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Annales School and Pakistani Historiography

Abstract

History-writing in Pakistan is generally criticised for ignoring the influences raging at the international level and mainly following a traditional style. In the 20th century, one of the greatest contributions in historiography was made by the French historians, particularly belonging to Annales school. Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel greatly influenced the practice of historiography. With their innovative approaches and new methodological experimentation, they brought about major changes in the concept of history-writing and thus, expanded the domain of history. However, Pakistani historiography was hardly influenced by this 'New History'. The present article first introduces the major Annales historians and their new approaches and then attempts to see how these can be utilized for enriching Pakistani historiography.

Keywords: Annales School, Historiography, Pakistani history, French historians

A major problem of Pakistani history-writing is that it has paid little attention to wider epistemological and conceptual debates about history writing at the international level. In the words of Prof. Naeem Qureshi, "Pakistani historiography had remained largely insular and linear—almost untouched by the contemporary intellectual movements abroad or even within the country."¹ It has mainly failed to disentangle itself from the norms established by great nineteenth century German historian, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886).² This type of history, now generally referred to as old or traditional history, has emphasised that documents are sacred and can quite objectively portray reality. Thus the historians' main task is to collect, read and analyse the documents, and let the facts speak for themselves. This 'fetishism' with documents and archives became the hallmark of the nineteenth century historiography. This Rankean tradition naturally privileged political and diplomatic history as most of the written documents concerned these two areas. And dominant form of expression became the narrative. As a prominent French historian, Francois Furet, maintained that this kind of history-writing "gives history the structure of a novel, except that its plot must be composed of authentic facts verified according to rules of evidence; and this history is indeed

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the true novel of nations.”³ This type of history was a kind of political chronology.⁴

In the early decades of the twentieth century, this Rankean tradition of history came under severe attack from two intellectual trends. The dominant critique came from the Marxists who seriously questioned the dominance of political history and in its place favoured economic and social history, based on Marxist conception of history and society. The second group, the so called *Annales* school, also called into question the validity of Rankean model but quite in different lines and for different reasons. Though in Pakistan, Marxist tradition of history-writing is not unknown due to the writings of Kunwar Muhammad Ashraf, Hamza Alvi, Irfan Habib and Mubarak Ali, the *Annales* school has virtually been ignored, despite the fact that unlike Marxism, it was loaded with no ideological baggage. It is absolutely essential to study the *Annalistes* as they produced “the most innovative, the most memorable and the most significant historical writing of the twentieth century.”⁵ The article highlights the basic features of *Annales* school, some of its methodological innovations and historiographical contribution and lastly their relevance to Pakistani historiography.

***Annales* School: An Historical Profile**

The roots of the *Annales* school go as far back as the turn of the century and the work of a philosopher of history named Henri Berr (1863-1954) who in 1900 founded a journal, *Review of Historical Synthesis*, whose purpose was “to bring together all branches of knowledge in a synthesis.”⁶ It became in fact a broad interdisciplinary publication which included contributions from prominent non-historians including Emile Durkheim. Two young historians, Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) and Marc Bloch (1886-1944), established their ties with Berr's journal and in their works defied the convention of writing narrative political history. In 1929, both scholars launched their own wide-ranging journal entitled *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale* (*Annales* of economic and social history). The first issue of *Annales* began with a manifesto that set the direction of the journal. It opposed overspecialization, encouraged scholarly collaboration, and proclaimed a goal of total history which covered all the activities of mankind. The distinguished company of scholars supported this enterprise which was a testament to the journal's interdisciplinary concerns. The *Annales'* content reflected the deep interest of its founders in economics as well as sociology. During World War II, the Nazis captured Bloch, who had joined the resistance, and shot him dead. The *Annales* endured this loss and emerged in 1946, with an altered title and under the dynamic direction of its remaining founder, Lucien Febvre. The early post-war years were a time of great institutional growth for the *Annales*. The journal quickly recovered its pre-war size and added a new sub-title: *economies, societes, civilisations*. This use of the plural represented a further assertion of the movement's concern about comprehensiveness, interdisciplinary cooperation, as well as geographically and chronologically diverse subject matter. Another manifestation of growth was Febvre's appointment in 1947 to the presidency of the Sixth Section of the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, a prestigious institution of social sciences in France. Under his leadership the Sixth Section rapidly became a

