

CONSTRUCTING THE PAST: ESSAYS IN HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY. Edited by Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora. Cambridge University Press and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. 1985 \$39.50.

This collection of ten pieces aims to make available to an English readership some of the historical strategies presented in a larger compendium, the editors' *Faire de l'histoire*, that appeared in France in 1974. The intervening decade makes some of the self-conscious urgency feel *de trop*, if only because imperatives about how to conduct research lose some of their sting when no one can raise the money to do any. But if the tone of the contributions sometimes resembles *Annales* in a dry season, at least the book has some claim to be *about* something. Loosely, the subject seems to be historical methodology; and most of the essays contain doctrines about appropriate approaches to a considerable range of fields and projects, from quantification and economic history, to demography, religion, *mentalités*, ideologies, and festivals (festivals?). All randomness is eschewed for the book is deeply French. In the light of its arguments 1974 scrolls backwards to 1929, the year when Bloch and Febvre founded the periodical *Annales* which has since bred a school-full of prefects determined to treat the junior boys with all the brusqueness which they themselves suffered from the French historical establishment in the 1930s. Concealed within these covers there lies a sort of *Festschrift*-by-stealth dedicated to the innovations of the *Annales* school about which the contributors regularly congratulate one another—relishing their mutual clear-headedness, slapping their thighs over the sheer excitement they have brought to a tedious profession. Bottom of the class remains the empiricists, as one might predict, though Furet, whose essay on quantification begins the volume, had not in 1974 yet thought up his ludicrous attack on Richard Cobb.

It goes without saying, too, that the better side wins, as opponents of empiricism always do, if only because the defending team regards methodology as a form of cholera best avoided by scrupulous hygiene. That 'the facts' have no existence but rather undergo a retroactive constitution by the historian is a premise important enough to warrant all the reiteration that these writers supply from their various standpoints, even if they ignore Oakeshott's having got there first by an entirely different route on his way to framing quite spectacularly different conclusions. Sources suffer the same diminution as facts. 'For it is not the sources that define the questions', according to Furet, '...but the questions which determine the sources'. This also seems unimpeachable. Problems arise rather when one attempts to prescribe the framework within which intelligent questions are supposed to reside and offers recommendations about the operations deemed appropriate to the data that the questions unearth.

The Parisian perspective is clear enough. Questions should be global, both in the sense of implying a comparative geography and in traversing a wide range of disciplinary categories. Behind the guidance one senses a certain materialism: a willingness to reduce ideologies or mentalities to something more elemental and quantifiable. Behind that sheet of frosted glass stands a further one obscuring the point of it all—the creation of a human science that will one day produce a true history of the fundamental processes (some fast, some slow) that together make up the world that Paris believes real. Good questions are those whose answers hasten that day; bad ones miss what The History Man understood as the plot of history. When Chaunu announces his laws of economic development, he has responded to proper questions. When Vilar believes that 'we are making progress in the "true history" of the translation from feudalism to capitalism', he joins in the hunt.

Part of the self-confidence derives from a faith in the procedures which are brought to bear on evidence. None of these essays forgets the need to quantify and to compare, which is why Chaunu's concept of serial history receives a good airing. Whether one studies icons, ice-caps, literacy or miracles, the manual reads the same. Establish runs of data at equidistant (and therefore comparable) intervals; cross disciplinary frontiers to find

parallel runs of related data; test for correspondences within and between the series with a computer; identify broad structures within the material and possible *conjectures* between processes; apply structuralist functionalist modes of explanation to the resulting shapes. Of course some do better than that. Le Roy Ladurie's piece on climate offers a well-controlled analysis of modern techniques that raises nothing contentious. But others leave a disturbing sense of elision or, in the case of Vilar, no sense at all.

That worry is not trivial. It reflects a friction implicit in the entire *Annaliste* enterprise between what the authors believe themselves to be doing and what they actually do. The theory says that they are not epistemological realists: they are *Constructing the Past*. Yet their practice suggests that they are rather *Reconstructing the Past*. They sink their shafts at regular intervals into their question-led data; but having sunk them they behave as though it is the past itself into which their bit has cut. For all their language of liberation and their sense of breaking new ground, these contributors call up echoes of nineteenth-century positivism with their hopes for a nomothetic *Wertfreiheit*. Instances of 'dilemmas and unease' discovered by Colin Lucas in his introduction to this evocation of the mood of the *Sixième Section* in the 'seventies perhaps derive most essentially from the degree to which these essays sustain the suspicion that a computer-screen, no less than a camera-lens, presents a picture of its controller.

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PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, J. Hick, *Macmillan*, London, 1966. pp. 148. PB. £7.95/HB. £22.50.

THE EXPERIENCE OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY, eds. J. Hick & H Askari, *Gower Pub. Co. Ltd.*, Aldershot, 1966, pp. 236. HB. £18.50.

Both books are important contributions to the much discussed question of the relationship between religions. In *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, Professor John Hick has collected together previously published essays (some of them eight years old) defending and developing his thesis that all religions can be viewed as differing, but equally valid, responses to the 'Real' which is experienced both personally and non-personally. In *The Experience of Religious Diversity* a number of distinguished writers explore the resources from within their own religious tradition (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism) to explain and legitimize religious plurality. This latter work is an extremely welcome multi-lateral contribution to what has tended to be a unilaterally Christian debate.

Hick's book, *Problems of Religious Plurality* is an appetizer for his Gifford lectures (1966–7). No doubt, the main course will be as engaging and controversial as this offering. Whether it too will cause a certain amount of philosophical and theological indigestion remains to be seen. Hick deals with a number of issues such as: the epistemological basis for accepting religious plurality (ch 2); explaining the view that all religions can be regarded as equally salvific paths to the 'Real' (chs 3, 7); developing truth criteria to sustain and legitimize this view in the light of conflicting truth claims (chs 5, 6); explaining the significance of Christ within this perspective (ch 4) and exploring the possibility of an after-life which further sustains his pluralist thesis (chs 8, 9).

Although Hick's arguments are lucidly presented, I remain uneasy about a number of issues. Regarding Christology, Hick still thinks that docetism is 'barely distinguishable from the traditional Christian conception of the incarnation'. (p. 54). Hick's position also seems to constantly veer towards a pragmatic agnosticism despite his professed belief in the cognitive veracity of religious language (p. 16). He argues that all religions are valid when they foster the 'transformation of existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness'. (p. 95). Therefore, in writing about conflicting truth claims, the question as to whether Jesus did or did not die on the cross seems unimportant to Hick, who writes that 'we