

Interview

François Dosse

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RESUMO

François Dosse, historiador francês, nasceu em Paris numa família de classe média, e desde cedo se interessou por política, vinculando-se quando jovem ao trotskismo. Estudou sociologia e história na Université de Vincennes – Paris VIII. Aprovado no exame de Agrégation, lecionou vários anos nos liceus de Pontoise e Boulogne-Billancourt. Foi Maître de conférences no IUFM (Instituto de Formação de Mestres) de Versailles e no de Nanterre. Foi aprovado no exame para dirigir pesquisas em 2001, quando produziu um trabalho sobre Michel de Certeau e consolidou sua orientação para a área de teoria da história e historiografia. A convite de Henri Rousseau, vinculou-se ao IHTP, onde participou de vários seminários voltados à epistemologia dos estudos sobre o tempo presente. Publicou inúmeros trabalhos nessa área, focalizando especialmente biografias de intelectuais como Paul Ricoeur e Pierre Nora. Atualmente é Professor no IUFM de Créteil.

ABSTRACT

François Dosse, a French historian, was born in Paris in a middle class family and from a very early age was interested in politics, becoming a Trotskyite when very young. He studied sociology and history at the Université de Vincennes – Paris VIII. After passing the Agrégation exam, he taught for various years in the lycées of Pontoise and Boulogne-Billancourt. He was Maître de conférences at the IUFM (Teacher Training Institute) in Versailles and Nanterre. In 2001 he passed the examination to direct research, writing a book on Michel de Certeau, which consolidated his orientation to the area of the theory of history and historiography. At the invitation of Henri Rousseau, he joined the IHTP, where he took part in various seminars concerned with the epistemology of studies about the present time. He published numerous works in this area, focusing specially on biographies of intellectuals such as Paul Ricoeur and Pierre Nora. Currently he is a professor in the Créteil IUFM.

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MM: Can you speak to us about your family origins and your education?

I was born in Paris. My father is a lawyer, a magistrate and member of the Communist Party. My mother is an artist, a painter. I participated in the events of May 1968, I became interested in Cuba and socialism and I went to visit Prague during the occupation of this city by Soviet troops. Following this I started my studies in Université de Vincennes (Paris VIII), where the leftists went and which projected itself as an exponent of inter-disciplinarity. I was a militant Trotskyite. Rather dissatisfied with sociology, I decided to direct myself to history. What was emerging then was *immediate history*. More than making history it involved telling history. The context of Vincennes was very important.

Once I had finished my studies I needed to re-direct myself, since the only professional outlet of history was, evidentially, teaching, and for this it was necessary to do public examinations. Vincennes university had an anti-examinations position. I had to prepare by myself, studying in the library. It was in this way I had to prepare for the *Agrégation*² and I had the luck to pass. I taught for more than 20 years in Pontoise *licée*, and afterwards in Boulogne-Billancourt. After this I felt like writing and doing research. It was in the *licée* that I wrote *L'histoire en miettes* [*History in crumbs*].³

MM: Had you already started post-graduate studies, a masters, a doctorate?

Yes, of course. To obtain the *Agrégation* it is necessary to have finished the masters. My thesis dealt with the criticism of the communist party: *The PCF in power 1945-47*. After this I did my dissertation, under Pierre Chénau, in Université de Paris VII with the theme *The Annales School in the media since 1968*. I had written various articles, including "History in crumbs," which was published in *Politique Hebdo* in 1974. It involved a critical report of Laurent Laïeul. I returned to the title for my book.

MM: A very well known book here in Brazil.

After this I was recruited as *Maître de conférences*⁴ in IUFM Versailles and afterwards in the IUFM⁵ of Nanterre. In 2001 I passed the HDR [*habilitation à diriger des recherches* – qualification to direct research], which consisted of a defense of all the works I had produced until then, plus an original work. Mine, about Michel de Certeau, was published in 2002 by Éditions de la Découverte. After this I became a university professor in the Créteil IUFM.

MM: How did you turn to historiography, to theory? In France these subjects are not well received.