leading centre of interdisciplinary studies concerned with the collection and analysis of huge quantities of historical data. Another landmark in the *Annales'* development was the publication in 1949 of Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. This great study of the Mediterranean basin is widely regarded as the fullest and most representative expression of the *Annales* scholarship. When Febvre died in 1956, Braudel (1902-1985) succeeded his late mentor as president of the Sixth Section, editorial director of the journal, and occupant of the chair of the history of modern civilization at the College de France. During the period of his direction, the *Annales* grew to become the foremost journal of its kind in the world, the Sixth Section an internationally celebrated research centre, and the works of several *Annalistes* among the most innovative and distinguished in all of historical scholarship. Braudel retired at the start of the seventies, his legacy passing to no single heir of immense prestige, but to a company of esteemed associates, including Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Georges Duby, Jacques Le Goff, Roger Chartier from France, and Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton from America. They remain guided by the spirit of the school's founders, Bloch and Febvre. The journal *Annales* is still being published and in the words of one scholar, is "the rallying point of everything that is lively, new, and controversial in French historical writing."⁷

Conceptual and Methodological Innovations of the *Annales*

There are a number of diverse concepts, methods and techniques which were utilised by the *Annales* historians. These include interdisciplinary and total history approach which became the hallmark of the *Annales* school, comparative and regressive methods advocated by Marc Bloch, concept of mentalities pioneered by Lucien Febvre and later *Annalistes*, Fernand Braudel's three tiered division of historical time and particularly his concept of *longue duree* or long term and finally *Annales* emphasis on the history of material culture.

From the very beginning, Bloch and Febvre were concerned with expanding the boundaries of historical discipline—a history more fully illustrative of the life of man in society. To write total history was their goal. Febvre developed this grand claim of writing total history, by arguing that all human sciences were essentially historical and only a trained historian, by uniting them scientifically, could write a comprehensive description of the past. The concept of total history was defined in later years by Fernand Braudel as "a history whose scope would extend to embrace all the sciences of man." They thought that the historian could enhance the knowledge of the past if only he showed a readiness to draw freely from sociology, geography, psychology and economics. Yet this did not mean any disregard of documents or of scholarly concerns. The history which Bloch and Febvre wrote was not restricted to just the narration of events but its main concern was social, economic, and cultural life; politics had been given a marginalized space. It utilized all the social sciences and was more analytical and problem-oriented.

Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's monumental study of a small village, Montaillou, in south-west France can be considered as an example of interdisciplinary and total

history. It was a village which was largely affected by the Cathar heresy in the beginning of the fourteenth century. The heretics were later captured, tried and punished by the local church authorities. Fortunately the inquisition register survived and got published. Le Roy Ladurie, after reading the register, noted that twenty-five of the accused, nearly a quarter of all suspects, came from a single village Montaillou. He treated the register as a mine of anthropological information and reconstructed the life of the villagers on the basis of the evidence. Divided into two parts, the book first discusses the material culture of the village, for example, the houses built of stone without mortar allowed the neighbours to observe and listen to one another; while the second part dealt with the mentalities of the villagers—childhood and death, sense of time and place, concepts of sexuality, nature and God.⁸

Second area of the *Annales* concern was comparative and regressive methods advocated by Marc Bloch. He was an early believer in both these methods which he explained as:

Comparative study . . . involving comparisons within a single country or between different countries, is of immense value, since in highlighting both similarities and differences it can be a source of new syntheses, new questions and, sometimes, convincing answers. The regressive method involves using evidence drawn from a later age of matters—customs, traditions, place names, field patterns—which may well have endured from an earlier age, in order to illuminate that earlier age.

Bloch's own work provided examples of his comparative and regressive methods. His main area of interest was rural peasantry in the medieval and early modern period, particularly their mentality and culture. He realized that France, in the early twentieth century, still had a majority of its population living in rural society and in this rural atmosphere, grandparents often brought up the children, because the parents would be working in the fields. So according to Bloch, if a historian wished to investigate the structures and operation of rural culture in the most distant past, a good idea could be to first look at that passive and semi-inert culture today. Bloch explained that this would provide ideas about the right questions to ask about, say, sixteenth-century peasant culture. This sort of comparative approach, he called, the "regressive method."⁹

