

## TRIUMPH OF A LIFE'S WORK: LE GOFF AMONG MENTALITIES, MEMORY, AND HISTORY

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### **Abstract:**

The article presents some commentaries on the work of Jacques Le Goff emphasizing its theoretical and methodological aspects. Stresses his contribution as a historian of mentalities in France during the 1970s, and refutes the criticism against the *New History* moved by the Marxist historians and/or those dedicated to the economic studies inspired in Fernand Braudel model.

The article sustains so, that the French historiography of the mentalities has not abandoned the totalizing perspective of social history inaugurated by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in the *Annales* movement. This argument is demonstrated based upon one of the main works of Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981), in which the French historian establishes strong connections between the economy, the society, the politics and the religion in the Late Middle Ages. Examines, at last, some aspects of the Author's subjectivity related to his thematic choices in the religion field, highlighting the weight of the Catholic upbringing, the religious influence of his mother and, also, his political option in the post war.

**Keywords:** French Historiography, Mentality, New History, Memory, Catholicism.

### **Resumo:**

O artigo apresenta alguns comentários sobre a obra de Jacques Le Goff enfatizando seus aspectos teóricos-metodológicos. Sublinha a sua contribuição como historiador das mentalidades, na França, durante os anos 1970, e refuta as críticas contra a *Nova História* movida pelos historiadores marxistas e/ou aqueles que se dedicam aos estudos econômicos inspirados no modelo de Fernand Braudel. O artigo sustenta, assim, que a historiografia francesa das mentalidades não abandonou a perspectiva totalizante da história social inaugurada por Marc Bloch e Lucien Febvre no movimento dos *Annales*. Este argumento é demonstrado com base em um dos principais trabalhos de Le Goff, *Nascimento do Purgatório* (1981), no qual o historiador francês estabelece conexões sólidas entre a economia, a sociedade, a política e a religião na Baixa Idade Média. Examina, enfim, alguns aspectos da subjetividade do autor relacionadas às suas escolhas temáticas no campo da religião, com destaque para o peso da educação católica, a influência religiosa de sua mãe e, também, a sua opção política no pós-guerra.

**Palavras-chave:** Historiografia francesa, Mentalidade, Nova História, Memória, Catolicismo.

“That which I try to remember and remind myself of is a memory.  
That which I strive to build is a history.” (Le Goff, 1987)

### **Jacques Le Goff: a theoretician of History in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The title of this article brings to mind one of the most important contributions of this French historian to Western historiography, his considerations on the methodology of history. They are sometimes explicit, in theoretical texts, but most of the time implicit in his great body of research work. Jacques le Goff exposed his observations on the convergence and divergence between memory and history in one of the volumes of the *Enciclopedia* published by the Italian publishing company *Einaudi*, in two fundamental texts signed by him.

In the text *Memory*<sup>1</sup>, which opens the volume, the starting point is the distinction between individual and collective memory, the latter truly significant to historical studies, because it relates to identities that are socially constructed among traditions, historical facts, and injunctions of the time when they built this social memory. One other essential point is the distinction between memory in preliterate and in literate societies. Even though oral tradition might have some weight in societies with writing systems, Le Goff claims that, in preliterate societies, it works as ethnic memory, based on myths of origin, connected to genealogies that blend with ancestral worship, with practice of religious magic. On the other hand, since Antiquity, Western societies with writing systems made a difference between *mnēmê*, the faculty of evoking the past to preserve it, and *mamnēsi*, the recalling of the past in time, creating a non-religious memory, desacralized, that can have a written register for posterity.

In my opinion, in this difference resides the ambivalence of *Clio* in Greek mythology, considered at times the muse of memory, and at other times muse of history, always fighting against *Chronos*, titan or demigod responsible for the flow of time. Fast-running Time, where elusive facts run. Slow-paced Memory, concerned with the remembrance or registry of these same facts.

In this highly scholarly work, Le Goff made an effort – being in consonance with the reflections of his colleague Pierre Nora, author of important work on this field<sup>2</sup> – to discuss and determine the differences between history and memory. That includes the history of the slow development of this conceptual distinction in the West during the Christian Middle Ages, modern Renaissance, 17<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, 18<sup>th</sup> century Scientism, the electronic registry of memory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He does not belittle, however, the contribution of memory to historical

knowledge:

“Overflowing history as both a form of knowledge and a public rite, flowing uphill as the moving reservoir of history, full of archives and documents/monuments, and downhill as the sonorous (and living) echo of historical work, collective memory is one of the great stakes of developed and developing societies, of dominated and dominating classes, all of them struggling for power or for life, for survival and for advancement.”<sup>3</sup>.

If Le Goff separated memory and history in the inaugural text of the volume, the same did not apply to the relationship between document and monument in a specific text of the same encyclopedia. He skillfully limited himself to establishing formal, morphological, and etymological distinctions, but his reasoning searches for the similitudes. In this sense, argued Le Goff, documents and monuments can be treated both as historical fonts or documents – from the standpoint of traditional historiography. With this broadening definition, a monument ceases to be just a “heritage from the past”, for it suffers intervention from the present. The document, in its turn – still in the traditional perception of it –, becomes a monument because “it results from the effort of historical societies to impose to the future – voluntarily or not – a determined image of themselves”<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Mentalities: the ideological substrate of a historiographic controversy***

Another Le Goff stamp on French – European, Western – historiography has to do with the *history of mentalities*. He was one of the main names of the post-Braudelian generation, and started this journey silently, still in the 1950s. One of his first books, *Intellectuals in the Middle Ages*<sup>5</sup>, published in 1957, could be classified as a work of social history of ideas<sup>6</sup>, dedicated to formal, even official, culture of Late Middle Ages: culture produced in medieval universities between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, time of Scholasticism. In his book, *La civilisation de l’Occident Médiéval*<sup>7</sup>, published in 1964, Le Goff plunged into themes that would soon be dear to history of mentalities. Good examples would be themes related to everyday life and to religiosities, examined through a historical-anthropological view. Around 1968 he definitely joined this line of thinking, when he organized the volume on European heresies, analyzing them in long-term, from the Middle Ages to the Age of Enlightenment – a book that became reference for inquisitorial studies in Europe<sup>8</sup>.