You live in a country which appreciates them a lot, even more so because, compared with France, you can see an advance in the area of theory of history. This comes, first, from the fact that in France teacher training covers history and geography. The curriculum of this education is removed from everything that is philosophic and theoretical. French historians do not have a philosophical background. The second reason is that philosophers look to historians with a lot of condescension and contempt. For them, it involves empiricism, factuality – as denounced by Heidegger, mundanity. This does not involve the essence of things. Paul Ricœur, nevertheless, is of more interest for historians. Another reason is that historians have kept their distance from what they call the history of history.” In France reflection on history has not been encouraged much. Finally, what has dominated the landscape is a certain number of paradigms whose orientations have not been questioned, they have just imposed themselves. The historiographic, methodological and epistemological questioning of history does not exist. Only recently has it started to attract interest. It is true that, amongst other works, *History in Crumbs* contributed to this, since it impacted on a school, the *Annales School*, which was in crisis. Since then, at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, we have had the Chartier era, the end of great certainties. The era of questioning, of interrogations, favors new questions and put back into question the fact that historians, such as Jourdain,⁶ used concepts without being aware that they were using theoretical concepts, “they wrote prose without knowing.” At the end of the 1980s the questioning of the concepts and notions of history started. I am thinking, for example, of the dictionary which Christian [Delacroix], Patrick [Garcia] and myself directed: *Historiographies – Concepts et Débats* [*Historiographies – Concepts and debates*].⁷ We passed these concepts through a fine tooth comb, and questioned them one by one: what is the truth? What is memory? What is present time? These notions fed a debate, they are not at all evident, even among historians. In relation to the question of the present time, we have different definitions in IHTP [*Institut d’Histoire du Temps Présent* – Institute of the History of the Present Time].

MM: When did you start to become involved with the studies of the Institute of the History of the Present Time?

In relation to my genealogy, both myself and Christian [Delacroix] came from a trans-disciplinary journal concerned not just with history, but the social

sciences. This was the *Espace-temps* journal. Most of us were geographers or historians, and our reflection was concerned with the teaching of the didactics of history, the theories of history and geography. We had a seminar. I began to become interested in Michel de Certeau and took the decision to write his biography, which I published. I proposed a seminar about him. But while the geographers gave it no importance, Christian [Delacroix] and Patrick [Garcia] soon became interested. We went to the IHTP, then directed by Henri Rousseau, and the seminar was held with philosophers, psychoanalysts, sociologist, and Paul Ricœur, amongst others. I was actually in contact with him since I had written his biography. We continued to work in the IHTP and the epistemology of the 'present time' has now assumed an important place.

MM: How do you evaluate the importance of this approximation with IHTP, of research on the present time, for your reflection on history and epistemology?

Historians, in general, are very empirical and concerned with the reliability of sources. This is important of course for historians of the present time, but they are confronted in a more direct mode with two problematics: 1) Interdisciplinarity. The history of the present time has been inscribed since the beginning in a necessary dialogue with sociology, analysis, anthropology and philosophy; 2) Historians find themselves confronted with their own practice, with the risks of manipulation, and thus find themselves obliged to question themselves. We can even say that historians of the present time are led to question themselves about their own historiographic operations, and this has positive results for historians of other periods.

All corporations of historians are led to question their practices. This is Michel de Certeau's calling. He emphasized this personal inscription of the historian, in his 'building site' which has to be remade so that readers can understand what signifies the idea of 'doing' history. This involves a discursive operation, an apparatus which deserves a minimum of transparency. For a long time it was believed that the historian was the reality who spoke. Now we have the opposite: the historian is the one who speaks of reality. Pierre Nora played a role in this. He ran unsuccessfully in 1976 for the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales [EHESS – School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences]. At the time he was a professor of Sciences Po,⁸ he became a candidate and was elected to a chair dedicated to the teaching of the present time. He then organized seven volumes, *Les lieux de mémoire* [*The places of memory*], which showed how it is possible to do history of the present time, although not forcing an immediate history. In these we can find,

for example, entries mentioning Joan of Arc, a figure who is not even close to the immediate time. They serve to show how an icon or event suffer metamorphoses which have an impact until the present. It is in this way that Joan of Arc is an icon of the present time. We have seen this recently, during the presidential elections when Joan of Arc was associated with the National Front, although in the Third Republic she was associated with the Republic (with the republicanized name of DARC) and also canonized by the Catholic Church, the same one which condemned her to the stake. As can be seen she is an extremely complex personality, with very different aspects. General de Gaulle promoted her effigy, making her a representative of the French Resistance, but during the Collaboration she was also extolled by Pétain, for having expelled the English from France. It is all these, very different, meanings which participate in historic discourse, in history and the history of the present time. This is part of a type of *contemporaneity* of the contemporary world. The notion of present time is transversal, trans-periodic and richer than contemporary history. In fact, I became aware of this when I did some research for the biography of Pierre Nora, and I was examining the foundations of the development of the present time in France. It was then that I discovered that he was a great medievalist, that he had shown that the notion of present time was richer than that of contemporary history, and that he intended not to hand over contemporary history to journalists. The president of the *École des Annales* then was Jacques Le Goff, who had the powers to create the chair of the history of the present time. The *Annales* had abandoned contemporary history in favor of medieval history, but in the 1970s the notion of the present time was reintroduced.

