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Dosse, François *Pierre Nora – homo historicus*

Helenice Rodrigues da Silva*

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As part of the genre of ‘intellectual biography’ of French authors who marked the second half of the twentieth century (Michel de Certeau, Paul Ricoeur, Gilles Deleuze/Félix Guattari), François Dosse has written an extensive work on Pierre Nora. A singular figure in the French intellectual space, this author looks in a discrete and silent manner at different domains of production and diffusion (literature, journalism, publishing and essays) during the last 50 years.

Known by historians as one of the coordinators (with Jacques Le Goff) of ‘Doing History’ and the idealizer of ‘sites of memory,’ Pierre Nora is above all seen as the editor of *maison* Gallimard and the creator of the famous ‘Bibliothèque des sciences humaines.’ In this collection the ‘cream’ of the French and foreign *intelligentsia* (Michel Foucault, Georges Dumézil, Émile Benveniste, amongst so many others) promoted in the 1960s and 1970s “the golden years of the human sciences.”

A university professor (assistant professor in École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and Institut d’Études Politiques during the 1970s and 1980s), idealizer of different collections of human sciences (initially in Julliard publishers afterwards in Gallimard), the founder in 1980 (with Marcel Gauchet) of the journal *Le Débat* (an important intellectual media anchored on the critique of ideas and the analysis of current events), and an immortal (having been elected to the *Académie Française* in 2002), Pierre Nora still plays a leading roles in the current debates of the *Cité* (the public sphere) notably in relation to the imbroglios of memory, history and French heritage.

Nevertheless, author of a single book, published during the Algerian war, *Les Français d’Algérie*, and of numerous articles (never put together in a single collection) about the history of the present and the epistemology of history, Pierre Nora incarnated the solitary intellectual, the talented writer who

* Associate Professor, Universidade Federal do Paraná. Rua General Carneiro, 460. 80060-150 Curitiba – PR – Brasil. helenrod@terra.com.br

doubted which path to follow and who felt incapacitated to build an individual work.

Throughout a dense and detailed work, notably due to the extensive documentation of Nora's personal archive, François Dosse reconstituted the various itineraries of the historian, seeking to understand the enigma of the academic 'outside the norm.' As is well demonstrated in the biography, the paradox of Nora, editor of great books in all disciplines – from linguistic to economy, from anthropology to history, from philosophy to politics – resides in his impossibility to affirm himself as the author of a work.

Sensitive to the reception of new ideas, Pierre Nora published since the 1960s texts that until then were unpublished and original, produced in France and abroad. From *As palavras e as coisas* by Michel Foucault, to Leroy Ladurie's *Montaillou, povoado occitânico* (300,000 copies sold), Pierre Nora in Gallimard launched best sellers in the social and human sciences. Nevertheless, two heavyweight works which marked their times are exceptions. Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes trópicos* and *A era dos extremos* by Eric Hobsbawm were refused by the publisher.

How then to explain the trajectory of an author without a work, but who appears to have made his own existence into his work? This interrogation constitutes a 'biographical challenge' (title of one of François Dosse's books). Pierre Nora was more solicitous of the ideas of his authors than the production of his own ideas. A talented writer, he is reported to have said: "the best editors are certainly converted, repressed and transformed writers."

Built on successes and failure, his intellectual trajectory is revealing of a Being in permanent search of himself. Nora puts his trajectory in doubt, criticizes academic norms and refuses to lock himself inside a single discipline. However, alongside the apparent frustrations and lack of success (the public contests for admission to the École Normale Supérieure, giving up an already started thesis, giving up on collective works), numerous achievements can be found. Thanks to his gift for writing, his anticipated vision and his tireless curiosity, Pierre Nora obtained the very difficult *agrégation* in history (a public competition to become a professor of National Education), anticipated the creation of new historiographical models and managed to survive the crisis of the human and social sciences, creating in 1980 a journal open to intellectual debates.

Recounting this 'intellectual adventure' requires the resources of psychoanalysis from a good biographer. François Dosse is thus led to emphasize the traumatic experience experienced by the young Pierre at the age of 12. Of

Jewish origin, totally assimilated in the French republic, the Nora family (originally Aron before the nineteenth century) was nonetheless considered “a Jewish family more French than the French.” Having taken refuge with relatives in the south of France at the moment of the German occupation, Pierre saved himself from a *rafle* (a checkpoint to arrest Jews) organized by the Gestapo. In the words of his biographer, this drastic episode gave him a certain anxiety and seriousness about his existence, marking him for life.

In the opinion of François Dosse, the memory of this event would probably impact on his later intellectual work, leading him to rethink the categories of memory and history: “[This] would undeniably be Pierre Nora’s most decisive contribution to historiography; his Jewish singularity led him to valorize the memory – the *Zakhor* [‘remember’] –, but also to submit it to an uninterrupted barrage of the criticism of the historic discipline, historic vigilance.”