During this year of 1968, Robert Mandrou published *Magistrats et Sorciers en France au XVIIe siècle*<sup>9</sup>, an important book, according to many, for the selection of history of mentalities as the center of post-Braudelian *New History*. This book of Mandrou is, actually, a milestone rather

than a turning point in itself. Mandrou himself published, in 1964, a classic book on French popular culture in the *Ancien Régime*<sup>10</sup> and, before him, Philippe Ariès published, in 1960, the book *L'enfance et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*<sup>11</sup>. We can say that this book of Ariès was the true opening for *history of mentalities*, even though the French academy did not recognize the author, at that time, as a professional historian<sup>12</sup>. It was no coincidence that Ariès was the editor of the first books of Michel Foucault, at that time also facing hostilities from the French academic establishment, but nonetheless decisive to *New History*<sup>13</sup>.

Be French historiography in the 1970s as it may, Le Goff took a key strategic role in the changes caused by New History. He was a crusader in favor of the *history of mentalities* – secret love of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch even before the creation of the magazine –, and of the historiographic “movement”<sup>14</sup> or “revolution”<sup>15</sup> of the *Annales*. Jacques le Goff started out with a chapter published at *Faire de l'histoire*, collective work organized by him, in association with Pierre Nora, in 1974. In the Brazilian translation of 1976, this text has as title “The mentalities of an ambiguous history”<sup>16</sup>.

This is a conceptual text, to which I will return later on, mentioned now as an example of a text bombarded by the ideological patrolling of Marxist historians. These, trying to mask the ideological motivation of their criticism, claimed to be loyal to Braudelian tradition (even though Braudel was never a Marxist). They alleged that the “third generation” of the *Annales*, where Le Goff is inserted, had broken with *Total History*, method suggested by Bloch and Febvre, augmented by Braudel.

In France, François Dosse, a Marxist specialized in historiography, published in 1987 *L'histoire en miettes: des Annales à la «nouvelle histoire»* (History in crumbs: from the *Annales* to *New History*), regretting, as the book title suggests, the fragmentation of history promoted by the third generation of the *Annales*. He particularly condemned the commitment of historians to “the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss”, that – according to Dosse – transformed the historian into a “specialist on immovable time, in a frozen present, petrified of terror before an uncertain future”. All this due to the formation, according to the author (after the retirement of Fernand Braudel, in 1969), of an editorial commission for the *Annales*, formed by André Burguière, Marc Ferro, Jacques le Goff, Jacques Revel, and Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie<sup>17</sup>.

Among Brazilian writers, Ciro Cardoso led the crusade against *New History*, a man with the reputation, in Brazilian academy, of being one of the most important theoreticians of history. Cardoso, being of the same line as François Dosse, reserved part of his book, *Ensaio*

*racionalistas*, published in 1988, to disqualify the so-called “New History”. He disqualified it especially for breaking with the notion of *totality* sustained by Bloch and Febvre; because of its emphasis in *mentalities*, in superstructures, instead of the socioeconomic determinations of history; for being politically *conservative*, dedicating itself to themes that did not threaten Capitalism, as *class struggle* did. Cardoso declared openly:

“In sum, the ideological function of ‘New History’ does not consist in open apology to Capitalism, it is much more subtle: once we eliminate rationalism, especially Marxism, what remains, however undeclared, is Capitalism itself – and a series of conceptions that do not threaten it”<sup>18</sup>.

Here we have the perfect example of disqualification of mentalities by the defenders of Marxist dogmatism. A type of consideration that attributes to the political “other” reprehensible ideological machinations, with the assumption that their own convictions, far from being ideological, are “scientific”, and therefore true. All of it without ever submitting any important work of this New History to close scrutiny.

However, neither François Dosse nor Ciro Cardoso dare disqualify the work of Jacques le Goff. The first goes as far as complimenting him, here and there, even though he is relentless in his attacks to *New History*. The second does not even mention him, limiting himself to alluding to, in a single paragraph, two French historians that, according to Cardoso, exemplify the fragmentation of historical science: Mona Ozouf, historian of the party in French Revolution; and Jean-Paul Aron – grandson of Raymond Aron<sup>19</sup> – who studied French menus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>20</sup>.

This combat – more ideological than historiographic – has, obviously, its own history, starting from the fact that, in France (but not only there), several historians that professed faith in Marxism – as theoretical model and political practice – migrated to New History. The hegemony of Marxism as paradigm for Social Sciences, created after the Second World War, fell like a house of cards after the 1960s. Those nostalgic of this hegemony did nothing more than defend its last grounds.

