

PRÁTICAS DA HISTÓRIA

JOURNAL ON THEORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY,
AND USES OF THE PAST

Nº 13 - 2021



Special Issue The Polemics of History: Historiographical Debates and Public Life

Elisa Lopes da Silva

Práticas da História, n.º 12 (2021): 7-17

www.praticasdahistoria.pt

This journal is funded by National funds through FCT — Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the projects UID/HIS/04666/2013, UID/HIS/04666/2019, UIDB/04666/2020, UIDP/04666/2020, UIDB/04209/2020, UIDP/04209/2020 and LA/P/0132/2020.

Special Issue
The Polemics of History:
Historiographical Debates
and Public Life

Elisa Lopes da Silva*

Polemics were famously condemned by Michel Foucault for twisting arguments, distorting criticism, assigning blame or breeding enemies. Unlike dialogue, defined by reciprocal elucidation and the exposure of contradictions, by which faulty reasoning or conflicting postulates are brought to light, polemical texts or moments have, as he sees it, “sterilizing effects”. Which leads him to ask: “Has anyone ever seen a new idea come out of a polemic?” However, the French philosopher also says, “[p]erhaps someday, a long history will have to be written of polemics, polemics as a parasitic figure on discussion and an obstacle to the search for the truth.”¹ This special issue of *Práticas da História* does not aim to offer an overview of the history of polemics, but rather to trace a preliminary thread through the long lineage of historiographical polemics, in a broad sense, as, simultaneously, a form of knowledge and a form of public intervention.

History has always been a battlefield, with recurrent clashes between opposing interpretations, out in the open or within the walls of academia, notwithstanding the bad reputation polemics earned in post-May 1968 universities in many Western European and North American countries.² In the decades that followed, polemical interventions were

* Elisa Lopes da Silva (elisals@fcsh.unl.pt). Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA) / Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa. Av. Forças Armadas, Edifício ISCTE, sala 2W2 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal.

1 Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics and Problematizations. Interview to Paul Rabinow”, May 1984, in *The Foucault Reader*, org. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 381-390.

2 Enzo Traverso, *L’histoire comme champs de bataille. Interpréter les violences du XXe siècle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

seen as being at odds with the professionalism and civic and ethical discourse of the Humanities and Social Sciences institutionalised after the great era of politically-committed intellectuals that marked the 1960s.³ Polemical texts seems to belong to the public sphere of journalism and politics rather than to the realm of the professionals of objective and impartial knowledge of a technical and scientific nature, expressed through the use of incontrovertible evidence and logical reasoning. Malice, or even verbal abuse, hyperbolic rhetoric and unrestrained language, charismatic fallacy and ad hominem attacks have established the status of polemics as an enduring form of entertainment and, for that very reason, a threat to academic gravitas. Enjoyment, it would seem, haunts critical interpretation.⁴ In a university characterised by erudite distance from fleeting passions, polemics came to be regarded as the Other of humanistic discourse.

Be that as it may, in countries where dictatorships and other repressive political regimes (such as colonialism) endured longer (as was the case in South America, the Iberian Peninsula or certain African countries), where the political struggle of intellectuals continued to permeate (and shape) a public democratic life and where the full academisation of social scientific knowledge came later, polemics have been perceived, one might argue, with a lesser degree of academic mistrust and have never been under as much epistemic suspicion. The history of the twentieth century was marked by polemics that laid the groundwork for the creation of the material and epistemic conditions (archives, university departments, new guiding questions and methods) for new research objects to be formed and developed. Polemics around the fascist typology that applied to the ‘Estado Novo’ in Portugal promoted the preservation of the regime’s official sources; public debates on the Spanish Civil War invigorated research in forensic anthropology; polemics around the legacies of colonialism broadened the thematic scope of European and national funding policies. Moreover, the so-called ‘culture

³ Jonathan Crewe, “Can polemic be ethical? A response to Michel Foucault”, in *Polemic. Critical and Uncritical*, org. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 135-152.

⁴ Jane Gallop, “Introduction”, in *Polemic. Critical and Uncritical*, org. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

wars', fought within and outside academia (mainly in the US and UK) since the 1980s, have largely resulted from battles (or polemics) over the creation of new epistemic domains (e.g., gender studies) and from forms of public intervention and participation (e.g. feminist demands), which were, not without a degree of irony, (also) carried out under the sign of Foucault. Over the last decade, historiographical polemics seem to have acquired an added public relevance, namely through the emergence of memorial discourses, of widespread discussions on official commemorations and the monumentalisation of history that have challenged the hegemony of history (as a discipline) over public life.

