

Interview

Jean-François Sirinelli

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Translation: Anne Marie Milon.

Marieta de Moraes Ferreira (MM)*

Jean-François Sirinelli, historiador francês especialista em história política e cultural do século XX, é professor do Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris. Desenvolveu, também, diversos trabalhos no campo da história dos intelectuais, da cultura de massa, da França na década de 1960 e da história do tempo presente. Foi profundamente influenciado por seu orientador, o também historiador René Rémond. Seu pai, Jean Sirinelli, foi professor de literatura grega clássica na Sorbonne. É presidente do Comité Français des Sciences Historiques e do Comité Científico de História da Unesco, vice-presidente da Association pour le développement de l'histoire culturelle, diretor do Centre d'Histoire de Sciences Politiques, além de editor responsável por dois periódicos, a *Revue Historique* e a *Histoire Politique*. Publicou, em 2013, na França, o livro *Désenclaver l'histoire. Nouveaux regards sur le XXe siècle français*, ainda sem tradução para o português.

Jean-François Sirinelli is a French historian and specialist in the political and cultural history of the twentieth century. He has also written various works in the fields of the history of intellectuals, mass culture, 1960s France, and the history of the present time. He was profoundly influenced by his adviser, the historian René Rémond. His father, Jean Sirinelli, was professor of Classical Greek Literature in the Sorbonne. He is president of the Comité Français des Sciences Historiques and the Unesco Scientific Committee for History, vice-president of the Association pour le développement de l'histoire culturelle, director of the Centre d'Histoire de Sciences Politiques, as well as the editor of two journals, *Revue Historique* and *Histoire Politique*. In 2013 he published in France the book *Désenclaver l'histoire. Nouveaux regards sur le XXe siècle français*, which has still not been translated into Portuguese.

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MM: Could you speak to us about your professional education, your trajectory? Why you choose the area of history?

I was born in 1949, I belong to the baby-boomer generation, which was one of the subjects of my studies. I will return to this later, since it raises the problem of the history of the present time: can it be done when you belong to the same generation?

I am a child of the post-Second World period. I was born in Corsica. My four grandparents were primary school teachers, and my father, who was a professor of Greek literature, had a career in the Sorbonne.

My choice of history was made at three different times. After my *baccalauréat*,¹ I heisted between medicine and history. I had a strong liking for history, for the observation of the world around me, and the desire to understand it. Historians frequently produce *narrations of themselves*, placing their lives in perspective, looking at their own taste for eternity. This was not my case, which was more prosaic. I had good teachers. I spent my youth in Paris, since my father had been nominated *Recteur d'Académie*,² and did some of my studies in the provinces. I did not study at any *Grande École*,³ unlike my father, who had been a student at the *École Normale Supérieure*, since I did not have any wish to reproduce the same scheme. I studied in university with the aim of making it my profession. My taste for history became a vocation. I passed the *Agrégation*⁴ in history in 1973. I passed in first place.

After this I hesitated between ancient and contemporary history. I wrote a monograph with the results of research about the Hellenistic period that followed Alexander the Great. This work referred to the Hellenistic kings and their relationship with culture, in other words the relationship between politics and culture. The sovereigns of the Near East were also patrons who helped scholars and poets. This involved a center of knowledge and creation, with the aim of patronage being to illustrate the grandeur of the sovereign. This relationship between the men of culture and political power interested me. However, afterwards I decided to change areas. I must insist again that it was to avoid reproducing the scheme of my father, a professor of Greek literature, that I chose the direction of contemporary history. Professor René Rémond was my dissertation adviser.

I obtained the *Agrégation* at the University of Nanterre, which at the time was at the center of a rebirth of political history. I chose intellectuals as

the theme of my work, and once again the relations of the men of culture with politics. Jean-Paul Sartre said that intellectuals had the obligation to be engaged, as if engagement was consubstantial to the status of intellectual.

MM: This option was the results of a personal political engagement, particular to the '68 generation?

The answer is no. I was never an activist, I was not an actor in May '68. I was living in the provinces then. In my opinion, the historian should abstain from being an activist in the exercise of his profession, since nothing ages faster than activist history.

For the theme of my dissertation I became interested in the education of intellectuals in the *École Normale Supérieure*, or more precisely in the preparatory classes for the entrance exam, called the *Khâgnes*. With the title: *Khâgneux et normaliens des années vingt. Histoire politique d'une génération d'intellectuels (1919-1945)* [*Khâgne Students and the École Normale Supérieure in the 1920s. The Political of a Generation of Intellectuals (1919-1945)*], the dissertation was approved in 1985 and published in Paris by Fayard in 1988. I studied the history of these young students of the *Khâgne* and the 1905 generation of *École Normale Supérieure*, a generation too young to go to war and therefore, the post-war generation. I became interested, amongst other things, in the history of a cultural institution; in the notion of generation and sociability, involving an environment which formed a web. I studied the ways intellectuals congregated and afterwards the notion of itinerary. In other words, I sought to portray a group and show how these intellectuals, who had come from the same social environment, would see their destinies diverge afterwards.

I took 11 years to complete my *thèse d'état*, which I defended in 1986, at the age of 37. At that time, this *these* was usually only defended after the age of 40. I was an assistant in contemporary history at the University of Nanterre and my supervisor, René Rémond, did not expect us to become his clones. Little research was dedicated to intellectuals.

