

Interview

Christian Delacroix

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RESUMO

Christian Delacroix, historiador francês originário de família operária, iniciou sua militância política na esquerda, desde muito jovem, e foi fortemente marcado pelos acontecimentos de maio de 1968. Formado em filosofia na Sorbonne, direcionou seus estudos para a área de História quando foi aprovado para a École Normale Supérieure de Saint-Cloud. Em 1977 foi aprovado no exame de Agrégation, e a seguir trabalhou mais de 20 anos como professor secundário. Em 2000 candidatou-se a um posto no IUFM (Instituto de Formação de Mestres) em Créteil. Junto aos colegas François Dosse e Patrick Garcia vinculou-se ao Instituto de História do Tempo Presente (IHTP), onde participou de vários seminários voltados à epistemologia dos estudos sobre o tempo presente. Publicou inúmeros trabalhos no campo da teoria e da historiografia.

ABSTRACT

Christian Delacroix, a French historian originally from a working class family, started his leftwing political activism when he was very young and was strongly marked by the events of May 1968. He graduated in philosophy in the Sorbonne, moving to the area of history when he was approved for the Saint-Cloud École Normale Supérieure. In 1977 he passed the Agrégation exam, afterwards working for more than 20 years as a secondary school teacher. In 2000 he applied for a position in the IUFM (Teacher Training Institute) in Créteil. Together with his colleagues François Dosse and Patrick Garcia he joined the Institute of the History of the Present Time (IHTP), where he participated in several seminars concerned with the epistemology of studies about the present time. He has published numerous works in the field of theory and historiography.

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MM: *Could you speak about your education? Your family origins? Why did you choose to study history?*

I come from a large working class family from the North of France which was strongly marked by the Second World War. My parents were involved in the French Resistance. These origins were very important for me.

In relation to my educational background, I have a degree in Philosophy. I started my studies in this discipline in the Sorbonne. I attended the classes of Pierre Macherey, of whom I have an emotional memory. In the 1960s he belonged to the group of 'young Althusserian philosophers.' I did a *licenciante* and masters in philosophy in the Sorbonne, taking as a theme the doctrine of war. In May 1968 I was on the front lines, in the same way as François [Dosse]. This event profoundly marked my itinerary. After '68, I abandoned my studies and become engaged in politics, in political activism of the extreme left.

This is the history of a generation marked by '68 and by this militant experience which implied experience in factories, in other words being a factory worker. With the failure of this extreme left movement, I was left in a situation which offered me few options for work. To teach in France – it is still the same today – it is necessary to be approved in a public examination, CAPES and *Agrégation*.¹ I had passed in the admission examination for the *École Normale Supérieure* of Saint-Cloud,² which gave me the right to receive some funding for my studies, provided it was not in philosophy. I needed to change discipline, and for this reason I chose history. So you can see that I arrived in history through a rather windy roads, following my own personal itinerary. However, I think that my philosophical education did have afterwards an important weight in my choices of what I studied, particularly in relation to historiography, and the epistemology of history. I found myself once again in the Sorbonne, this time as a student of history. I did a masters with Albert Soboul, of whom I have an excellent memory.

MM: *What was the subject of your thesis?*

My masters was about the 'Social Circle' which was active during the French Revolution. It is well known for being the only group cited by Marx. After this I moved to the social history of the working class world. The theme of my DEA [*Diplôme d'études appliquées*] and my later research was working class work in the inter-war period, initially with Jacques Deleuze. I then changed directions a second time, towards historiography and the epistemology of

history, which counted a lot in this second orientation... Actually I have always remained interested in social history, in particular in the book I published recently with Belin publishers and Michelle Zancarini, and which is the final volume of a History of France. It has the name “France in the present time.”³ You will notice in this book a very strong social inclination.