Polemics have been omnipresent in the history of historical knowledge. They have been expressed through different media (from the general press to specialised journals, from courts to social networks), used many different forms of reasoning (from virulent personal attacks to arguments from authority or claims of social utility) and stylistic resources (irony, insult, satire). They have revised analytical concepts (feudalism or totalitarianism) and placed methodologies (from biography to cliometrics) and epistemologies (from Marxism to postmodernism) under scrutiny. They have given a voice to dissent and exposed irreconcilable views and stances as much as they paved the way for the resolution of conflicts hitherto deemed insoluble. The most assertive interventions in the matter of the past's presence in public life have often resorted to the disciplinary codes of history writing, seeking to gain the legitimacy (and veracity) it confers (through its use of empirical evidence and objective narration), all the while avoiding, ignoring, or challenging some of its protocols (critique of sources, referencing, literature review). By constructing and debating the past in light of the present, historical polemics also challenge the disciplinary premise that the cognitive handling of the past implies that the latter is dead and buried, thus throwing into doubt any clear-cut separation between past and present⁵. For all of the above, polemics are exceptional moments of reflection on the epistemic foundations and methodological procedures of both the professional

⁵ Sanjay Seth, *Beyond Reason: Postcolonial Theory and the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 91-95.

work and the social role of the historian. Polemics should therefore be included within the history of knowledge processes.

There are manifold reasons to examine the role polemics have played in public life. The philosopher Marcelo Dascal suggests one follows what we might call operative reason, as opposed to the rationality of so-called ‘pure reason’. Polemical texts, so the argument goes, express impassioned and partial reason (reason in action), which we can define as opposed to the form of reason that nowadays dominates the social science and humanities texts that are argued, discussed and made consensual through extended processes of peer reviewing. It is not a question of favouring one over the other, but rather of scrutinising the use of “impure reason” and other normativities, bringing to light the forms of reasoning, what is deemed valid as proof, the limits of critique, what is perceived as an intelligible formulation or accepted as “knowledge”. Framing polemics as a specific form of dialogue – one in which there is a confrontational interaction between at least two people –, Dascal created a typology that takes into account the scope of the disagreement, the type of contents in dispute, the means of resolving the conflict and the goals of the polemicists. He defined three ideal types against which concrete polemics should be classified: discussion; dispute; controversy.⁶ The analysis of the devices employed (assessment of the use of evidence to establish truth; ploys aimed at impressing the audience; arguments geared to changing the audience’s beliefs through persuasion) implies a survey of the discursive strategies and an evaluation of the syntactic-semantic as well pragmatic composition of each concrete (polemical) move in terms of its internal structure, but also bearing in mind the importance of the context in which the polemic takes place or the audience the polemicist is addressing. This typology put forward in the field of analytic philosophy, of which we offer but a mere sketch, and which follows in the tracks of other canonical clas-

⁶ Marcelo Dascal, “Types of polemics and types of polemical moves”, in *Dialogue Analysis*, ed. S. Cmejrkova *et al*, vol. 1 (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1998), 15-33. Marcelo Dascal cleared the way for the study of polemics in the field of philosophical studies of argumentation and dialogue, launching a collection (Controversies) in the John Benjamins Publishing Company, which now includes 16 works.

sifications (from Aristotle and Kant), suggests the vast interpretative potential of turning polemical exchanges into an object of study.

Polemical texts are always the result of both a way of reading and a way of writing. If intertextuality is the condition of any text, polemical texts are arguably the epitome of this postulate.⁷ It is from reading other texts, tracking down their errors or incriminating evidence, that polemical interventions are created. These are, almost by definition, established as a direct and oppositional response to past quotations, paraphrasing terms and phrases and unfolding ideas by way of codes, narrative models and other linguistic resources that are reassembled in a new text. The polemical text is also a way of writing which, arguably, can be studied as a literary genre of its own, i.e. as a discursive structure organised according to a set of rules of formal composition and substantive validation. Studying historiographical polemics, then, enables a study of historiography not only through theory or the philosophy of history, but through passionate reason and a poetics of history.

