

## Sep. 10. The Annales School: Origins and Establishment

### Discussion 2: Marc Bloch

We all need heroes. Every discipline defines itself in part by hagiography. Notice how physics or biology textbooks put little pictures of their founding fathers in the margins: Maxwell, Darwin, Watson, Einstein, etc. This is one way of suggesting that you are part of a tradition. It also offers models for new recruits; it may inspire people to surpass the masters, offer targets for critiques, or even humble a few rare souls. If social historians need model ancestors, Marc Bloch is just about an ideal example. He pioneered new historical methods, he inspired generations of students, he founded an entirely new approach (with Lucien Febvre) institutionalized in the journal *Annales*, and he died a martyr's death at the hands of the Gestapo. But there's always the danger that the real human being will be swallowed up by plaster sainthood, or his contributions will be co-opted by others with different agendas. It's always a good idea to go back to the sources - Bloch's original writings - to judge how far we have come since then. Carole Fink's biography provides a welcome, balanced account of Bloch the man and historian.

Marc Bloch was an Alsatian Jew and French patriot. His father had defended Strasbourg against the Germans in 1870, having succeeded in getting into the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, where he became a classics professor. His son grew up during the great agitation over the Dreyfus affair, which swept professors at the Ecole into mass politics. In 1906, when Bloch was twenty, Dreyfus was finally vindicated against the charges of treason brought by the army's anti-Semites. The patriotism of France's Jews was vindicated, but Bloch learned to hate the army. It probably sensitized him to the role of rumor, prejudice, and "psychosocial" phenomena in history: not popular subjects in a period when history pretended to be scientific, positivist, and objective. Opposition to both French positivism and Germanic scientism were hallmarks of Bloch's thinking. He fought in the first World War, then began teaching in the University of Strasbourg (note: without a Ph.D., until 1920) All his great works were produced in a remarkably short period of time, from 1920 to 1939. The first, *Les Rois thaumaturges* (1924; trans. *The Royal Touch*, 1973), is a remarkable combination of medical, psychological, and anthropological analysis of the healing power of medieval kings. It was perhaps the first true history of *mentalités* (collective belief; cf. modern anthropologists' "culture"; note the link to Durkheim's *conscience collective*). The "new cultural historians" have followed this line of Bloch's work (Ginzburg, Davis, Schama, Darnton, etc.), even though more in the early modern than medieval period (why is this?).

Rural history, especially in France, was Bloch's main focus. But do not forget his long interest in the comparative history of feudalism, the history of money, technology (see his classic essay on the water-mill), law, etc. Note the French title of his most important book: *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (The Original Characteristics of French Rural History): "original" in the sense of both "basic" and "unique". Bloch looked for the most fundamental features of French rural life, but he also stressed the uniqueness of France: though it shared many of the features of its three field systems with England, Germany, and the Mediterranean, it was the combination of all three in one space that made France unique. (Doesn't he assume a French nationalist's

view here: that "France" is a naturally bounded community? Doesn't this probably distort the medieval understanding of territory: certainly not all the people in this territory spoke French; none of them thought in terms of a modern "France". Here is Bloch the French patriot, in tension with the promise of internationalist, comparative historical analysis.) Bloch's methodological innovations were striking. The introduction has a famous passage about Fustel de Coulanges, who denied that there ever was an open-field system in France. He had never set foot outside the library to look at the evidence in fields right in front of him. "Fustel de Coulanges was not a man on whom the external world made much impact" (xxvii). Bloch never divorced the historian's work from his present-day experience. The historian must "read history backwards" to solve his problems. Objectivists worshipping at the altar of science call this the vice of "presentism": refusing to respect "the pastness of the past", falling into anachronism by mindlessly transferring categories of today to bygone eras, or worse yet, using people of the past in the agenda of present-day politics. Did Bloch fall into this trap? See his reflections in *The Historian's Craft* – must reading for all historians.

Other innovations: his attention to qualities of soil and climate, but not in an environmentally determinist sense; the reliance on maps as well as documents to reconstruct field shapes; attention to place names as indicators of early settlement. Note also his denial of the ever-popular race analysis that infected French and German scholarship (62). NB also footnote on p.63 where he speculates about the role of religion in establishing field boundaries. Bloch was always open to the cultural approach; he was not the materialist some make him out to be. The main goal is to discover the hidden sources of long-term social change, to create an integrated account of their connections, to resurrect the lives of obscure people in as many facets as possible.

Some limitations of Bloch from today's perspective: 1) The ultimate cause of the difference in "agrarian civilizations" detected in field shapes remains vague. If it is not race, and not merely soil, what is it? Technological functionalism helps: e.g. the long, narrow, shape of the field depends on the need to turn the plow around, if it is wheeled. Communal grazing on the stubble prevents enclosures. But why is communal grazing so entrenched? If "custom", an "attitude of mind" (46), is the key to communal grazing, why can't it change over time? Enclosures did come into Normandy during the agricultural revolution, raising productivity and leading this part of France along the

English road (or did they? Michel Morineau denies this: it's now a hotly controversial point whether France ever really had an "agricultural revolution") But if one part of France can change, why can't the rest of the country? This isn't really spelled out.

Michael Confino's work on the three-field system in Russia is a brilliant analysis of this Blochian theme, which brings in much more on rural culture to balance the technological component. (See my article for Roe Smith volume on technological determinism).

2) "Ecology" in the modern sense is not really present in Bloch. Land, soil, climate are static elements in the picture. The land does not cycle; animals and plants as biological organisms do not really enter the picture. The natural world is seen as a constraint, mastered only with difficulty by humans producing for subsistence. The general tendency of *Annales* rural historians is to stress the great limits put on human society by nature in medieval and early modern times. It's a welcome contrast to American triumphalism. But the two need to be brought into balance, in a more dynamic picture.