But what also counted strongly in my orientation towards historiography and epistemology was my participation with François Dosse and Patrick Garcia in the writing of a journal called *Espace-temps* – perhaps you know it? It campaigned in the 1970s in favor of interdisciplinary reflection in the social sciences. In fact the subtitle of this journal was: Reflecting on the social sciences. It was the reading of an article by François Dosse entitled “Obscure Object of History,” in one of the numbers of this journal that triggered in me this desire to work with historiography and the epistemology of history. We produced many numbers of *Espace-temps*, it had a very particular place in the French intellectual field, until then known for its reflective political orientation towards the social sciences, about the epistemology of the social sciences, and thus about history. We produced many numbers with François Dosse and Patrick Garcia, but we decided to leave the journal when it started to be published on the internet. We decided not to participate in this new adventure, since it was something else. We then began some collective ventures, notably in the *Institut d’Histoire Politique* [Institute of Political History] where since the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, we have coordinated a seminar on the epistemology of history in *Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent* [Institute of the History of the Present Time].

MM: You said you passed the Agrégation. Did you work in a secondary school? When?

I did the *Agrégation* in 1977, in very particular conditions, since, as I have said, in France at that time, when anyone was pre-admitted to the *École Normale* of Saint-Cloud, could receive funding to prepare for public examinations. I was lucky to be able to prepare in very good conditions for, first, CAPES and afterwards the *Agrégation*. To obtain this it was necessary to have received a *très bien* mark in the masters (as I did with Albert Soboul). For more than 10 years I taught in a secondary school before reaching higher level education. I worked on the periphery of Paris, in Orly, in a school classified as a Zone of Priority Education, ZEP.⁴

MM: *When did you start to work in higher level education?*

It was the circumstances. François Dosse and Patrick Garcia played an important role. There was a position available in the *Institut de Formation de Maîtres* [Teacher Training Institute] in Créteil. They encouraged me to run and I passed at the beginning of the 2000s. I spent 10 years there and afterwards I was transferred to Université de Paris-Est, in Marne-la-Vallée, where I was recruited for university teaching.

MM: *What can you say about the challenges represented by the transformation of academic work in secondary teaching, notably about the question of sensitive memory? What do you think of the transmission of sensitive memory in the second level teaching?*

I taught at second level in the 1980s and 1990s. We began to ask ourselves about how to think about transmission, not of memory, but rather, especially in the case of France, of knowledge referring to the colonial past. On the Parisian periphery, 60% of students have a Maghrebian background and live in a disadvantaged social environment. What impressed me was the ignorance of these students about their own culture, including religious culture. It was us, the teachers from the seventh year, who taught them the basis of Islam. This is important, because the situation changed afterwards. During the 1980s and 1990s we had students who were totally unaware of their culture and even more their history. There actually existed, especially in the case of Algerians, very little internal transmission of information about the Algerian War. This has evidentially been confirmed by precious sociological studies. The transmission of family memory about what the Algerian War could have been was very fragmented and definitely very weak. During the 1990s this changed and I saw a new situation emerge, with two phenomena. First, there was a diffusion, especially in the peripheries, of religious aspects. Second, the problems related to the failure of the French model of integration began to be felt at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. We had to begin to deal with these difficulties.

Only rarely did these students have to confront racism within the school. They discovered it outside the school, in the local environment. These students rarely leave the periphery, despite the possibilities offered by RER,⁵ which can bring them to Paris in 10 minutes. It is when they grow up and go to nightclubs and other establishments that they encounter racism. We saw these two phenomena arrive: first a new religious culture transmitted by radical religious

militants. Where I was there were many active groups which recruited children. The second phenomenon is, for some, this growing failure of integration. Once again these problems appeared for students outside the school environment.