In the French case, which interests us closely, several historians who joined the ranks of *New History*, abandoning Marxism, had been militants on the French Communist Party or in other left-wing parties. Some of these historians were François Furet, Mona Ozouf, Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Maurice Agulhon, and Alain Besançon. The disillusion with Communism became apparent in the 1950s, as described by Furet:

Now, why did we leave (the party)? Because the succession of Stalin brought to the surface the enormity of lies we had lived, and suddenly the French Communist Party, a particularly Stalinist

environment, seemed to us impervious to change. Like almost everyone who leaves the Party, we started to abandon it while still inside. We said 'the principle is still valid; all that happened was a deviation inside it. Therefore, we remain in the Communist world to make it change'. It is the classic example of internal revisionism. After some time, however, you realize the total uselessness of this internal action, especially in a party so militarily centralized as the French Communist Party. Afterwards, a third stage puts in check the principle itself, the Communist idea itself. I personally lived all these stages. Internal revisionism, leaving the party, and finally the questioning the Communist idea, this idea of a State capable of changing society in the direction of greater equality and greater transparency.<sup>21</sup>

The Soviet intervention in Hungary, in 1956, was the crucial moment for these historians, who were then starting their careers, to abandon Communism. A decade later, the intervention of the URSS in Czechoslovakia (*Spring in Prague*) was the end of any illusion about a supposed libertarian character of Communism. Eurocommunism, appearing in Western Europe after the 1970s in countries like Italy, France, and Spain, tried to conciliate the socialist project and democracy, abandoning any revolutionary ambition, but the erosion in trust of the Communist parties of the European continent was irreversible

The fierce criticism against the history of mentalities – in France and in other countries – came mostly from intellectuals, historians or not, who resisted against the unveiling of the Soviet regime, and were, therefore, defenders of Marxism, especially of economic determinism, as the only paradigm for historical knowledge<sup>22</sup>.

Very few among historians remained faithful to Marxism as a model for the understanding of history, like Pierre Vilar or Pierre Vidal-Naquet – a declared Marxist, militant of the Socialist Party. Even Michel Vovelle, who remained a Marxist, started to dedicate himself to themes connected to mentalities, besides proposing, in a classic work, a combination between the concept of mentality and the Marxist concept of ideology<sup>23</sup>. Jacques le Goff was never part of the French Communist Party, nor did he ever adopt Marxism as theoretical model for historical knowledge. After a discreet participation in French Resistance, during World War II, when he was little over twenty, in the period post 1945 he became member of a left-wing Catholic party, *Mouvement Républicaine Populaire* (MRP); however, after 1958 he abandoned politics.

Jacques le Goff was spared these harsh criticisms, even though he was a forefront figure of the history of mentalities. The orphans of *real socialism* and of Marxist theory, especially those of economic determinism, would not dare. They could not. Le Goff proved, with his work, that this *New History*, at its best (not the smaller production), never broke with totalities or with the perspective of synthesis present in French Social History.

His first book, from 1956, *Marchands et banquiers du Moyen Âge*<sup>24</sup>, suggests a Le Goff that is an intellectual disciple of the Belgian Henri Pirenne (1862-1932)<sup>25</sup>, author of two classic

books on commercial and urban renaissance in Western Middle Ages. A magnificent historian, Pirenne was a collaborator of the *Annales* since the first decade of the magazine, and one of the pioneers in the study of the impact of commerce and urbanization in the crisis of European feudalism, evidently a macrohistorical theme.

Le Goff retook this study of medieval merchants in the book *Your Money or Your Life: Economy and Religion in the Middle Ages* (1997)<sup>26</sup> – joining economy, society, and religion. In this book, he resumed his considerations from his classic, *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981), to explain the relief brought by this “third place”, between paradise and hell, to the ascending commercial bourgeoisie, since it made a living out of lending and profit, and was therefore condemned to eternal damnation.

We can find, in Brazilian bibliography, an inventory of the works of Le Goff, both as a medievalist and as a theoretician of history, in *Historiadores do nosso tempo*, published in 2010. There they indicate the most important books by Le Goff, highlighting the ones published in Brazil – and those were many<sup>27</sup>. There is no historian capable of dismissing the works of Jacques Le Goff, if we consider that this historian gathered all the essential skills of the trade: historiographic scholarship; research expertise; total dominion of factuality; impeccable narrative. Le Goff, when he was still very young, had diplomas of Greek and Latin. He was a humanistic historian, with an irreproachable classic education. His life’s work does not need defense or compliments, it speaks for itself, either in the medievalist’s work or in the theoretical texts of greater importance.

### **Conceptual ambiguity of mentalities**

Be as it may, since the criticism of mentalities concentrated in some theoretical texts on the field, we need to recognize that the “third generation” of the *Annales* gave ammunition to their critics by producing conceptual texts far too superficial on this subject. The classic example of this approach to theory of history is found in the famous *Faire de l’histoire* (1974), translated to Portuguese, in three volumes, as *História: novos problemas, novas abordagens, novos objetos* (1976).

In the *Introduction* of this work, Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora claimed this *new history*, that offered itself to the readers, represented the “coexistence of several kinds of history, equally valid”. It also defended the “division of history”, in contrast with an absolute history of the past, either the one from *historicism* – which believed in a true history to be *reconstructed* – or the one from the *determinists* of all time. This “division of history” – term that would lead François Dosse,

in the end of the 1980s, to qualify New History as “history in crumbles” – did not intend, according to Le Goff and Nora, to promote a “juxtaposition of fragments of several histories”, but wished to find the “connections between the several roads of historical research”. The bet was on a plurality of views, in a diversity of themes, and the rejection of any theoretical or doctrinal orthodoxy. In its most extreme, it announced itself as a new history concerned with “everyday life, the ordinary happenings, the little ones”.

However, in the euphoria of those years, and driven by the editorial and mediatic success that history books started to enjoy, some authors celebrated, with no qualms, the end of total history, as predicted by Bloch and Febvre, and by Braudel. “We must renounce global history, as Febvre wished”, declared Michel de Certeau, one of the greater enthusiasts of the new trend. Pierre Nora, in his turn, more prudently limited himself to saying, in an interview from May 1974 to *Nouvel Observateur*, that “this notion of total history is what seems to me to be a problem today. We live a history in crumbles, eclectic, stretching towards curiosities, which we must not refuse”<sup>28</sup>. The sum of these and other comments with the weak theory present in the definition of the main body of New History – the mentalities – from early on caused the criticism to this new field to be relentless.