The goal of editing a special issue of *Práticas da História* devoted to historiographical polemics is to reflect on those exceptional moments of construction, condensation, dissension and transformation of theories and practices of history. We have considered historiographical polemics as the exposure and public confrontation of antagonistic views about the past that have occurred, either in a short period or over several years, among specialists of the past (historians, museologists, archaeologists, among others) as well as lay persons, not only in academic forums but also in other spaces of publication and public intervention. Historiographical polemics, here understood in a broad sense, address theories, topics, periods, events, or subjects that have divided historians and others devoted to historical learning, highlighting different and contrasting ways of conceptualising knowledge. The articles and essays published in the present issue allow us to make an incursion into historiographical polemics starting from theoretical debates (the status of history and totalitarianism) as well concrete cases (the conflict in Northern Ireland

⁷ Thomas N. Corns, "Introduction", in *The Literature of Controversy: Polemical Strategy from Milton to Junius*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (London: Routledge, 1987), 2-3.

and public memory in Cameroon), pursuing an analysis of the role of the press and social networks (disciplinary consolidation, dissemination of historical knowledge, platforms for debate) as well as of historians' epistemic virtues (scientific impartiality, social responsibility).

The two articles that open our special issue bear witness to how academic debates on history, in its various meanings (the lived past or a disciplinary field), were often included not only within the scope of other epistemic fields (from political science to philosophy), but also beyond the institutional sphere of academia. This was the case with the polemic that followed the publication of Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* [The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences] (1966), in which the very status of history came under discussion, in terms of both its anthropological *partis pris* and its epistemological problematics. This is the subject of the issue's first article. Through the phrase "refusal of history", Lucas Perdrisat exposes how, in the context of the critical reading of Foucault's work among historians and, most of all, philosophers (namely Jean-Paul Sartre), a new epistemological horizon for history entered the discussion, one grounded on the concept of discontinuity. Another theoretical debate, this time from within the fields of political philosophy and political science, proposes a re-reading of the 80-year long history of the category of 'totalitarianism' as a cumulative theoretical debate. The essay by Henrique Varajidás exposes the suppositions and foundations of the work of the classical theorists of totalitarianism, at a time when the negative verdict on the category had yet to crystallise. The essay further examines the polemical disagreements after World War II and the critical distance towards the alleged theoretical canon, both by the current defenders of the category and by those sceptical of it. These two texts address how history is reflected upon and discussed beyond its disciplinary academisation, clearing the path to conflicting ways of understanding historicity and of conceptualising the past in academia. They also lay bare how debates and polemics around history were often the result of a mutual interaction between academised knowledge and public life.

Throughout this process, the press has been not only a privileged stage for debates about the past, but also an essential instrument, with its own particular features, in the constitution, consolidation and re-configuration of the discipline of history and of public life – the two being, in fact, mutually imbricated. The press, as well as other media, has operated as a ground for the exposure and reformulation of conflicting visions of history, developing, importing and exporting mechanisms of argumentation and strategies of legitimation from various disciplinary fields. Meanwhile, public interventions that take the interpretations of the past as their subject matter also had an impact in the fields of academic knowledge. Focusing on journalistic discourse, Cillian MacGrattan analyses how academic narratives about the origins of the conflict in Northern Ireland have been reproduced, reshaped and debated in the public arena. By studying the way in which explanatory models – agential and structuralist – of these historical narratives were employed in newspaper articles and in the academic literature, one is able to understand how politics – nationalist and unionist ideology – was articulated, in public life, by way of historiographical models of explanation. Alfonso Calderón Argelich’s article, on polemics in the Spanish press (1833-1868), addresses how “men of letters”, voicing different political cultures, have argued over historical themes according to models of forensic rhetoric, through refutations cast in a legal mould and the appropriation of the deliberative oratory of parliamentary debates. This was a struggle for hegemony between different readings of national history in the press, during the initial period of the disciplinary consolidation of history in Spain. This example shows how the emergence of the epistemic virtues of historians, associated with the impartial and dispassionate study of history, far from being explained by reasons exclusively tied to the growing scientificity of history as a discipline, must be understood in the political context of the defence of the institutional order of conservative liberalism.

It is well known that the social and political commitment of historians, as well as the social, political or moral values that should guide, or not, the writing of history, have been a subject of debate ever

since the impartiality and objectivity of historiographical practice and the disinterested stance of the historian became the discipline's touchstone. At issue is not only the claim that history (and the historian) is always shaped by the present, and that history is elaborated on the grounds of an individual selection of empirical materials, of particular interpretative frameworks and in the context of the funding of certain research agendas over others, but an understanding of how historians' political and moral stance has been affirmed and defended in accordance with circumstances and contextual urgencies and even perceived as a requisite for their public intervention. This debate has surfaced periodically and became especially heated in polemics where the definition of national narratives was at stake, marked by the interpretation of events and the heralding of heroes. While it is true that the disciplinary consolidation of history occurred through the writing of national narratives in the nineteenth century, contributing to the affirmation of modern nationalism, no less relevant is the political role played by historians when they embraced the mission of critically deconstructing cultural identities and other forms of essentialism.