Other clues which can explain his choices or his refusals are surveyed: the authoritarianism of his father, the success of an older brother (a brilliant student at the prestigious École Nationale d’Administration (ENA), and a high ranking civil servant in the area of finance and a councilor of Mendès France, and president of the council of ministers of the Fourth Republic), his initial passion for literature and poetry, the critical spirit in relation to the rhetoric and philosophy taught in to the youth. The latter justified his triple failure in the public competitions for admission to the École Normale Supérieure. Destined for future philosophers, the ENS was a ‘place of passage’ for the intellectual elite and the ‘Parisian republican.’

Nevertheless, the writing of *Les Français d’Algérie* (1961) would awaken his interest in archives. Nora had idealized while still in Julliard the launching of a paperback collection that would present to readers the integrality of archives, accompanied by comments on the part of specialists. Entitled ‘Archives,’ this collection, published in 1964, seemed to renew the discipline of history. His project for launching new collections, this time in Gallimard took shape in the ‘Bibliothèque des sciences humaines,’ ‘Bibliothèque des histoires’ and in the collection ‘Témoins.’

His publishing successes, nevertheless, did not prevent him from elaborating his own thinking. In a letter written at the end of the 1960s, Edgar Morin demonstrated his anxiety and states:

You increasingly jail your first personality, who I think is a dreamer, meditative, affectionate, full of deep curiosities which go elsewhere. There is no solution in sight, but there is a path: cultivate your own philosophy. This does

not mean – write a thesis or a book, or ride a horse. This only means that it is time to look for the expression of what most counts within yourself.

According to François Dosse, the great work in Pierre Nora's life was carried out through his intimate connection with France, through the intermediation of 'sites of memory,' he even states that a 'Nora moment,' similar to a 'Michelet moment' and a 'Lavissee moment,' will mark French historiography.

This 'memorial' venture, coordinated by Pierre Nora originated in his seminar on the history of the present in the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and would last for more than 10 years, being concluded in 1993 with the publication of the last tome of 'Sites of Memory.' Proposing to return to the questioning of the nation through the analysis of 'sites of memory' (material, symbolic, functional), the first tome was concerned with the Republic (one volume about the nineteenth century), the second (3 volumes) with the Nation (from the Middle Ages on), and the third (3 volumes) with the Frances (*les France*).

A notable historiographic and epistemological work in the intellectual trajectory of Nora, this 'venture' occupies a central space in his biography. In the chapter entitled 'The factory of sites of memory,' François Dosse describes the preparation of his historiographic production noting that in the 1980s and 1990s the expression 'sites of memory' came to be part of current language. While the notion of memory emerges in the territory of French historians, it is presented in a supporting role in the category of history. Through the 'sites of memory' Pierre Nora will provide a "personal historic response to this ambiguous situation of the French intellectual Jew; this [situation] resulting from his passionate relationship with his editorial monument."

Nevertheless, since the 1970s France has witnessed the emergence of hidden memories, repressed by official history. Consequently the phenomenon of the *après coup*, the traumatism expressed by survivors of the catastrophes of the twentieth century will sensitively modify the approach to the past. However, far from expressing the dialectic of memory and forgetting (of collective memory), 'sites of memory' (responsible for the return of the national question through the intermediation of memory and politics) was built as a study of French heritage.

Although recognizing its heuristic value, I share the criticisms made by some French historians (cited by Dosse). As national heritage (symbolic and material), 'sites of memory' sanctify official history, the myths of the nation,

the sites of cults. Thus, the seven volumes that make up the three tomes of this collection also represent a 'historic moment,' a celebration of French national history. Concerned with the trilogy – the Republic, the Nation and the Frances – the 'sites of memory' unjustifiably do not take into account the analysis of the colonial past, in other words of the French empire and the Algerian war, and forgetting the traumatism of the collective memory (the Vichy government, the Algerian war and the slave trade, amongst others).

Retrospectively analyzing the so-called 'Nora moment' in the current times of the paradigm of *global history* brings historians to express series reservations in relation to the historic matrix of the nation state. Furthermore, the notion of 'national identity' (intrinsic and explicit to this work), which is transformed into a polemical and dangerous category in current day France, obliges historians to review the historic and historiographic interpretations of previous decades.

In contrast, Pierre Nora's later venture in intellectual history is of fundamental importance. Created in 1980, the journal *Le Débat* (directed by Pierre Nora, Marcel Gauchet and Krzysztof Pomian) proposed to rethink new intellectual models and/or 'the changing of paradigms' in the human sciences. Open to innovation, reflection, foreign contributions and above all to the heterogeneity of ideas, it installed itself in the intellectual landscape as an obligatory reference.

"The keyword to describe *Le Débat* is opening, a will to decompartmentalize, to break through borders, both disciplinary and national." During the 30 years of its existence, the spirit of renovation and sensitivity in relation to the historical and intellectual mutations of the moment seemed current.

Conjugating the history of the intellectual, intellectual history and the history of French historiography (in the last 50 years), this biographical study offers the reader a stimulating journey through ideas. Covering different scenarios – institutions, persons, works and social networks –, François Dosse reconstitutes political and intellectual tensions, ideological debates, models of analysis, etc, through the original journey of a discrete 'aristocrat of the left.'