CR: *How did this become palpable in the classroom?*

It became palpable in various subjects, for example the Israeli-Palestinian problem. We saw protests from some Maghrebian students with anti-Semitic and anti-Israel reactions. Another sensitive question is *Shoah*. Some students – not all, it has to be clearly said –, thought that I spoke too much about it. This could be seen in the 1990s and the 2000s when I worked with teacher training and I visited classrooms. It is a period when things changed. Teachers faced great difficulties given these problems. Some even avoided dealing with it to avoid tension and confrontations, which is unacceptable. This was the case of the memory of the colonial past and, above all, the Algerian War. In relation to the Indochina war, this problem did not exist. The same occurred in relation to the German Occupation and the collaborationist Vichy government. I saw university students who said they had never studied the Algerian war, neither at first or second level. If you open any history book, the Algerian War appears on two occasions: decolonization and the Fourth Republic. Students had interjected the fact that this was a taboo, and that it is not talked about – which is false and I know that my colleagues taught the Algerian War. However, this taboo also still persists in the press, it is a type of blackout. I still have students who say they have never studied the Algerian War.

MM: *How is the Algerian War studied at third level? Do different interpretations exist?*

In relation to the Algerian War, in a collection we direct with Seuil Publishers, François, Patrick and myself published a book by Raphaëlle Branche,⁶ a historian who wrote her dissertation about torture in Algeria, a historiographic summary of Algeria. Since then things have evolved a lot. Research, theses and work on Algeria are very fertile. Important scientific documents are now available. What cause problems for teaching are precise points. The question of torture is no longer a specific problem, but the interpretation of the actions of the FLN [National Liberation Front] and its methods are. Students tend to have a Manichean vision of history, the good on one side and the bad on the other.

There is also the interpretation of the Algerian government, which demands that France express regret and argues that it committed an *almost* genocide, which is not scientifically sustained. One point allows the actual progress made in the transmission of knowledge in school books to be evaluated: the place occupied by the Massacre of 7 October 1961 in Paris, when an Algerian demonstration was repressed with great force by the French police, provoking the death of one hundred people. 15 or 20 years ago, there was no trace of this in school books. This is very important, since the memory of this massacre had until then been transmitted by associations of second or third generation immigrants which had been campaigning for its recognition in the general narrative. It can be said that the school narrative reflects the dominant narrative of the country. What is in play behind it is less a scientific question than an identity based one. How to be at the same time French and have an Algerian origin? How can I be French without betraying the memory of my country, of my country of origin? This has still not been sufficiently studied. It does not belong to the domain of scientific knowledge, it is a feeling of identity unease manifested in a very acute manner in the question of the Algerian war.

CR: *Does the time factor exercise an important role in this acceptance?*

Yes, this is the common thesis. Studies have been done of Italian immigration which have shown that frequently the second generation tries to forget the past, while the third returns to it.

RF: *Currently in Brazil we are creating a 'Truth Commission' aimed at analyzing the crimes committed against human rights during the military dictatorship. This events has led to a series of question: how to evaluate the documents produced by this Commission, and what is the role of historians in this task?*

In France we have had lawsuits linked to the Second World War and the period of Occupation: the case of Maurice Papon, who had as position of great responsibility in the Vichy regime and who 57 years later was accused of crimes against humanity. There was a much debate about historians, about the question of this participation, related to another deeper movement called the *judicialization* of História. We saw a division emerge between the historians who accepted appearing before judges as witnesses and those who refused to do this. In France the status of 'expert historian' does not exist. Witnesses are only authorized to make oral statements although they perform the role of experts.

For example, Marc-Olivier Baruch, a specialist in the Vichy administration, came to explain what was a secretary general in that administration. He did the work of an expert, but did not have this status. He was only a witness, in such a way that there was no access to the dossier.

The pedagogical argument is useful. We can find those who, like Henri Rousseau, refused to participate in these cases on the principle that judicial logic is different from historical logic. This constitutes a initial fracture. On the side of the historians there could be seen a type of irritation with the veiled *judicialization* of history, with the idea of transforming historical events into judicial problems, aiming at compensation, with instrumentalizing historians according to judicial logic. What is its object? Referring to a work by Antoine Garapon, is it possible to repair history?⁷

MM: How did the ‘memorial laws’ fit into this context?