MM: *Why have you in your most recent work opted for biography? It is frequently frowned upon or even forbidden in historiography and epistemology.*

It is very simple: because of my taste for transgression. [Laughs] It happened a little by chance, because, as you said, it was a proscribed domain, it was not considered serious. In the three volumes of *Faire de l'histoire* [*Making History*], directed by Pierre Nora and Jacques Le Goff in 1974,⁹ there is no entry for 'biography.' But there is an allusion to biographies in the introduction, when the two authors direct themselves to the 'scribblers of stories' – in other words, people lower than anyone else. There was nothing worse than being a biographer. The situation was totally inverted in France in the middle of the 1980s. Biography came to be legitimated as a perfectly convenient genre, with serious and scientific historians. We can even

mention Jacques Le Goff, who wrote a biography of St. Louis¹⁰ in 1996. Ferraud did one of Pétain at the end of the 1980s. It became a perfectly admissible genre. In 1974 a US historian, Paul Murray Kendall, published a biography of Louis XI. It was his dissertation, presented in the state of Utah. In Fayard Publishers, where I did some research, they explained to me that this biography almost went unpublished in France. The director asked what was the reason to publish a biography of a king of interest to no one. Since the publication was paid for by the Americans, Fayard printed a small number of copies. It became a best-seller read by, amongst others, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who liked to present himself as a modern president. [Laughs]. This contributed to legitimate the serious university biography which mentioned its sources and citations. A well known collection in the area of serious biography was created, the hardcover collection from Fayard, something very rare in France. After this Fayard asked serious academics to write biographies of Napoleon, Clémenceau, etc.

Behind this success we can also find the crisis of structuralism, Marxism, functionalism and an interest in singular phenomena. I dedicated a book to this, published by Presses Universitaires de France, *Renaissance de l'événement* [*Renaissance of the event*].¹¹ In relation to myself, I caught the biographic virus and it has still not left me, because I am writing a biography of Cornelius Castoriadis after having published one of Nora. It is a virus, an completely passionate investment and a transformative experience for the author. I had a critical perspective of structuralism, but at the same time, its fertility interested me. To a certain extent my position was intermediary. I dedicated one thousand pages to *Histoire du structuralisme* [*History of structuralism*].¹² It is a fertile field, but it has impasses which I pointed out. During this work I discovered I was close to the positions of Paul Ricœur. After finishing I felt fully in agreement with him and his work, which until then I did not know and I wanted to get to know better. It was then I decided to write his intellectual biography. When I tried to meet him, he accepted my proposal on the condition that I not bother him. I respected his wish not to meet him and a brick weighing 1.3 kg arrived at his house – his biography. Since then we have meet. He brought me to a restaurant and asked me to read *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* [*Memory, history, and forgetting*].¹³ Ricœur sent me the chapters and asked me to make corrections.

MM: *A fantastic position!*

Extraordinary and a little miraculous! I needed to be useful, I could not tell him everything was perfect, [laughs] and for this reason I entered the game. He wanted me to guide him through the historiographic landscape, since, as a philosopher, he wanted to read things in that area. It happened that I was working on the biography of Michel de Certeau. So, I managed to organize a posthumous meeting between Ricœur and Certeau. In life this was really not the case. For Ricœur, Certeau was a discovery. This is evident in a reading of *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. And when we published *Michel de Certeau: les chemins d'histoire* [*Michel de Certeau: the paths of history*],¹⁴ which is the fruit of our seminar, Ricœur seduced by Certeau accepted to write the preface. He could not do it for health reasons, but it was a really important meeting for him, this discovery of Michel de Certeau.

These biographies contributed much, and as I wrote in the personal dedication I sent to Paul Ricœur, my plunge into his work accompanied the mourning I experienced for Marxism.

MM: *I would like to make a provocation. I work with history of the present time, historians and biographers, and I experience this conflict. How do you feel when you are writing the biography of historians who are close to you, whom you admire, and about whom you have to at the same time maintain a critical perspective? Is it easier when you work on someone for whom you have less admiration?*

It is not necessarily easier. The biography of Hitler by Ian Kershaw is excellent. The biography Freud wrote about President Wilson is not a good biography. He did not like Wilson, and at the end of his biography liked him even less. In general, what is essential for a good biography is empathy, also necessary for the good historian. I wrote a book of dialogues with one of the most important French historians, perhaps the best – Pierre Chaunu –, and I do not share his positions.¹⁵ He had incredible empathy, I saw him cry in an interview such as this, by reliving scenes from the sixteen century. He spoke about the first meeting of Charles V and Luther and the tears rolled. This capacity to transport oneself to another is the condition for a good biography. But to return to your question, I think there is no answer capable of serving as a model, or that it is singular.

