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# Writing Political History Today

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# The Political as Communicative Space in History: The Bielefeld Approach

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## Political History and its Discontents: Towards a New Consensus?

There was a time when political history was declared outdated by prominent members of the historical profession in most Western countries. The high point of the assault on political history was reached in the 1970s and 1980s under the double blow of, first, social history, and second, cultural history. It is true that the traditional topics of political history – the rise and fall of nations, the making and unmaking of constitutions, the strategies of political parties, the encounters between great leaders and the people, in short: the business of government – continued to dominate teaching in schools and universities as well as TV documentaries and popular textbooks. However, although still an important subject, this kind of conventional political history had lost much of its former attraction by the 1970s, especially among younger scholars. The slackening of interest was due partly to the fascination exerted by new and until then largely unexplored fields such as gender history, the history of the body and sexuality, or the history of marginal and subaltern groups. Furthermore, critics were dissatisfied with the unresponsiveness of traditional political historians to new methods and approaches such as comparison, discourse analysis, or the study of images. At times, these discontents culminated in more fundamental calls for a paradigm shift in the entire discipline. Politics, it was claimed, was only a dependent variable in the historical process. The real forces shaping long-term developments were assumed to be either socio-economic »structural« constraints, or the mentalities and sign systems that – together – make up the »culture« inhabited by the historical agents and informing their beliefs and behaviour. Political history, the critics argued, had to be dethroned from its top position, because social history, or respectively cultural history, possessed much more explanatory potential.

The French historians of the *Annales* school were among the earliest, and most outspoken, opponents of political history. They not only refused the positivistic traditions of French republican history, but struggled against the priority of politics in historical writings in general. As Jacques Le Goff stated in 1978 – nearly fifty years after the founding of the *Annales* journal – the fight was not over yet: »Détrôner l'histoire politique, ce fut l'objectif numéro un des Annales, et cela reste un souci de premier rang de l'histoire nouvelle.«<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, this massive challenge caused angry reactions and a stiffening of attitudes with some practitioners of old-style political history, whereas it encouraged others, in France and elsewhere, to promote revisions and apply new concepts to the historical study of politics. Thus, René Rémond, historian of the French Right, coordinated a volume defending political history in 1988 in which he defined its goal in almost Weberian terms: to study the political as an »activité qui se rapporte à la conquête, à l'exercice, à la pratique du pouvoir.«<sup>2</sup> And Jacques Julliard, historian of the French Left and labour movement, directed the attention of historians to the »strategies of actors in the face of historical necessities« and stated that »in modern societies, the interrelations are sufficiently numerous to give birth to events, institutions, and even structures that are sufficiently complex for the word »political« to remain the only one capable of describing them.«<sup>3</sup> Political history as a history of structures, not just events, became conceivable.

From another angle, cultural history in France was particularly productive in questioning the practice of political history. Important works on political culture, such as Mona Ozouf's study on revolutionary celebrations (1976),<sup>4</sup> as well as a sustained interest in national myths and the rituals of memory were outcomes of this shift of focus. Pierre Nora's project on the French *Lieux de mémoire* (1984–1992) found international followers and brought the content, form, agents, and effects of myth making and memory building to the attention of political historians.<sup>5</sup> In spite of, or

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1 Le Goff, Jacques (1978). L'histoire nouvelle. In Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (eds.), *La nouvelle histoire*. Paris: Retz, 226.

2 Rémond, René (1988). Du politique. In René Rémond (ed.). *Pour une histoire politique*. Paris: Seuil, 381.

3 Julliard, Jacques (1982). Political history in the 1980s. In Theodore K. Rapp and Robert I. Rotberg (eds.). *The new history. The 1980s and beyond*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 30–47, at 44.

4 Ozouf, Mona (1976). *La fête révolutionnaire: 1789–1799*. Paris: Gallimard.

5 Nora, Pierre (ed.) (1997). *Les Lieux de mémoire*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard.

rather because of the *Annales* historians' criticisms, and inspired also by the works of social scientists like Pierre Rosanvallon, Claude Lefort, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu, French political history has again become a differentiated and lively field of historical research.