The second of focus of these problems is the 2005 *lois mémorielles* [‘memorial laws’]. Parliamentarians from both the left and right voted for a law in 2005. It contained articles which allow for compensation for both the *harkis* and the *pieds-noirs*,⁸ complementing the previous amnesty laws. There was also an article – article 4 – stipulating that teachers should teach the positive role of French colonization in North Africa. An exceptional mobilization of historians through associations and petitions followed: the CVUH, *Comité de vigilance face aux usages publics de l’Histoire* [Committee for the Monitoring of the Public Uses of History], with Gérard Noiriel and René Rémond, as well as the second *Liberté pour l’Histoire* [Liberty for History] and PMH [Protocol for Metadata Harvesting], with Michèle Riot-Sarcey and Pierre Nora.

The two associations opposed article 4. The institutional positions of these associations has to be taken into account, with the CVUH more to the left and the PMH less so. Pierre Nora’s *Liberté pour l’Histoire* asked for the suppression of the text and the abolition of all ‘memorial’ laws about questions of history. We should also remember the 1990 Gayssot Memorial law, which penalized the negation of the Jewish genocide; the Tobira Law, which recognized slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity, as well as the need to teach these questions. Finally there is the French parliamentary law about the Armenian Geocide. CVUH, in turn, asked for the removal of the law about the positive role of French colonization in North Africa. This difference reflects quite a profound lack of consensus about the social role of history. On the one hand could be seen a retreat to the professional sphere, to the methodology of the profession. History should not submit to social demands, it needs to hold

its classical methodological line, which is the research of the truth. On the other hand is the idea that history does not belong to historians and that the parliament can have an opinion about the question of history.

MM: *What is your personal position on this point?*

My personal position differs from that of François [Dosse]. I think that historians cannot totally abstract themselves from society. They need to confront in a conscious manner the question of their social role. I do not think that history is a pure practice of knowledge isolated from the social milieu. Historians have a social role, and in this I follow an idea which Marc Bloch developed in his *Apologie pour l'Histoire [Apology for History]*,⁹ which is the usefulness of history. Bloch said that the question of the usefulness of history for life cannot be avoided, but that it must be submitted to the question of its intellectual legitimacy, and thus its scientific work.

CR: *What is the place of historiography and epistemology in France today?*

First, it has to be remembered that historians, and not just them, resisted for a long time applying the historic method to history. In other words, to do a history of History. This resistance constitutes a very interesting study object. It has to be questioned. And at least in France, it would have to be coupled with the persistent suspicion that many historians have of all forms of theory, of reflexivity. This is rooted in the history of the discipline, which to become autonomous, to affirm itself, had to separate itself from literature in the nineteenth century and the philosophy of history. A type of distancing. Historiography was placed in this *package*. If we look for studies of historiography in France, we will start to find books of historiography in the 1970s, although Georges Lefebvre and Pierre Chaunu had already launched some fundamental texts. When we published our book in 1979, there was only a summary called “The historical schools,” though there were a few books about historiography. Of course there was François [Dosse’s] book, *L’histoire en miettes [History in crumbs]*,¹⁰ denounced very violently by many people from the *Annales* who afterwards retracted. I think that currently the situation has progressed greatly, motivated by this sequence in the 1980s and 1990s. It was when this feeling of crisis emerged, which led some, such as Gérard Noiriel, to talk of the ‘crisis of history.’ Chartier, in turn, spoke of a ‘time of doubts,’ and Jean-François Revel spoke of ‘epistemological anarchy.’ This climate of uncertainty had, I think, a positive bias, and highlighted a reflexive return to the discipline itself, to its practices, and thus

about its history. To such an extent that Pierre Nora spoke of a historiographic age for history, but that this should not be separated from the added reflexivity of historians. Despite everything, there is a greater legitimacy in the field of historiography. We, in our discipline, have always associated historiography and the epistemology of history, but in compensation this epistemological approach has been seen as suspicious by many historians who – let us be direct – remain very empirical. I remember here Pierre Chaunu’s celebrated phrase: “epistemology, this morbid Capua” which continues strong. We regularly seen historians doubt and distrust epistemology. This feeling is less palpable in the younger generation. Historians have begun to affirm themselves now, especially those who have very recently assumed the leadership of the *Annales*, who do not have this bias against theoretical reflection, against the epistemology of history. I think that this is important. I believe that things are changing. This suspicion is dissipating. One of the problems is that the institutional foundations of the teaching of historiography and the epistemology of history are very fragile. For the recruitment of second level history and geography teachers, for CAPES, there is an examination called *Consulat Dossier*. We contribute much to give it form, to orientate it in direction of historiography, in other words, in the direction of the knowledge of the discipline itself.