Third methodical innovation of the *Annales* was the concept of *mentalite* (mentality), a word loosely defined by different scholars in different ways. For some, it is "retrospective anthropology," which gives us clues into human action as to what in a particular society at a particular time is "thinkable," or the "mental tools characteristic of a given time-space." It may also mean "what was 'thinkable' in a human collective at a given moment of time." According to the *Annalistes*, "beyond individual thinkers and their particular expressions of value and belief lay patterned systems of thought—mentalities—which differed radically from age to age." In a way, it indicates the ways in which specific cultures at a particular time see and interpret their world. The study of beliefs and the ways of seeing in a particular culture can be called as the history of mentalities which is quite fertile ground for further explorations as the topics like traditions, myths, popular beliefs,

rationalism, modes of behaviour and perceptions and views about God can be studied under the history of mentalities. The classic example of the history of mentalities is the work by Lucien Febvre, entitled, *The problem of unbelief in the sixteenth century: the religion of Rabelais*. Febvre was offended by an intellectual who claimed that Rabelais, a great sixteenth-century writer, was an atheist rather than a Christian. He felt that the accusation was unhistorical and he set out to show why. He admitted that Rabelais had been called an atheist, but this was just a common term of abuse in that period which meant little in practice. He wrote a study in three parts of the perception of the world and God by men in the sixteenth century. The first part is about Rabelais himself as seen through his writings; the second is about his friends and his intellectual circle; and the third is an explanation of the general thinking in sixteenth-century France. Febvre thus provided a history of the mental universe of men in a certain period in the past. The conclusion of the book was that all thought had the concept of the existence of God as an unchallengeable assumption, and so Rabelais was never an atheist.

Philippe Aries, a contemporary of Braudel, investigated the relationship between nature and culture and how a culture categorizes natural phenomena. Thus he produced two remarkable works on childhood and death. His work *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* argued that the idea or rather the sense of childhood is quite a recent one as it did not exist in the Middle Ages. According to him, childhood was discovered in France in the 17th century or thereabout; earlier children were either considered more or less animal-like until the age of seven or just like miniature adults afterwards. On the basis of letters, diaries and paintings, he argued that in the early modern period, children began to be given special clothes and there was special interest in child behaviour. Thus awareness of childhood as a particular phase of life in human development dates back only to the 17th century and not earlier.¹⁰ His other work, produced at the end of his life, was his investigation of western attitudes towards death. It was inspired by Lucien Febvre's remarks that "we have no history of death." Focussing on the medieval as well as modern periods, it studied developments over a very long term, nearly a thousand years or so and pointed out varied behaviours towards death—from 'tame death' of Middle Ages which can be defined as 'a compound of indifference, resignation, familiarity and lack of privacy' to a 'forbidden death' of our own age where death is treated as a taboo.¹¹ The works of Philippe Aries came as a challenge to historians who started giving more importance to the role of attitudes, behaviour and values.

Finally, the *Annales'* contribution to history-writing was Braudel's concept of *la longue duree* (the long term). It was first expounded in his work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II*, (1929).¹² The work began as a history of the foreign policy of sixteenth-century Spain and Philip II towards the Mediterranean world. However, Braudel was influenced by Lucien Febvre who said to him: "Philip II and the Mediterranean is a good idea, but the Mediterranean world and Philip II is a better one." The book is divided into three parts, each corresponding to a certain type of historical time. For Braudel, there are three tiers of historical time or *duree*. The first he calls *longue duree*; this is the

time of deep-seated structures such as geographical constraints and cultural systems which change slowly and imperceptibly over the centuries. The second he names conjunctures; this is intermediate time-the trends and cycles observed especially by economists and demographers- which is measured in decades or half centuries. The last is *evenementielle* or the surface time of events; it is the *duree* of politics, diplomacy and the individual's actions whose history the *Annales* historians have generally considered the least important. The book's first part described the geography of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, looking at the possibilities for human settlement and trade and communications. Then, Braudel studied the economies of the Mediterranean basin in the sixteenth century and the impacts on them, for example, the size of the population and the amount of precious metal for exchanges. Lastly, he investigated the politics of the time and proved that it revolved around a set of assumptions which had been unknowingly conditioned by developments beyond the control of the people of that time.