Objections to conventional political history were less pronounced in Anglo-American academia than in France. British historian Susan Pedersen could state in a 2002 article on the prospects of the discipline, that the »study of politics has always been the British historian's first concern«, and she only cautiously criticised her fellow political historians for still concentrating primarily on the doings of statesmen and stateswomen, party organisations, parliamentary affairs, and governmental and electoral politics.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Mark H. Leff adopted only a mildly revisionist tone in his 1995 article on the state of U.S. political history for the centennial issue of the *American Historical Review*. As a »working definition« that reflected »common practice«, he put forward that »political history deals with the development and impact of governmental institutions, along with the proximate influences on their actions.«<sup>7</sup> While he had some harsh words to say about conservative historians who abhorred multiculturalism and wanted to impose an orthodox, »patriotic« view of U.S. political history, the only innovations he found worth commenting upon were, first, the abortive »new political history« of the 1960s and 1970s relying solely on quantitative methods; second, the more successful, qualitative approach of »new institutionalists« such as Theda Skocpol who aimed at explaining how public policy was shaped by complex »interactions between governmental structure, legislative actions, private groups, and underlying social assumptions«, and third, the endeavours of some historians of labour, gender, and race relations to more thoroughly consider the »infrapolitics of oppressed groups« as yet another element for explaining institutional and policy changes.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, however, major challenges for political history in the Anglophone world came from the sidelines rather than the core of the discipline. As in France, cultural history and the (comparative) history of nation building introduced new themes, approaches, and concepts to po-

6 Pedersen, Susan (2002). What is political history now. In David Cannadine (ed.). *What is history now?* New York, NY: Palgrave, 36–56, at 39.

7 Leff, Mark H. (1995). Revisioning U.S. political history. *American Historical Review*, 100, 829–853, at 829.

8 Ibid., at 848, 851, 853.

litical history. Lynn Hunt's books on the symbolic and gendered dimensions of political culture in the French Revolution (1984, 1992), Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's collection of essays on the »invention« of tradition (1983), Linda Colley's work on the »forging« of Britons and the British nation (1992), and, most notably, the path-breaking study on »imagined communities« by Benedict Anderson, specialist on South East Asian history (1983), all helped historians to contend with the fact that the political communities they wrote about: states, nations, peoples, empires, and so on, were »constructed« entities in the first place, entities that could not be treated as given, but whose emergence had to be part of the story.<sup>9</sup> The construction of the polity itself, and along with it, the notions of identity and difference, of citizenship and political space thus came to the fore in the writings of English-speaking political historians.<sup>10</sup>

From the 1980s onwards, the linguistic turn posed another – worldwide – challenge to traditional political history. In Britain, dissatisfaction with socio-economic, often Marxist explanations of political decisions and structural changes caused a growing interest in the discursive practices by which political actors described themselves, their own ideas, activities and opponents, and the community as a whole. Gareth Stedman Jones's essays on competing conceptualisations of »class«, and particularly his linguistically informed reinterpretation of Chartism, sparked off a debate that is still ongoing about the political dimension of verbally and symbolically produced class (and other) divisions in society.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1990s, the debate has not only brought English-speaking historians to reflect more

9 Hunt, Lynn (1984). *Politics, culture and class in the French Revolution*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Hunt, Lynn (1992). *The family romance of the French Revolution*. London: Routledge; Hobsbawm, Eric J. and Terence Ranger (eds.) (1983). *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Colley, Linda (1992). *Britons: Forging the nation 1707–1837*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press; Anderson, Benedict (1983). *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

10 For the broad spectrum of themes and approaches now discussed in American political history, see American Historical Association (ed.), Political history today: Plural perspectives on a protean culture (*Perspectives on History*, May 2011), available online at <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2011/1105>, accessed at 3 Oct, 2012.

11 Jones, Gareth Stedman (1983). *Languages of class. Studies in English working class history 1832–1982*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; the essay on Chartism *ibid.*, at 90–178; for a succinct overview of these debates, see Mares, Detlev (1997). Viktorianische Arbeiterbewegung, politische Sozialgeschichte und linguistic turn in England. *Neue Politische Literatur*, 42, 378–394.