Even though it did not suffer any particularly criticism, Le Goff’s text in *Faire de l’Histoire* summarized the hesitations and ambiguities of this concept of mentalities, starting with the title itself: “Mentalities – an ambiguous history”.<sup>29</sup>

In this article, it is possible to identify three basic ideas:

- 1) Regarding the social distribution of mentalities – which the author claims to be so wide that it would **dilute the differences that are inherent to the social stratification** of the society under study: “The mentality of an historical individual, if he is a great man, is exactly what he has in common with other men of his time” (page 69). Further along: “the level of the history of mentalities... is what escapes the particular subjects of history, because it reveals the impersonal content of his thought, it is what Cesar and the least soldier of his legions, what Christopher Columbus and the sailor in his caravel have in common” (p.71).
- 2) Regarding the dominion of beliefs and attitudes common to the whole society, Le Goff says it lays, preferably, in the field of the “irrational and the extravagant”, arising from the notion of a **collective unconscious** and he recommended an **archeopsycologic research** to unveil this unconscious in concrete investigations.



3) Regarding the *time* of mentalities, it is the Braudelian **long term**<sup>30</sup>: “the mentality”, says Le Goff, “is what suffers the slowest change. History of mentalities, history of the slowness of history” (p.72).

Another revealing aspect of the text is the sometimes harsh, sometimes accommodating dialogue with Marxism. Criticizing Marxism, Le Goff declares that, “the historians that made use of it, after having valued the mechanisms of means of production and class struggle, could not successfully and convincingly pass from the infrastructures to the superstructures” (p.71). Mentalities came, therefore, to fill a theoretical gap of Marxism, or even substitute it with a model capable of “giving these fleshless mechanisms the strength of something else”, of “finding in history some other part”. At the end of his article, however, Le Goff becomes less emphatic, declaring that it is a “gross mistake” to disconnect mentalities “from structures and from social dynamics”, and admitting the existence of “class mentalities along with common mentalities” (p.78).

Le Goff reworked some concepts some years later, when he published an article entitled “Everyday History”<sup>31</sup>, in 1980. Mentalities appeared then dressed up as everyday life, a possible sign that the concept of mentalities was already giving signs of wear in French academy. We can see this conceptual revision in the author’s effort to show that the study of everyday life could not be confused with the collection of anecdotes and extravagances seen in several books of *History of Everyday Life*. This was a French collection created in 1938 with the naïve intention to “bring back the past, giving it back its flavor, as if we were actually there”. Le Goff rejected the label of descriptive and superficial that many attributed to *history of everyday life* and to the history of mentalities.

He alerted, also, to the risks of *structuralism*, criticizing the exaggerated tendency of looking for, in research, “the cold part that exists inside every warm society” (p.78). He emphasized the imperious need of establishing a link between the study of everyday life – the mentalities – to their explanatory totalities: “everyday life only has historical and scientific value inside an analysis of historical systems, which contribute to explain their functioning” (p.79). Nothing, however, that ever came close to the Marxist theory of history, especially the version turned famous by Louis Althusser<sup>32</sup>, of a compartmentalized history: everyday life should not be understood as a level above the economic, social, political, and cultural levels.

Having said that, one can say that the concept of *mentality*, in Le Goff’s text, is truly ambiguous. It swings from the individual to the collective; between social classes and society in

general; between rational and irrational; between social conscience and the collective unconscious; between the historical time of change and the anthropological time of myth; between ruptures and continuities. Such ambiguity was enough for many to condemn the concept and, as a result, the great amount of bibliography produced by the *new* historians.

The attachment to ambivalence and hesitations notwithstanding, Le Goff's text showed the dominion of history of mentalities: studies on the cultural representations of societies; on beliefs and collective feelings; on rites and ceremonies. History of mentalities proposed an intellectual adventure that wanted do migrate from the *basement* to the *attic*, remembering the very fortunate metaphor by Ladurie. A movement away from economy and material civilization in favor of socio-anthropological themes: the religiosities, sexualities, collective feelings, and everyday life.

I must say that the critics of history of mentalities, besides their ideological motivations and their attachment to economic determinism of Marxist nature, have shown a certain sometimes moralist aversion for the themes that *New History* offered the readers<sup>33</sup>. I must also repeat that the wave of criticism predominant during the 1970s and 1980s, did not tackle, except peripherally, the great books and the main authors of history of mentalities. This criticism was limited to a merely conceptual debate, as if history were an abstract discipline and not a *science of particularities*<sup>34</sup>.

This wave of criticism really exaggerated – due to ignorance or ideological proselytism – the break between the totalizing social history project defended by Bloch and Febvre and the history produced by the “third generation” of the *Annales*. If they had read with any interest or due attention, *Les rois thamaturges*, by Marc Bloch (1924)<sup>35</sup>, or *Le problème de l'incroyance*, by Lucien Febvre (1942)<sup>36</sup>, they might have given up this extreme swordplay.

### **Checkmate: the *Purgatory* of Le Goff**

To demonstrate the commitment of great historians of mentalities (not the smaller ones) with social totalities, it is worth commenting one of the books of the author we pay homage to in this dossier: *La naissance du Purgatoire*, published in 1981<sup>37</sup>.

This theme of *purgatory* is, no doubt, part of the subjects anathematized by old school Marxist historians, nostalgic for Stalinism and Althusserianism. After all, what is *purgatory* except an imaginary territory, a *ghost* built by the wise man of Christendom in Late Middle Age<sup>38</sup>?