Braudel himself explained the logic of *longue duree*

there has been an alteration in traditional historical time. A day, a year once seemed useful gauges. Time, after all, was made up of an accumulation of days. But a price curve, a demographic progression, the movement of wages, the variations in interest rates, the study (as yet more dreamed-of than achieved) of productivity, a rigorous analysis of money supply all demand much wider terms of reference.¹³

Braudel's real argument was that 'events,' which have been recognized as the theme of traditional history, did not play so significant a role in history, and likewise, the role of individuals, even those of the most powerful ones like Philip II of Spain, was seriously constrained and limited by broader, and deeper structures beyond their control. In his Preface to the first edition of *The Mediterranean*, Braudel wrote that politicians and statesmen like Phillip II, "despite their illusions [were] more acted on than actors." He also opined that: "the history of events" was merely the history of "surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs." History of events, according to him, is "the most exciting of all, the richest in human interest, but also the most dangerous. . . . Resounding events are often only momentary outbursts, surface manifestations of . . . larger movements and explicable only in terms of them."¹⁴

This "dialectic of space and time", as Braudel calls it, profoundly impacted the explanatory organization of history books so much so that now majority of the historical works produced in France and other countries are written with Braudelian structure/conjuncture/event model in mind. They start with society and economy, move on to cultures or "mentalities" and finally discuss politics.¹⁵ K.N. Chaudhuri's *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean World: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*¹⁶ is directly inspired by the Braudel's *Mediterranean*.

Another important area of concern for the Annalistes was the history of material culture. Braudel, besides *Mediterranean*, worked on another ambitious project

which initially started by his mentor, Lucien Febvre who proposed to write a two-volume history of Europe from 1400 to 1800. Febvre was to write on “thought and belief” while Braudel with the history of material life. But Febvre died in 1956 without completing his part and Braudel produced his three volume study between 1967 to 1979 with the title *Civilisation Matérielle et capitalisme* (*Material Civilization and Capitalism, 15th to 18th Centuries*). The first volume is subtitled as *The Structure of Every Day Life* and its introduction explains that economic history is practically a three storey house. At the ground level is the material civilization, defined as “repeated actions, empirical processes, old methods and solutions handed down from time immemorial.” The second storey elaborated in the next volume titled as *Wheels of Commerce*, is concerned with economic life, “calculated, articulated, emerging as a system of rules and almost natural necessities.” While the third storey explained in the last volume titled as *The Perspective of the World* is the “capitalist mechanism” which is the most sophisticated of all.¹⁷

The *Annales* influence on modern historiography is immense. Peter Burke sums up the contribution of the *Annales* in the following words:

the outstanding achievement of the *Annales* group, . . . has been the reclaiming of vast areas for history. The group has extended the territory of the historian to unexpected areas of human behaviour and to social groups neglected by traditional historians. These extensions of historical territory are associated with the discovery of new sources and the development of new methods to exploit them. They are also associated with collaboration with other disciplines.¹⁸

New Insights for Pakistani Historiography

For history-writing in Pakistan, this *Annales* emphasis on multi-disciplinarity and borrowing from other disciplines cannot be overemphasised. The problems affecting Pakistani society, with such diverse and complex issues as terrorism, religious extremism, social and economic stratification and ethnic and linguistic disparities cannot be fully comprehended by one specialized branch of social sciences and there is a growing need that all the social sciences should come together to understand and resolve these problems. In this cross-fertilization of knowledge, history should occupy a pride of place for its ability to historicize the issues and provide historical contexts to the problems.

The question of Muslim identity and the growth of a particular Muslim mindset are directly relevant to Pakistan’s search for a national identity. The *Annales* concept of mentalities can be helpful in further exploring this theme. This question of Muslim identity which is as much important to a Pakistani intellectual was equally relevant to the identity of, say, Hazrat Amir Khusrau, Abul Fazl, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Abul Kalam Azad or any other Muslim intellectual in the medieval or modern period. All of them negotiated with their multiple identities, and their mental universe and world-outlooks would be very interesting subjects for the historians of mentalities.

Pakistani historians have not generally utilised comparative methods to sort out historical problems. It is a very fertile area and can lead to important results. Even the problem of Muslim nationalism can be explored in a comparative perspective. Indo-Pak Subcontinent was not the only region in the world where two religious communities lived side by side. There were important religious minorities in other parts of the world, particularly in the Far East. However, the religious rivalry there did not result in the creation of separate states on the basis of two-nation theory. This kind of comparative study can reveal what was unique to Indo-Pak experience and why did it lead to partition in the sub-continent.

