are observers [*Betrachter*] of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter" (Dilthey 1968, 277-78).

And, as for the linguistic nature of the human being, upon which Gadamer placed such emphasis, we should not forget that, as Donald Kelley (2002, 300) noted with a penetrating metaphor, "language is the ocean in which we all swim – and whatever our dreams of rigorous science, we are fishes not oceanographers". We know however that our environment has changed enormously over time. Certainly, however much we historians endeavour to classify as accurately as possible our fellow men and women from another era, we and they – historians and "historised", classifiers and classified, sometimes interchanging our respective roles – swim in the same ocean. But that ocean has been continually changing, and it would be a major error to ignore its evolutive dimension. Palaeontology shows us that numerous fish species have become extinct, whilst other new ones evolved and appeared. And, just as no scientist in their right mind would use the taxonomy of today's species to identify fossil species, we should be aware that our categories of social grouping are perhaps not best suited to classifying the collectives of the past.

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