The theme of purgatory is an “invented beyond”, a “third place”, as Le Goff puts it, between paradise and hell. Church invented it between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, to alleviate the tension that ran through European Christendom when it faced its *post mortem* destiny: spiritual salvation

or eternal damnation – radical possibilities. Purgatory was offered to the Christians of western middle ages as an intermediate spiritual space between those polarities, something like a provisory hell, out of which souls could actually enter into heaven, purged of the guilt of earthly life, with the help of prayer – and pious donations – of relatives to the Church of Rome.

With extreme scholarship, Le Goff faces the purgatorial and infernal imaginary of medieval West. He compares it to similar spaces from other cultures and times: *Ishna Upanishad* from the Vedic culture, in India; the trial of Osiris found in the *Book of the Dead*, in pharaonic Egypt; the travel of some heroes of Greek mythology down to the “dark abode”, like Orpheus or Hercules; the possibility of reincarnation of souls in Platonic philosophy; the Babylonian citation of hell in *Gilgamesh*.

This analysis gains momentum when Le Goff examines the notion of hell in ancient Judaism, found by the author in several books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Samuel, Psalms, and Job). Besides the narrative differences between the Old Testament sources, in biblical Judaism hell appears like *shéol*, in Hebraic, always defined as an underground space, muddy, compared to a pit or a well. Purgatory itself, according to Le Goff, would appear in sketch in the second *Book of Maccabees*, even though this is a controversial subject in theology. Protestantism, in its various versions, rejected this book as a canonic text after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, going against the Catholicism of Saint Augustin to Saint Thomas.

Anyway, the relation between Judaism and Christianity, with good reason, gives Le Goff justification for the verticalization of this analysis. The “descent of Christ into hell”, suggested in some texts of the New Testament, reinforces such continuities in the theme that interests the author. The purgatory itself, however, disappears from the gospels and other New Testament texts, Le Goff recognizes, with the exception of some apocryphal ones.

Examining this work as a whole, what we see are the comparative method, the scholarly narrative, the factual precision. This is true for the list of theologians who built the “culture of purgatory” in medieval Christian imagery. True for the different versions of purgatory in Christian literature, from Sicily to Ireland, for the definitions of purgatory in Scholasticism. True for the manual and books inserted in Christian teachings and in laic literature, as the classic example of *La Divina Commedia*, from Dante Alighieri.

*The Birth of Purgatory* is a book that contains, in itself, a lesson in research methodology for cultural history, heir to the history of mentalities. Regarding temporality, there could be no other than the longest time, for these are elements of several cultures, from Antiquity – Western

and Eastern – until Late Middle Ages, which converge into the geography of the other world built by Scholasticism in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. This also applies to spatiality, the widest possible: from Vedic India to the British Isles; from the Near East to the dominions of the Sacred Roman Empire; from Jerusalem to Rome. The treatment given to intertextuality is also admirable; this is specially so when Le Goff examines, one by one, the “Fathers of Purgatory” among the authors of primitive Christianity, like Origen of Alexandria, and the writings of Gregorio Magno, a pope from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, whose importance does not need to be mentioned.

Jacques Le Goff made, in this 1981 book, a historical exegesis of a **cultural system** – the imagery of Christian *purgatory* – which, after the religious reformations of the 16th century, would become “just” Catholic. Le Goff treated purgatory in the same manner as the Italian Carlo Ginzburg would treat the stereotype of a witches’ Sabbath in *Storia Notturna* (1989)<sup>39</sup> or like his fellow Frenchman Jean Delumeau would treat Christian *paradise* in *Une histoire du Paradis* (1995)<sup>40</sup>.

The wide scope of the subject studied in Le Goff’s book on purgatory, combined with the analytical verticalization of several topics and mythemes – a demand in any history sensitive to anthropology – would be, in my opinion, enough to place Le Goff in the historiographic tradition of the *dos Annales*, faithful to a totalizing social history. This is proof that this “third generation” is very far from breaking with Bloch and Febvre, breaking apart history, as their critics said or still say.

Saying this is nothing as response to the Marxist-inspired critics, known to reject debate, and rejecting even more any contradictory. I make use here of Leon Festinger (1919-1989) who, in his *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), wrote that “persons of deep convictions become incapable of changing opinion when facing contradictions: they are immune to evidences and rational arguments”<sup>41</sup>. This seems to be the case of the faithful dogmatists of Marxist thought, especially the so-called “revolutionaries”.

I discard, therefore, the dilemma between (historic) reason and (Marxist) faith raised by this debate to concentrate in factual evidences. The font, in this case, is the selfsame book by Le Goff on purgatory. I say this because the author is far from confining his object to the field of representations, as if mentalities were “layers of air”<sup>42</sup>. He also does not share the ideas of Roger Chartier, for whom the social only makes sense through cultural *practices* and classes and groups

only acquire some identity in the intellectual configurations they build, in a reality that is *represented*.<sup>43</sup>

As a prelude to the second part of this work, with the same title as the book, Le Goff dedicates a few pages to medieval history in the 12th century, defined by him as “the century of the great explosion”<sup>44</sup>. An *explosion of Latin Christendom* in demographic and economic terms, with great repercussions in social and political relations. The 12<sup>th</sup> century in medieval West, declares Le Goff, corresponds to the crystallization of relations of servitude, with the extraction by the lord of the surplus produced by the peasantry, either in the form of goods or of coins. It is a time when the “aristocracy of the main castles” subjugates the small nobility of the knights through the bonds of vassalage.

The author says *feudality* is consolidated, an institutional version of a “larger system”: *Feudalism*. At that time, the population doubles, thanks to the extension of cultivated surface and of the technological progress in the rural world. A model of social hierarchy is established, defining in a crescent order, the clergy (*oratores*), the nobility (*bellatores*), workers (*laboratores*). Commerce and urban life start an exponential growth. We watch the appearance of new values, away from feudalism, that bet on profit and social mobility. Where do we place *purgatory* in this *totalizing* analysis? Le Goff explains: “Purgatory is an element of this expansion of social imagery, in the geography of the other world, in religious certainty. Part of the system”<sup>45</sup>.