After this, I became a professor at the University of Lille. It was a passionate time and I was able to continue with my dually oriented research. I sought to understand how the ideas of intellectuals acted – or did not act – on the rest of society, how ideas circulated in a society. In other words, I studied

the notion of the circulation of ideas. This is cultural history and, at the time, it was called the history of mentalities, of representations. A historian is someone who constructions a chain reaction.

MM: How were relations between the group linked with René Rémond and the Annales?

René Rémond's group had no connection with the *Annales*' group. Actually they were on parallel trajectories. The *Annales*' historians were hostile to the renovation of political history. So the introduction to *Pour une histoire politique* (1988) [For a political history] almost signified, for political reasons, a response to the question of the *Annales*.

MM: You also have a great interest in cultural history.

I wanted to participate in the development of contemporary cultural history and research the forms in which meanings circulated in society.

I was asked to write a book about right-wing currents in France. I hesitated, since René Rémond had already written about the theme. I did not want to make my master out of date. I then said that there had been a mutation of political history towards cultural history, and to the implementation of a cultural history of the political. The book entitled *Histoire des droites en France* [History of the right in France] shows how it is possible to advance in political history. It took four years work and involved fifty authors.

In the 1990s the development of cultural history could be noted in France, at the same time as a rebirth of political history.

A chronological evolution can be observed in my career, as previously I had been a specialist in the history of the first half of the twentieth century, and with cultural history I slid into the second half. You could talk of a 'sliding' of my centers of interest at the moment when the history of the present time developed. René Rémond was president of the *Institut de l'Histoire du Temps Présent* [Institute of the History of the Present Time]. We fought in the University of Lille for this discipline to win legitimacy. What is interesting is this 'mobile scale,' in other words, the fact of conquering the decades and accompanying the history that is being made. I have a certain taste for the history of the present time, it is a type of research that seeks to explain the present with the union, amongst others, of journalists and political scientists. It

involves creating knowledge, documenting, and referencing it. This means that there has to be some distancing from the sources, putting into perspective what is continuous and what is discontinuous. Nowadays, the years of the Second World War belong to contemporary history. The history of the present time is the history of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. It is a moveable history. As I have just said, the historian accompanies the history as it unfolds. It is a life history in which various generations are involved who do not have the same inter-generational relationships. There exists what is called the ‘rosebud effect,’ as in Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*. Historians should not look at the generation of their own youth with nostalgia. As Paul Ricoeur’s work has shown, memory becomes integrated in this history of the present time. This is something fundamental in France, memories propose a regime of truth. Currently the debate about the ‘memory laws’ is raising passionate epistemological questions: distancing from the object, memory, the relationship between the discipline of history and the social sciences. I participated in the development of cultural history, initially contested by those from a social background. Nowadays, cultural history is fully instituted in France.

In the 2000s, after I had turned 50, I wanted to return to the sources, in other words to the notion of generation. I took hold of this object. I studied the 1960s in a book dedicated to the baby-boomers.⁵ I wanted to return to the notion of generation, without striking historical events, though to a true generation, not one created by political or military events, but rather by culture. I call it the *generation of the four Ps*: Peace, Prosperity, Full Employment and Progress. In this there was the idea of a march forwards, a socialized generation, before the arrival of the crisis.

After this there was a great change in France, along came the ‘20 decisive years’ during which France underwent an anthropological mutation: everything which determined society changed in the 1970s, or more precisely between 1965 and 1985.⁶

Now you cannot write a national history disconnected from the world, *World History* is talked about, since the growth of a mass culture is noted, a worldwide culture which leads to transnational reflection. Legislation in France is European legislation. Is French history a connected history? Political history studies the nation-state. But nowadays, in the time of globalization, not everything takes place in nation-state, national decisions go beyond the country, we are confronted with a history which can no longer be national.

MM: What do you think of diagnoses which talk of a crisis of history?

I will give my answer in two parts. I have admiration for what young French historians write, for their production in a general manner. However, I can observe in French historical science a real problem. French history is ever less heard and read abroad due to the importance – and even the hegemony – of English. It does not spread in the same manner in the institutional sphere.

MM: How and when did you enter Sciences Po?⁷

After 11 years teaching in Lille, I received a proposal to assume a chair in *Sciences Po*. It was a chair of political and cultural history of the twentieth century. In other words, everything which interested me. The president of the administrative council of *Sciences Po* was René Rémond. It also involved a place where we could create things and contribute to the development of cultural history.

NOTES

¹ The exam to finish secondary school. It is not a competition and all who pass get direct access to university. (T.N.)

² In France the public education system is divided into administrative regions called *Académies*, they are headed by a *Recteur* (Rector) chosen by the president of the Republic from university professors. (T.N.)

³ The name given to the public establishments where the elites (political, administrative, commercial and industrial, etc.) are educated. Entrance is through by an extremely selective examination. One of these school is the *École Normale Supérieure*, where the great intellectuals of the country are educated (T.N.)

⁴ A public examination for selecting secondary school teachers. In some cases it allows access to third level education. (T.N.)

⁵ SIRINELLI, Jean-François. *Les baby-boomers: une génération – 1945-1969*, reissued by Hachette Littérature, collection Pluriel. Paris (1.ed. 2003). 324p.

⁶ SIRINELLI, Jean-François. *Les vingt décisives – 1965-1985. Le passé proche de notre avenir*. Paris: Fayard, 2007. 350p.

⁷ The study of political sciences in *Institut d'Études Politiques*, one of the *Grandes Écoles* from where various members of the political class have emerged. (T.N.)

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