3) Bloch has an ambivalent and interesting relationship to the social science of his time, which no one has really explored. Like many other historians, he did not want to "apply" a given theory to a "case study" in order to prove or disprove it. Durkheim and Marx he read, but used only implicitly, as working tools, sometimes useful, sometimes not. He attacked the blind faith in statistics promoted by Durkheimian positivists. On the other hand, he clearly was influenced in his concept of *mentalité* by Durkheim's *conscience collective*. But Durkheim, in *Suicide*, detected, and defended this mentality through statistics: the evidence of differential suicide rates in Protestant and Catholic countries. Bloch had only intuition, and evidence of conscious behavior. He also rejected German "political economy": an abstract theorization of economics combined with legalistic and administrative analysis: lots of stuff on the legal status of serfdom without looking at what it really meant to the lord and serf on the ground. He didn't take much Marxist class analysis to heart, because it didn't seem to work out in terms of medieval practice. Long debates have ensued since then. Can people have "class consciousness" without being aware of it? Can social structures change because of class relations, even though there are no consciously organized class-based movements? (Cf. Neo-Marxists Robert Brenner, Perry Anderson vs. Malthusian-technological interpreters Le Roy Ladurie, et.al.) Bloch focused on *practice*. This gives his work a welcome concrete flavor; also puts it in tune with modern anthropological efforts to see people's everyday life as expressions of underlying class relations (Bourdieu).

**Legacy:** Too often Lucien Febvre gets slighted in the discussion of the *Annales*. He and Bloch collaborated closely, founded *Annales* together in 1929, corresponded frequently. Note that they also had frequent bitter fights, too. The fact that Febvre was not Jewish, compromised with the anti-Semitic Vichy regime (leaving Bloch off the editorial board, publishing his work under pseudonyms), rankled deeply. Febvre was more polemical, wrote more articles than books, did more of the institution-building, probably offended more people than Bloch. There still is no English-language biography of him. Nowadays, however, he may turn out to be the more influential figure, if the trend is (alas!) away from the muck of the countryside and toward linguistic, symbolic, religio-cultural analysis. Febvre pioneered these aspects in his work on unbelief, Rabelais, and Luther. But we can't separate them too sharply. Bloch was sensitive to cultural analysis, and Febvre wrote one of the first great blockbuster regional rural histories, the foundation of the school that followed.

The great tomes of regional rural histories of France are the massive pillars of the Annales school. (Febvre; LeRoy Ladurie; Baehrel; Vilar; Goubert; Lefebvre; ) Too few of these have been translated. If your French is good, it's well worth devoting a summer to one of them. My greatest inspiration for the kind of work I do came from plowing through several of these in French. There is something about French rhetorical style that doesn't come through in translation. But something was lost when Bloch's clarity, synoptic vision, and sympathy was buried in numbers, huge weights of documentation, and thousands of pages. His best work was short, sharp, and clear. Has the institutional "success" of the postwar Annales lost the essential vision of this modest, peripheral, dedicated scholar and patriot? Stay tuned for next week's edition.

### Bibliography

Perry Anderson, *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism; Lineages of the Absolutist State*. The greatest modern Marxist analysis of European states, lords, and peasants from the Middle Ages to the end of the nineteenth century.

T.H.Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (1985) (articles by Robert Brenner, E. LeRoy Ladurie, R.H. Hilton, Guy Bois, M.H. Postan, et.al)

Michael Confino, *Systemes Agraires et Progres Agricole: L'Assolement Triennal en Russie aux XVIIIe - XIXe Siecles* (Agrarian Systems and Agricultural Progress: The Three-field Rotation in Russia from the Eighteenth to Nineteenth Centuries), Paris, Mouton, 1969. In my view, one of the greatest regional rural histories ever written, in classic Annales style. Examines the causes of Russian rural stagnation as determined by the combination of climate, technology, state institutions (serfdom, taxation), and religious belief. Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (Cambridge, 1989)

Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History*, ed. Peter Burke, trans. K. Folca (Harper, 1973) Translated selections from Febvre's polemical essays.

Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Histoire de Languedoc* (1966; trans (only in part), *The Peasants of Languedoc*. Takes a primarily Malthusian approach to agrarian change (or lack of it) in Southern France from the 13th to 18th centuries.

Michele Morineau, *Les faux-semblants d'un demarrage economique* (The False Signs of Economic Take-Off)

P.C. Perdue, "Technological Determinism in Agriculture", in Merritt Roe Smith, ed., *Beyond Technological Determinism* (MIT Press, 1994). Compares Lynn White, Confino, and discussion of Chinese agrarian change; refers to Bloch.

Examples of French Regional Histories:

Rene Baehrel, *Une croissance: Le Bas-Provence.*; Something of a renegade to the other rural historians, since he stresses the possibilities for growth in the pre-modern rural economy.

Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France: vol. 1: History and Environment* [1988; translation of vol. 1 of *L'Identite de la France* [1986]]. The last great work of Braudel, the successor to Bloch and Febvre, covers France region by region, and raises questions about the unity and special characteristics of France.

Pierre Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis...* Probably the greatest example of historical demography in a rural area in France. Parts available in English in *The Ancien Regime* and *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*

Georges Lefebvre, *Les Paysans du Nord Pendant la Revolution Francaise*. Lefebvre comes from a different tradition: the republican class-oriented view of the French Revolution, but here his interests intersect with socially-oriented rural change.

Charles Tilly, *The Vendee*, applies modern sociology to look at social structure in one small part of France which featured a huge peasant revolt against the Revolution.

Pierre Vilar, *Le Catalogne..* (On Catalonia in Spain). One of the few non-French studies that is solidly within the Annales tradition.