Therefore, it does not seem to me that, to say the least, the critics of history of mentalities have read this great book by Le Goff, when they affirm that *New History* broke away from social totalities. The sadness of it is that they condemned, and still condemn, history of mentalities – either in texts or inside classrooms (we would have many examples in Brazil) –, based on enraged clichés, in an extreme manner, with no bibliographic consistency. It is superficial, judgmental criticism. It is also inconsistent, because it lacks demonstration, since the most important books in the criticized field – the fonts in any serious historiographic analysis – are not examined or even faced.

### **The historian and the demon**

I reach the conclusion of this paper, abandoning Le Goff’s work to focus on the author, or rather, on the individual. However, I will not go too far down that road, because I will exchange the book on purgatory for the author’s personal purgatory. Related, though diverse, themes.

Born in 1924, in the city of Toulon, an important harbor in Provençal *Côte d'Azur*, Jacques le Goff was the son of an English teacher who had fought in the First World War, and his mother was a piano teacher. Jacques' father was laic, republican, and anticlerical. Jacques' mother was a devoted to "a Christianity of fear, of suffering, of sacrifice"<sup>46</sup>. In a text integrated to the so-called *ego-history*, Le Goff said he was Catholic in his youth, influenced by his mother and his school education, even though he harbored serious doubts on religious matters, maybe influenced by his father. This is the subject that interests us, at the moment, so we can relate both purgatories – the historic (or historiographic) and the individual ones.

In this retrospective interpretation of himself, the historian affirms that very early on he became skeptic in relation to three fundamental doctrines of Christianity. The first one was the Holy Trinity, because, in his opinion, there was either "only one God or there were three". A reasonable doubt in the light of reason, if you pardon de wordplay, and yet unacceptable in the field of Christian faith. Le Goff admitted that he saw as comprehensible de unfolding of the Father and the Son, but was never convinced by the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as part of the divine person.

Secondly, he was disturbed, he tells us, with the figure of the Virgin, whose devotion was very strong in his early life – childhood and youth. It was not that Le Goff questioned the dogma of the *real and perpetual virginity of Mary*, but because he had never made the "emotional transfer" (sic) between the mother of Christ and his own mother, for whom he was in love. Thirdly, he affirmed that he stopped fearing the devil when he was nine years old, and maybe because of that – he adds – he later on dedicated himself to the study of *Purgatory*.

What did our historian mean by that? Was he suspicious of the existence of the Holy Spirit, of the virginity of the Blessed Mary, and of the strength of the Devil?

The fact is that this skepticism in doctrinarian matter, which Le Goff finds in his youth, maybe in his childhood, would sound like an authentic heresy in the 16th century, for instance – starting with his doubt about the Holy Trinity, nothing less than the Credo approved by the Council of Nicaea in the distant 4<sup>th</sup> century. Even the main Protestant churches, from the past and the present, believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Doubting the *Marian devotion*, as Le Goff did, was reason for persecution in the Catholic world during inquisitorial times, considering the importance of the *Mother of God* in the Counter-reformation. Doubting Satan, lastly, is almost a rejection of Christianity, which views Lucifer and his diabolical court as an essential counterpoint to God, and the incarnation of Evil.

Here is a typical problem of individual testimony, of subjective memory as a historical font, a theme in which Le Goff is master. But he always took care in differing individual memory – each person’s remembrance – from collective memory – the one built historically. It is worth quoting him:

“Psychologists and psychoanalysts insist – either for remembrance or for forgetfulness..., in conscious or unconscious manipulations, that interest, affection, desire, inhibition, censorship have an effect on memory<sup>47</sup>.

Jacques le Goff warns us, in this passage, against the risk of taking the individual account of the autobiographic type as a factual registry of historical value. The only way to do this, he tells us himself, is pass it through the criticism of the font, an essential procedure of the historian. Based on his own warning we must examine his own autobiographic testimony and comment on it.

Le Goff’s testimony on his religiosity, if taken *ipsis litteris*, or even *ipsis verbis*, could make us assume that young Le Goff was more like his father than like his mother. In his feelings, he took after his mother. In his thoughts, he was like his father. A young skeptic, laic, critic of the fundamental principles of Catholicism. That was what he seemed to wish to emphasize in his testimony. .

However, when he is read between the lines, or rather, in the opposite sense he wished to project, the same testimony could indicate a Le Goff much more Catholic in his youth than he chose to relate decades later. In this case, he would be a youngster, who knows, convinced by Faith in the human incarnation of God (I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the begotten of God the Father, the Only-begotten, that is of the essence of the Father. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God); convinced, also, of the virginity of the *Blessed Mary*, even if suspicious of the excesses of Marian devotion; lastly, convinced of the existence of the devil, even though he claims otherwise.

In this last point, the relation the historian made between his lack of fear before the devil and his predisposition to the study of Purgatory can be interpreted as counterproof of the laic rationalism he intended to attribute to himself<sup>48</sup>. Actually, in this great book of his, Le Goff emphasizes the opposition of medieval heresies to the notion of *purgatory*, which would be amplified by the religious reformations of Modern time. Did Le Goff feel any sympathy towards medieval heresies, towards the protestant reformations? Was his religiosity similar to that of Rabelais, doctor of the king and great French writer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century? A Catholic who, denying Lucifer, rejected as consequence the existence of purgatory? Only the reading of the book in

question here can help with the answer to this question. The autobiographic testimony – his *individual memory* – only gives us a few clues.