Pakistani historiography, which up-till now is mainly concerned with the last tier of the Braudelian time-frame—political events—needs to follow this model. Another important fact is that Pakistan is located in a geographically important region which for centuries remained a hub of political and demographic activity by different Empires of the world. Cross-fertilized by different racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups, Pakistan's history has been influenced by these currents. The *Annales* emphasis on geographical structuralism and concept of *longue duree* can be utilized to reveal some particular features of the history of the people of Pakistan.

To conclude, I may say that in 2005, veteran Pakistani historian, Prof. Sharif al-Mujahid while delivering his keynote address to the 20th session of Pakistan History Conference, advised the Pakistani historians to “dart out in the direction of New History, familiarize himself with new approaches and new techniques, assimilate modern trends in historiography, and to go in for innovation and experimentation.”¹⁹ He added further that

“Of utmost importance is the need to introduce methodically and progressively, to both the teachers and (post-graduate) students the theorists, paradigm builders and giants. Unless the New History vision, trends and techniques get methodically introduced into our syllabi, course requirements, teaching techniques, and research perspectives, imperatives, methodologies and agenda, the prospect for History as a discipline and Pakistani historiography is bound to be bleak.”²⁰

His advice still remains valid and the *Annales* school present some fascinating and challenging examples for innovation and experimentation for Pakistani historians.

Notes and References

¹ M. Naeem Qureshi, "Dwindling Fortunes of the Historian's Craft: The State of the Discipline in Pakistan, 1985-2001," *Pakistan Perspectives*, 10, No. 1 (January-June 2005): 19. It must be noted that this problem is not unique to Pakistan. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, mainly talking about Indian historiography, laments that "over the past quarter century, both South Asian historians and historians of South Asia have, it would seem, grown more insular. Thus, today, practically no post-graduate department of history in India offers serious courses on the history of any part of the world save South Asia itself and—inevitably—Europe." "Writing History Backward: Southeast Asian History (and the *Annales*) at the Crossroad," *Studies in History* 10 no. 1 (1994): 131

² For Ranke, see, Michael Bentley, "Approaches to Modernity: Western Historiography since the Enlightenment," in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley (London: Routledge, 1997), 403-08; Thomas Gil, "Leopold Ranke" in *A Companion to Philosophy of History and Historiography*, ed. Aviezer Tucker (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 383-392.

³ Francois Furet, "Beyond the *Annales*," *The Journal of Modern History*, 55, No. 3 (Sep., 1983): 397.

⁴ For the strongest critique on narrative history, see Hayden White, *Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987).

⁵ Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-89* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 1.

⁶ Peter R. Campbell, "The New History: the *Annales* School of History and Modern Historiography," in *Historical Controversies and Historians*, ed. William Lamont (London: UCL Press, 1998), 190.

⁷ George Huppert, "Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch: The Creation of the *Annales*," *The French Review*, 55, No. 4 (Mar., 1982): 510.

⁸ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324*, tr. Barbara Bray (Middlesex : Penguin, 1984).

⁹ For a study of Marc Bloch's contribution to comparative method, see, Alette Olin Hill and Boyd H. Hill, Jr, "Marc Bloch and Comparative History," *The American Historical Review*, 85 No. 4 (Oct., 1980): 828-846; William H. Sewell, Jr., " Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History" *History and Theory*, 6 No. 2 (1967): 208-218.

¹⁰ Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, tr. Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

¹¹ Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, tr. Patricia M. Ranum (London: Maryan Boyars, 1974).

¹² Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, tr. Sian Reynolds, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: University of California Press, 1972-73).

¹³ Fernand Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences: The *Logue Duree*," in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, ed. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt (New York: The New Press, 1995), 120.

¹⁴ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, tr. Sian Reynolds, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: University of California Press, 1972-73).

¹⁵ Campbell, "The New History," 192-95.

¹⁶ (Cambridge, 1985)

¹⁷ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, tr. Sian Reynolds, 3 vols. (London: William Collins, 1982-84)

¹⁸ *The French Historical Revolution*, 110-11.

¹⁹ Sharif al Mujahid, *History-the State of the Discipline: An Overview*, Key-note address to 20th Pakistan History Conference (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 2005), 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.