This is especially relevant in the case of the debates on memory that have erupted with exceptional vigour in public life over recent decades. Even if one considers the writing of history as a modality of representation of the past on a par with memory, with no ontological primacy over it, one can argue that historiography offers an epistemological model of critical discourse, as it is open to a continuous re-examination that can gain a critical distance from memorial truth. Following this line of argument, Brice Molo argues for the moral responsibilities of the historian towards collective memory when analysing the uses and abuses of memory by social groups that polemicise in the public life – including, in this case, the social media – of Cameroon. By extolling the “virtues of forgetting”, Molo aims for a national narrative that can gain consensus so that a process of reconciliation can begin, one that may subsume and overcome debates on the memory of colonial and post-colonial violence. Conversely, when it comes to another process of violence, the Holocaust, the affirmation of the duty of remembrance

and the recognition of individual memories emerged at the same time as, and was constitutive of, the institutionalisation of its history. In this case, the consensual narrative about this set of events, as well as its moral evaluation, allowed it to play a role in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention, immediately after World War II. Intervening in a debate that opened some 10 years ago, Antoon de Baets assesses the extent and depth of the role played by the Holocaust in the revival of human rights, reframing it within public debates about history.

Alongside written memory, other ways of relating to history burst into the public arena, competing with disciplinary knowledge over the representation of the past. In recent years, the polemics that stand out are those whose interventions were made through, and using a combination of, different media (texts, paintings, photographs, exhibitions, novels, films, video games or statues). Examples of this process of inquiry and dissent are the debates on museums and the formation and management of their collections, as well as on forms of monumentalisation of history (public sculptures of national heroes), debates in which the descendants from groups that are under-represented or victimised in both historiography and public memory (such as the descendants of Africans and other racialised subjects) publicly called for other forms of historical and historiographical recognition. The gesture of toppling statues is one that makes history (in both senses of the term, the “lived past” and the “represented past”) as much as the act of erecting them; colonial images are appropriated and reedited on film, their meanings transmuted and other histories unveiled; video games represent the past so that it can be sensorially experienced, revising and challenging academicised histories. The agents and the ways of making history are broadened, the manner in which it is presented and the platforms for its discussion multiplied. Transmedia forms of polemical intervention were in our minds when we invited Patrícia Lino to publish her parodic exercise, *Anti-Corpo*, in this special issue. This is a «parody of the Laughable Empire», as its subtitle tells us, one that belongs among other forms of public destabilisation around historical themes. Appropriating images and words from Portuguese colonialism, Lino reassembles

them in visual essays that, through irony and nonsense, seek to destroy the original effectiveness of those images and texts.

As usual, in addition to the articles and essays, this issue contains other sections, including an interview with the historian Joan Wallach Scott, whose influential essay “Is Gender a Useful Category of Historical Analysis?” and subsequent work have exemplarily laid bare how historiographical texts can spark academic as well as political polemics, with the added benefit of their role as nodal points in the back and forth between public space and academicised knowledge. The editor of the review section, Inês Nascimento Rodrigues, also selected three works that are closely linked to the theme of this special issue. Rui Bebianco addresses a collection of essays by Enzo Traverso, recently published as a book, a work that allow us to examine the multiple uses of history, once again through the views and interpretations of the Holocaust – a theme that has been central to several works of the Italian historian. The historiographical debates around Stalinism, mapped and analysed in a book by Mark Edele, are discussed by Rita Lucas Narra, who points out the various contexts, protagonists and interpretations in this field of studies. To close this issue, Fabrice Schurmans reviews the work *Politiques de la mémoire*, in which Pierre Tevanian, focusing on the French context, discusses the notion of memory conflicts.

Finally, though it falls outside the thematic scope of this special issue, we also publish an essay by Rafael Gaune Corradi that examines the work of Carlo Ginzburg to tease out the relations between philology, translation and the historian’s practice.

*

* *

All academic journals owe special thanks to the authors of the published texts, who submit their research to an extended inquiry by others. The work of the referees, less visible though it may be, is an essential part of the process of scientific arbitration and one that does not

still receive its due authorial recognition. This special issue of *Práticas da História* is not only not an exception, but it owes them an exceptional debt for their contribution. Their detailed and constructive reviews allowed for a solid assessment of the texts submitted and an extremely fruitful editing of those selected for publication. This process proved essential to a special issue that focuses on a topic that is more often discussed than researched. Our thanks also extend to the proof-readers, whose work was extraordinarily valuable in an issue that includes texts in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, and who make it possible to pursue the journal's policy of favouring multilingual forms of knowledge. Finally, this special issue would not have been possible without the constant and boundless enthusiasm and questioning spirit of Bruno Peixe Dias.