The concrete – biographic – fact is that Le Goff was Catholic for decades, and might have died a Catholic *in pectori*. It is possible to perceive this trace of his personality in the themes he chose as a historian. Politically, we should remember, he joined the MRP after 1945, a Catholic, even if left wing party.

The conception of historic totality, in Le Goff, did not exclude, it could not have, the dominion of religion – a totalizing referential in itself. The comments on Le Goff's religiosity that close this article only matter to put on the scene the individual-historian. The historian who - as Lucien Febvre wrote – is a man of his time. Historical time, family time, personal time. History, if it is a Science is a science of particularities. This is due to the object of investigation, certainly, but also due to the subject researcher.

The *purgatory* is a particularity constructed in the medieval West, but it can only be studied, understood, and explained in a wider perspective. Jacques Le Goff made this project concrete based in his scholarship and historiographic competence. But would he have reached such a goal without having feared and defied the devil in his individual upbringing? That is something hard to answer. The readers can evaluate this problem at their ease.



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<sup>1</sup> - Jacques LE GOFF. Memória. In: \_\_\_\_ (org). *Memória-História* (Enciclopédia Einaudi). Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, pp.11-50

<sup>2</sup> - Pierre NORA (org). *Les lieux de mémoire*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992.

<sup>3</sup> - Jacques LE GOFF. Memória. *Op. cit.*, p.46

<sup>4</sup> - Idem. Documento-Monumento. *Op. cit.*, p.46 p.103.

<sup>5</sup> - There is a Portuguese edition: Jacques LE GOFF. *Os intelectuais da Idade Média*. Lisboa: Estúdios Cor, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> - Regarding the several different views in the field, see: Francisco FALCON. História das ideias. In: Ciro Cardoso e Ronaldo Vainfas (orgs). *Domínios da História*. Rio de Janeiro: Campus, 1997, pp. 91-126.

<sup>7</sup> - There is a Portuguese edition: Jacques LE GOFF. *A Civilização do Ocidente medieval*. São Paulo: EDUSC, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> - *Hérésie et sociétés dans l'Europe pré-industrielle, XI<sup>e</sup> - XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle : communications et débats du colloque de Royaumont*, Paris: EHESS, 1968.

<sup>9</sup> - There is a Portuguese edition: Robert MANDROU. *Magistrados e feiticeiros na França do século XVII*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> - Robert MANDROU. *De la culture populaire en France aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Stock, 1964.

<sup>11</sup> - There is a Portuguese edition: Philippe ARIÈS. *História Social da criança e da família*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> - Philippe Ariès suffered true ostracism, for decades, for belonging to a bourgeoisie family that, as an aggravating factor, in the 18th century had an estate that exported sugar in the Antilles (Martinique), based on slave work. A family that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lifted the flags of *Action Française*, with anti- Communist and Catholic orientation. Ariès started teaching in a school created by the Vichy regime, the *Ecole d'Uriage*. He quit the position, but continued to serve the Pétainist regime, as a researcher of an institute dedicated to investigations on agriculture in colonial regions. Ariès himself tells of his simpathies for AF in the book *Um historiador dileitante*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand, 1994, p.79 (original de 1980).

<sup>13</sup> - Michel Foucault, we know, also suffered hostilities by French historiography for political, ideological and intellectual reasons. The Foucaultian “fault” consisted, for French historians (and many continued this criticism), in the complete rejection of Marxist economic determinism and, more than that, his rejection to the existence of a *real history* – a concrete one – beyond the one registered in the discourses of the time or *discursive formations*. Foucault was, in a sense, an inspiration to historians of mentalities and their successors, like Roger Chartier, not to mention the meta-history of the North American Hayden White, an important post-structuralism name. See Hayden WHITE. *Meta-história: a imaginação histórica do século XIX*. São Paulo: EDUSP, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> - Jacques REVEL. História e Ciências Sociais: o paradigma dos *Annales*. In \_\_\_\_\_. *A invenção da sociedade*. Lisboareasons. a: DIFEL, 1990, pp.13-41.

<sup>15</sup> - Peter BURKE. *A escola dos Annales: a revolução francesa da historiografia*. São Paulo: UNESP, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> - Jacques LE GOFF & Pierre NORA (orgs). *História: novos objetos*. Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1974, pp.68-83.

<sup>17</sup> - François DOSSE. *A história em migalhas*. São Paulo: Ensaios, 1994, p.169

<sup>18</sup> - Ciro Cardoso, *Ensaios*, pp.100-101.

<sup>19</sup> - Raymond Aron (1905-1983) was one of the foremost French intellectuals on the second half of the 20th century. He became famous for openly declaring himself a liberal, and making harsh criticism to the intellectuals of the left. In 1955, he published *L'Opium des intellectuels*, condemning the leftist intellectuals for the adoption of a dogmatic and sectarian Marxism, and for the sympathy they showed for the Communist regimes of the time. The quote from Raymond Aron's grandson as an example of the so-called “reactionary history” illustrates the ideological animus of Cardoso in this text.

<sup>20</sup> - On the study of Mona Ozouf about the revolutionary party, Ciro Cardoso questions: “...Where has it all gone, the *French Revolution* itself, as class struggle?” A criticism that is similar to one made years before, by Pierre Vilar to Michel Vovelle, questioning “if it wouldn't be preferable (...) that he studied the process of consciousness among the masses”, instead of themes like death or parties. See Michel Vovelle. *Ideologias e mentalidades*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1987, p.9. Regarding Jean-Pierre Aron, after mentioning the book on French men in the 19th century, Cardoso comments: “the question I wish to make to the author after the reading is: So?” See *Ensaios*, p.101.

