

Intellectuals in the Middle Ages, Jacques Le Goff. – Birth of a social category, and discipline.

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Abstract

Intellectuals in the Middle Ages: birth of a social category, and also simultaneously discipline. A radical book – important to history like few are: with this small monograph, Jacques Le Goff created “*historical sociology*” or “*sociological history*”; and liberated countless others.

1 A foundational “mistake”

A “foundational” – and intended – anachronism creates an entire subfield. Mistake : literally, when something is taken for other than it is. But, this foundational “mistake” made it so that : it became what it should have always been perhaps.

Now, variously called “*historical sociology*” or “*sociological history*”, we have not quite agreed yet, on our own terms, tools.

In this radical book – important to history like few are, Jacques Le Goff reinvented his discipline, or a new one. – we are not sure.

In doing so, he is the peer of Michel Foucault and Erwin Panofsky – that is his place.

In great intellectuals, even the mistakes are beautiful, as some say about Panofsky, for instance, whose analysis of the “Arnolfini Portrait”, currently debated, is and in truth always was more important than the portrait itself. – even if they did end up reaching a consensus that disproved his flamboyant thesis of a painted contract, theirs would never have the same allure. He made us dream, at least.

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But, let us perhaps here try to create or recreate his or its genealogy.

Published in 1957¹, what models or peers did it, and he have? What models could Le Goff, who was 30 years old at the time of the publication of this great book, have looked up too?

One – one possible one – is *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* published in 1951. (While the 1953 *Early Netherlandish Painting* is often overlooked.) Was Le Goff aware of Panofsky then? We just don’t know, but think it unlikely. (They did share the same era.)

Closer to him would have been the historians of the *Annales*, this legendary journal of legendary historians: French, as he was, many of them specialists of the Middle Ages too : Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre to name a few.

Les Rois thaumaturges (1924), *The Problem of Disbelief...* (1942) ...

(Marc Bloch, who, like Cavailles, could have escaped his duty, had joined the Resistance instead, with the ends we know : imprisonment preceded execution by firing squad. A boy next to him, he comforted in their last moments : “my boy, everything will be fine”... And, they fired. And, so, died one of the truly great historians of the past century.)

Madness and Civilization was published in 1961 for the first time.

Greek Homosexuality, another work that we assign here to this great tradition of sociological history, in turn was published much later, 1978.

A meteorite fallen from the sky : “lonely, but not alone”.

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They are our peers, and fathers : us, who conceived of history as more than mere accumulation of dates; celebration of kings, queens, ladies and dames; hagiography of the lives of saints, old and new; comfortable, sometimes dangerous recollections, if not inventions of our “origins”.

¹Le Goff, Jacques. 1957. *Les Intellectuels au Moyen Age*. Seuil.

But, speaking of “saints” and “holy” figures, we also never forget the lines in the *Communist Manifesto* about slaves and masters, patricians and plebeians... Marx : father to all – fathers, sons, and daughters, deserving of their parents (or not).

In Durkheim, we also find in many places the earliest antecedents of this specific type of history : so, for instance, in mesmerizing passages where he makes broad – we would say “structural” now – analyses of the differences between the educations of the page and villein (the former learned the arts of chivalry, the latter arithmetic, songs and grammar), which he compares to that existing between that of the Brahman and Sudra – “world history”, anachronistically still.

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We said “(foundational) anachronism”, why? Well : the term, the modern term and model of “intellectual” did not exist in the Middle Ages as such, it existed but with some other conflicting meaning (they who make intelligible with intuition);

We also say “model” because these scholars had other visions and conceptions of intellectual activity as well : while we place much value on originality, they put much energy instead into copying, and commentaries, and did not conceive of neither as an inferior activity. We add here, that, in doing so, they were like pre-modern painters : a good copy was no less, and more perhaps?

How will the intellectuals of the 24th c. be? What will they look like? Where will they place their value? And, finally : will we return to dark ages of looking at stars and celestial objects with dumb amazement, or will be among them?

Just as talking of “homosexuality” in Greek antiquity poses a problem, as this terminology was unknown then (an invention of the 19th c.); the specific model of “pederasty” in Ancient Athens instead existed.

A problem that did not deter Kenneth Dover, whose work’s influence on Foucault we know, from calling his book : Greek Homosexuality. Another foundational, intended anachronism. Happy mistake, or happy ending? (Intercrural sex, or “between-the-thighs”.)

He even left out the “Ancient” part. Any more a transgression, and he would have needed to drop the capitalization in both terms.

This other great academic, who, otherwise incarnated the common-place figure of the intellectual, in clothing and titles, spoke of adolescent boys as the “pin-up’s” of the days. Transgressions that create insights.

Whoever is able to write the next book on “A History of Humanity on Mars” (conceived as our relationship throughout time to that planet) or “Queer in the Middle Ages” is guaranteed to have a place, if not in history, in our hearts.

(The state of the historiography of “homosexuality” in the Middle Ages is nothing short of amazing and catastrophic, with the books of one historian dominating all debates, for lack of alternatives, who reminds us of our modern ones who try to establish the “positive aspects” of various periods, from Colonialism to the Nazis... Meanwhile, he spends his time and energies on highlighting the “tolerance” of the Christian Church. But, at what point, between lighting the match and poring gasoline on someone, where these Churchmen of the Middle Ages “tolerant”? Imbecile.)

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2 Liberation of one, and many

Jacques Le Goff, in what is ostensibly a book for few readers, but only superficially so, gave us new liberties, as intellectuals, we did not know ourselves to know, or have – he liberated himself, and countless others;

All the while reminding us of our own history.

“*It is hard to not feel some form of adoration for intellectuals like that*”, we wrote about another social (or sociological) historian, Christophe Charle, with whom Le Goff had co-written. It is.

No footnotes, entire pages devoid of any dates; so much left out, we are only left with the gold that comes out of mud; and, only, that that can be separated by an expert. While reading this book, we know ourselves to be in good company, and never alone.

We read it with the feeling of being constantly guided by a great, gentle, somewhat scary giant. Like Virgil to Dante in the *Divine Comedy*.

(In real life, he was a stern, if not grave figure, who spoke with a steady, voice – there was something a bit monstrous about it, as Canguilhem had written about Cavailles. And, for some reason, he reminds us of gargantuan figures like Welles or Melville.)

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Intellectuals in the Middle Ages was the PhD thesis of Jacques Le Goff.

Did it really look like this when it was defended? We miss a history of this great book. How did it even get published? (We do not even know who its supervisor was. But, perhaps this plays no role, as, rarely, we encounter such beautiful books, that are so obviously product of one person, a singular vision.)

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In this, in truth, *strange, strange* book – *queer* like we like – Jacques Le Goff speaks interchangeably of “workers” and their “tools”, and imaginari-um and habits, to describe intellectuals at work.

Saint Jerome, in his study, would have fallen from his chair. Or, perhaps this is the fate of all the Saint Jerome’s and Saint Anna’s of our times. We cannot mistake these anachronistic scholars for intellectuals : they are in the 21st century, as they were in the 12th. They are “tools”, in the other meaning we know this word to have, because they don’t control theirs. Slaves of themselves, masters of many others.

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In concluding this review, allow us one last of the few pleasures that we are allowed as intellectuals : average intellectuals and academics (*moyen*) will certainly find much to learn in this book on the Middle Ages...

Les Intellectuels au Moyen Age.

The intellectuals of the 21st century are computer scientists : it is to them that we turn now.

Tools unknown live lives of their own...

References

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Figure 1: Intellectuals at work. Edward “Ed” Feigenbaum (Turing Award 1994).

(Image credit: Chuck Painter)