This has resulted in the creation of a certain number of courses aimed at preparing for the test. In fact the book we published consists, in its origin, of courses we gave to students in relation to this test. This is positive, but remains fragile. There exists, despite everything, that old tradition, of which Jean-François Revel speaks in an article – I do not remember which one –, the old tradition of distrust of theories which frequently includes historiography. Moreover, we lack studies of the sociology of the profession. We noticed this when we wrote the book. There exists Olivier Dumoulin’s thesis, which was never published and is important. There is also everything which François or Bertrand Müller have done on the correspondence between Bloch and Febvre. But this is not enormous.

Another problem is that of sources, which is general in the social sciences and particularly in history. Let me give an example: I worked on a critique of the *Annales*, about the crisis of *Annales* in the 1980s, in the middle of doubts, attacks, questionings. Stopping everything was even raised. A new research program was proposed, called the ‘critical turn,’ which ended with the disappearance of Bertrand Lepetit in 1996. I had contacted him and other people in the *Annales* looking for archives and M. Lepetit very politely told me there were none. We have here one of the problems of archives. We are militants

from different epistemological areas and think that archives are essential, especially so that professors can know the history of their own discipline, and that debates and interpretation can be reworked. In the book where we published a dictionary of historiography there is a part dedicated to this debate, which is a debate of interpretation. We think that it is useful for everyone. This situation remains destabilized, fragile, and weak in the area, but we no longer have the situation of the 1980s and 1990s.

MM: *Would you like to add anything?*

Yes, I would like to return to recent developments which have still not been integrated in the historiographic currents. There is a very interesting point: we can see that this suspicion of which we spoke is dying in the new generation. I can refer, for example, to Foucault. Do not think that French historians mention Foucault frequently. The names of Arlette Farge and Michelle Perrot do not hide others. The majority of historians use Foucault very little, even though there is, despite everything, a type of diffuse influence. The fact that Foucault is not cited does not signify that he is not a reference, but he is a small one. The attitude of the new historians is much more voluntaristic, such as investing, for example, in the works of Foucault.

We can speak of the literary dimension of the profession. There has always existed this suspicion of everything that is epistemological. This is well represented by a phrase of Gérard Noiriel in a book about the crisis of history¹¹ in which he denounces the epistemological historians – i.e., Certeau, amongst others – saying that these historians have diverted others from their true profession of empirical work. He has changed a little in this point. There was an extremely strong rejection of all reflections with a literary aspect of our profession, about the question of narrative. Certeau and Veyne's books were read, but this did not result in changes in practices.

MM: *These historians are very important here in Brazil.*

In France the historians who read Veyne do not know three quarters of the knowledge in the book. It is a culture which they do not have at all. There is great incomprehension. The book is known, but there are no real debates and, principally, it does not influence the practice. The same occurred with Certeau, who would only influence practice through another book: the one dedicated to daily practices, not the practices of history. There is also this reaction to literature, it is intended to attribute to history the same place occupied

by fiction, creating a type of enemy territory. No one tries to see what these works can add. Someone like Jacques Rancière – who is certainly well known for you –, with books such as *Les noms de l'histoire* [*The names of History*],¹² which contains very fine analyses of Braudel, etc., takes absolutely nothing from these works. This has not happened recently with the young historians, for which reason we are witnessing a complete change in attitude about the question of the literary dimension of the profession, about the question of narrative, etc. There are signals which do not deceive: if you observe the novelties in the history of France, you have *Débat XXe siècle*, which published articles about history and literature, and the *Annales* has also published a special issue about literature. People have recommenced to ask what literature can add to history, not only as documents, but because it can add knowledge about societies and about the social. This change points to mutations, evolutions, or openings which were very rare in the previous period. It is very encouraging.