<sup>21</sup> - Interview with François FURET. *Estudos Históricos*, Rio de Janeiro, 1:143-161, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> - On the other hand, history of mentalities was also criticized by demanding historians, especially the declared structuralists, on the relation between History and Anthropology. That was the case of Stuart Clark, British

historian of witchcraft, who condemned the French historians for joining a dated Anthropology, inheritance of Lévy-Bruhl. An Anthropology that adopted the concepts of primitive societies, primitive mentality or pre-logic to qualify tribal societies, projecting such concepts into European societies between the Middle Ages and modern times. The author extends this criticism to Bloch and Febvre, stressing the frailty of those historians on treating alterity in time. This is not, however, ideological criticism but exclusively a theoretical one. See Stuart CLARK. French Historians and Early Modern Popular Culture. *Past and Present*, 100:62-99, 1983.

<sup>23</sup> - Michel VOVELLE. A longa duração. In: *Ideologias*, pp. 259-297.

<sup>24</sup> - Jacques LE GOFF. *Mercadores e banqueiros da Idade Média*. Lisboa: Gradiva, 1981.

<sup>25</sup> - Henri PIRENNE, *As cidades da Idade Média*. Lisboa: Europa-América, 1963 (original de 1927); \_\_\_ *História econômica e social da Idade Média*. Lisboa: Mestre Jou, 1977 (original póstumo de 1936).

<sup>26</sup> - Jacques LE GOFF. *A bolsa e a vida: economia e religião na Idade Média*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1986.

<sup>27</sup> - Andréia Frazão SILVA, & Leila Rodrigues SILVA. *Jacques Le Goff*. In: M.A Lopes e S. Munhoz (orgs). *Historiadores de nosso tempo*. São Paulo: Alameda, 2010, pp.135-153.

<sup>28</sup> - Apud François DOSSE. *Op.cit.*, p.182.

<sup>29</sup> - Jacques Le Goff. “As mentalidades - uma história ambígua”. In: Jacques le Goff & Pierre Nora, (orgs). *História: novos objetos*. Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1976, pp.68-83.

<sup>30</sup> - Fernand Braudel declared, once: “my biggest problem, my only problem to solve is to demonstrate that time advances with different speeds”. This was the premise of his work *Mediterranean* (1949), and the theme of his classic 1958 article “The Long Term”, where he proposed the three times of history: the short term of episodes; the medium term of conjunctures; the long term of structures, thought in function of the relation between sociohistorical dynamics and geography. Fernand BRAUDEL. *História e Ciências Sociais. A longa duração*. In: *Escritos sobre a História*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1992, pp.41-78.

<sup>31</sup> - Jacques LE GOFF. A história do quotidiano. In: Ariès, Philippe et al. *História e Nova História*. Lisboa: Teorema, 1989, pp.73-82.

<sup>32</sup> - French philosopher, born in Algeria, published several books and essays on the works of Karl Marx and on Marxist theory. See, for instance: Louis ALTHUSSER, *Ideologia e aparelhos ideológicos de Estado*. Lisboa: Presença, 1974 (there is a Brazilian edition published by Graal, 1985)

<sup>33</sup> - Writing in 1988, Ciro Cardoso affirmed: “one of the most powerful factors behind the current interest for themes connected to everyday life, to sex, to family, the different ways of breaking the rules... is the collapse of the **traditional ethic** systems (my highlight), which became more apparent and clearly inescapable on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (...) Christian ethics to one side, and revolutionary (Marxist) ethics on the other...”. *Ensaaios*, p.109

<sup>34</sup> - Carlo GINZBURG. *Sinais: raízes de um paradigma indiciário*. In: \_\_\_ *Mitos, emblemas e sinais*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990, pp.143-180.

<sup>35</sup> - There is a Brazilian edition: Marc BLOCH. *Os reis taumaturgos – o caráter sobrenatural do poder régio na França e na Inglaterra*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993.

<sup>36</sup> - There is a Brazilian edition: Lucien FEBVRE. *O problema da incredulidade no século XVI - a religião de Rabelais*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> - There is a Portuguese edition: LE GOFF, Jacques. *O nascimento do purgatório*. Lisboa: Estampa, 1993.

<sup>38</sup> - Among the “distortions or radical inversions of perspective” promoted by New History, according to Ciro Cardoso, one could highlight the “valorization, not of social reality, of the real conditions of existence, but its opposite – dreams, imagery, ideologies (...); as themes go, macabre dances, the ‘repressed impulses of desire’, the Sabbaths, ghosts and obsessions jump at you...”. *Ensaaios*, p.100.

<sup>39</sup> - There is a Brazilian edition: Carlo GINZBURG. *História noturna – decifrando o sabá*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1991.

<sup>40</sup> - There is a Brazilian edition: Jean DELUMEAU. *Mil anos de felicidade – uma história do paraíso*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997.

<sup>41</sup> - Apud Nelson MOTTA. *A opinião como patologia*. O GLOBO, 26 de abril de 2016.

<sup>42</sup> - Michel VOVELLE, *Ideologias*, p.21.

<sup>43</sup> - Roger CHARTIER. História intelectual e história das mentalidades: uma dupla reavaliação. In: \_\_\_ *A história cultural*. Lisboa: DIFEL, 1990, p.55-56.

<sup>44</sup> - Jacques LE GOFF. *Nascimento*, p.159-161

<sup>45</sup> - Idem, p.161

<sup>46</sup> - Idem. O desejo pela história. In: *Ensaaios de ego-história*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 1989, p.178.

<sup>47</sup> - Idem. Memória, p.13.



<sup>48</sup> - Literally: "...from one day to the next, I stopped being afraid of the night. Satan disappeared with it (the fear). I never believed in him again (Satan). This was, maybe, a far back predisposition for my interest on purgatory". See Le Goff, *O desejo pela história*, *Op. cit.*, p.190.