In relation to the biography of Paul Ricœur, I was sympathetic to, and had empathy for, his work, but I had never met him. I never met either Certeau or Deleuze. In compensation, it was different with Pierre Nora, since I had to make an agreement with him in order to create a certain distance. He could give me crucial details which would have caused an important absence if I had not been able to see them. This relationship has to be cultivated, but neither should an exaggerated use be made of it, nor should the work just be praise, an apologetic discourse, a distortion. There is a risk, but the objective is not to write the biography of a saint. In order to avoid falling into this trap, a good technique is to divide the oral investigation. This gives the researcher different points of view. It is in this intersection of critiques, in this myriad of points of views, that an univocal point of view, as in heroic biographies, can be avoided. I define three types of biography: the heroic, the modal and the contemporary hermeneutic, which implies pluralism, openness to new perspectives, incompleteness and a posture of modesty.

MM: I would like to know your position about the problem of social demands made on historians who work with the history of the present time. For example, in Brazil the Truth Commission has been created to analyze questions linked to Human Rights during the military dictatorship. In your opinion, what is the role of the historian?

Moving from the classroom to the tribunal, there is an important social demand and a demand for justice in relation to the present time, which is the mediatic demand. It has to be answered.

What initially occurs to me is an article by Pierre Nora about the question of the event, published in 1972 in the journal *Communications*, in a number entitled “Monster Event,” organized by Edgard Morin, which showed how a modern event is transmitted by the media, whether it is media, written, radio, or television – and nowadays the internet. Pierre Nora had the idea to write an article based on his personal experiences. In 1968 he was living on Boulevard Saint-Michel, where the May barricades were. From his veranda he watched the event as a spectator. There was a reporter from Radio Europe nº1 on his veranda. Pierre Nora positioned himself as a historian and began to reflect on what he had seen, on what the journalist said in his *flashes* and about how this moment would be reproduced in the rest of France. The historian reflected about this support which represents the media, which consubstantiates the event. It is the mediatic support which gives it meaning and which makes it enter in a discursive form. The historian must be attentive to this, but should

also defend his autonomy. In France *public stories* have little success, but they work very well in the United States and Canada, where agencies of historians work for this or that society. It is a form of instrumentalization of history that is strongly rejected in France. Historians have to show themselves present to say what is happening in commemorations, but they also have to remain distant from the *lois mémorielles* [memorial laws]. In France a parliamentary assembly reflected on this, since we have had an inflation of these laws, and it has not fully ended. The Constitutional Council rejected the laws on the Armenian Genocide, which tranquilized me, since I was in Istanbul for a conference. I am a member of an association, “Liberté pour l’Histoire” (“Liberty for History”), which is presided by Pierre Nora. There was some reticence at the beginning but this began to dissipate in the name of liberty of history. We even found laws about the seventeenth century! Why not Spartacus? [Laughs]

NOTES

¹ The interview was held in a roundtable in FGV, at the launching of the book *Correntes históricas na França: séculos XIX e XX*, by François Dosse, Christian Delacroix and Patrick Garcia, published jointly by FGV and Unesp.

² 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.)

³ DOSSE, François. *L’histoire en miettes*. Paris: La Découverte, 1987.

⁴ Master of Conferences: The first level in university teaching positions. (T.N.)

⁵ IUFM – Teacher Training Institute, where primary and infant teachers are trained. (T.N.)

⁶ A character in Molière’s play *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (*The Bourgeois Gentleman*). The very rich bourgeois Jourdain intends to become an aristocrat and for this takes literature classes. Here he learns the difference between verse and prose and discovers, stupefied, that throughout his life “he has made prose without knowing it.” The expression became popular and came to designate all actions carried out in an unconscious manner. (T.N.)

⁷ DELACROIX, Christian; DOSSE, François; GARCIA, Patrick; OFFENSTADT, Nicolas (Dir.). *Historiographies*. Tome I: Concepts et débats. Paris: Gallimard, “Folio histoire”, 2010.

⁸ *Sciences Po* is the popularized name for *Institut d’Études Politiques* (Institute of Political Studies). (T.N.)

⁹ NORA, Pierre; LE GOFF, Jacques. *Faire de l’histoire*. 3v. Paris: Gallimard, 1974.

¹⁰ Louis IX, king of France from 1226 to 1270. (T.N.)

¹¹ DOSSE, François. *Renaissance de l'événement: un défi pour l'historien: entre sphinx et phénix*. Paris: P.U.F., 2010.

¹² DOSSE, François. *Histoire du structuralisme*. 2v. Paris: La Découverte, 1991-1992.

¹³ RICOEUR, Paul. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000.

¹⁴ DELACROIX, Christian; DOSSE, François; GARCIA, Patrick; TREBITSCH, Michel (Dir.). *Michel de Certeau: les chemins d'histoire*. Paris: Complexe, 2002.

¹⁵ CHAUNU, Pierre; DOSSE, François. *L'instant éclaté*. Paris: Aubier, 1994.

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