RF: *Can we speak of crisis?*

An initial observation, made by a positivist historian – if we read what historians have written since the nineteenth century –, is that ‘the crisis of history’ is recurrent.

It is this feeling of crisis which is interesting, what Roger Chartier called the ‘time of doubts.’ The grand historiographic model was very powerful and produced many results, such as the case of the *Annales*, despite transformations. But it happens that social history is being attacked, and not just in France, but on a worldwide scale. What the French situation had in particular is that the historiographic current was dominant on the intellectual and institutional plane. This did not mean that only the *Annales* existed, rather, despite everything, its influence was important in the international sphere and in France, so they were comprehended as a type of paradigm. The fact that they were being contested destabilized historians a lot. Structuralism and Marxism also became part of the crisis with new sensibilities in relation to action and actors. The questioning of these old theories participated in this feeling of crisis.

Another problem is the administrative tasks which university professors face, as well as CNRS researchers.¹³ The number of students never stops rising. What can also be noted is a crisis in social science publishers. The large print runs of the 1960s have disappeared. For a young historian, for example, it is very difficult to publish his dissertation nowadays. All of this feeds a feeling of crisis, but in my opinion, what we are experiencing is a transitional phase. We are creating a new theoretical culture based on new references, in relation to the

question of actors and new representations. All of this has to be connected to the question of the social responsibility of the historian which we saw just now.

NOTES

¹ CAPES (*Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement du Second Degré* – Certificate of Aptitude for Second Level Teaching) and *Agrégation* are public examinations organized at the national level aimed at recruiting second level teachers. The *Agrégation* is harder and better valued. In some cases it allows the holder to teach at the third level. (T.N.)

² The *École Normale Supérieure* were originally designed to train teachers for the 'normal' schools in the country. They became establishments for the education of elites. (T.N.)

³ DELACROIX, C.; ZANCARINI-FOURNEL, M. *La France du Temps Présent: 1945-2005*. Paris: Belin, 2010.

⁴ The ZEPs are residential areas where the question of basic education is considered particularly difficult and problematic, such as the district where immigrants live. Created in 1981, the ZEPs receive extra financial, material and human resources for the schools within the zones in order to compensate their disadvantages. (T.N.)

⁵ Regional Express Network of the Paris metro, which only stops at some stations, covering the capital and its periphery up to approximately 50 km. (T.N.)

⁶ BRANCHE, Raphaëlle. *La Guerre d'Algérie: une histoire apaisée?* Paris: Seuil, 2006. (L'Histoire en débats).

⁷ GARAPON, Antoine. *Peut-on réparer l'Histoire?* Colonisation, esclavage, Shoah. Paris: Odile Jacob, 1997.

⁸ *Harkis* are Algerians who fought on the French side in the Algerian War. Most were abandoned by France at the moment of independence. Many were massacred as traitors by their compatriots. A much smaller number of them managed to get to France, where they were marginalized. In relation to the *pieds-noirs*, the expression designates the residents of a European origin in Algeria. They exercised a wide variety of occupations and the majority had lived for generations in a country they considered theirs. Around one million *pieds-noirs* were 'repatriated' *en masse* to France after Algerian independence (1962). (T.N.)

⁹ BLOCH, Marc. *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien*. Paris: A. Colin, 1974.

¹⁰ DOSSE, François. *L'histoire en miettes*. Paris: La Découverte, 1987.

¹¹ NOIRIEL, Gérard. *Sur la "crise" de l'histoire*. Paris: Belin, 1996.

¹² RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *Les noms de l'histoire: essai de poétique du savoir*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992.

¹³ *Centre National de Recherche Scientifique* – National Center of Scientific Research. (T.N.)

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