

Zombai T.: A történész igaz arca – [The true face of the historian]

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- 43 -

MARC BLOCH: A TÖRTÉNÉSZ MESTERSÉGE. TÖRTÉNETELMÉLETI
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[MARCH BLOCH: THE HISTORIAN'S CRAFT]

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Abstract: Bloch was not merely a historian, but a defender of freedom, honour, and human dignity. If Seneca's words apply to anyone, they surely apply to him: 'The secret of wisdom is when words and deeds are in harmony.' A polymath who transformed historical writing, and a citizen who gave his life for his nation. When the Gestapo arrested him, his interrogating officer asked:

'Why would such a learned man join the Resistance?'

Bloch's alleged reply was:

'Because I am a learned man. I know what freedom means.'

Keywords: Annales d'histoire économique et sociale, historian, sociology, science, source criticism, resistance, mentality, historical anthropology, interdisciplinary

Introduction

The greatest honour that can be bestowed on a scholar is to be recognised as immortal. This happened to Marc Bloch in November 2024, when President Macron inducted him into the Pantheon: 'Pour son œuvre, son enseignement et son courage, nous décidons que Marc Bloch entrera au Panthéon.' (In honour of his work, his teaching and his courage, we decide that Marc Bloch will be inducted into the Pantheon.)

What makes this act even more significant is that there are few disciplines of science as often criticised as history. The works of Marc Bloch (1886-1944) provide an excellent example that continuous criticism does not undermine historical writing. Quite the contrary, it inspires historians. Bloch was never one to seek easy solutions. Following in his father's footsteps, he graduated from the elite school, École normale supérieure. After that he studied in Berlin and Leipzig and spent three years working on his dissertation while receiving a grant from the Thiers Foundation. Like for his whole generation, World War 1 was a formative experience for Bloch. His experience of war psychosis appears in several of his works, including *The Historian's Craft*. In 1929, Bloch and his friend, Lucien Febvre, founded the academic journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, which revolutionised historical writing.

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After the war, between 1919 and 1936, he was a professor at the University of Strasbourg. The intellectual and political scene in Strasbourg and the efforts by the state to 'rebuild' France provided a great setting for the development of Bloch and Lucien Febvre's modern, open and interdisciplinary school of history. In *Les Rois thaumaturges* (The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France), written in 1924 and still popular today, Bloch explores a peculiar rite, a ceremony when French and English kings healed people by merely touching them. With this work, Bloch founded the history of mentalities, and due to the new elements in its methodology, *Les Rois thaumaturges* is considered the first work of historical anthropology.

In 1931, he published a true masterpiece: 'Les Caractères Originaux de l'Histoire Rurale Française' (French rural history; an essay on its basic characteristic) describes French agrarian history from the early Middle Ages to the French revolution. He discussed topics like the history of the soil, the climate, crop rotation, the technologies used and the economy, as well as archaeology, ethnography and everything else related to agriculture.

Despite having a successful career, marriage and family life, he voluntarily enlisted in 1940, becoming the oldest captain of the French army. After the German invasion, he wrote this line by Corneille in his notebook in October 1940: 'Je ne hais point la vie, et j'en aime l'usage/ Mais sans attachement qui sente l'esclavage. (I do not hate life and I like living it, but without attachment that smells of slavery). When he wrote this, he was 54 years old, had six children and suffered from painful polyarthrititis. He had just finished his book *L'Etrange Défaite* (Strange Defeat), a significant historical work published only in 1946, after the liberation he had longed for and two years after he was executed. His life confirmed the truth of Seneca's words: 'The secret of wisdom is when words and deeds are in harmony.' During the occupation, in February 1943, he went to Lyon and joined the Franc-Tireur resistance movement. He was arrested, tortured, and on 16 June 1944, executed by the Gestapo. No-one knows their destiny, but we know that Bloch had been pondering about violent death and destruction from an early age. He wrote goodbye letters during World War 1 already. In his intellectual testament, dated 18 March 1941, he discusses general moral issues much more than he did in his early writings.' [Granasztói, 1997.]

As he was Jewish, when the Vichy government introduced anti-Jewish laws in 1940, he was dismissed from the university, and was gradually forced out of public life. He wrote this work during the German occupation of France, driven by both personal and historical motivations. 'The Historian's Craft is a special intellectual testament. Covertly, the tragedy of Bloch's life is there on every page.

The impact of Bloch and the Annales in Hungary

Hungarian historians were aware of Bloch and the Annales School in the interwar period, and the first issue of the Annales was cited by György Komoróczy in a review of a German monograph in the August-October 1930 issue of *Századok*. [Czoch, 2015] After the World

War, the relations between Hungarian and Western European academia were partly formalised and partly uninstitutionalised. 'With regard to pre-1945 professional conventions in Hungary, there was a "collective forgetting" [Csiki et al.]. There was a reason why the latter authors had a subchapter in their paper with the title 'The age of decline'. With the dominance of the Marxist-Leninist approach, civil and non-Marxist movements and the works of contemporary Western historians could not be published. In this context we can clearly see the significance of Braudel's visit to Hungary in 1962 and of the fact that he established formal relations with Hungarian historians. Following this visit, in early 1963, the Institute of History received books from Braudel and entered almost a hundred French works in its collection. What made this really significant was that the majority of these works had been newly or recently published and they discussed mostly economic and social history focusing on the period between the 11th and 19th centuries. The list of authors included Marc Bloch, Braudel, Adelaine Daumard, Georges Duby, Lucien Febvre, Georges Friedmann, François Furet, Pierre Goubert and Paul Leuillot. These books provided a comprehensive view of the achievements of French historians and of the Annales. [Czoch, 2015:125]

However, this did not lead to a breakthrough in Hungarian historical writing. The Historian's Craft was published in seven editions in France between 1949 and 1974 and it was released eight times in Italy. It was published several times after 1954 in England, and it was available in the Soviet Union in 1973. [Gyula Benda's afterword to the 1996 Hungarian edition] This delay is especially sad considering that in 1974, when the Hungarian edition was published, Duby, while calling it a 'grand texte', warned that this great text was already obsolete. 'This great text has become outdated. It disappoints. It is a bit too quiet, whispering. [...] It is weighed down by large amounts of slag...' This excerpt is highlighted by both Benda 1996 and Granasztói, 1997.

Marc Bloch would certainly not have taken offense reading this. He always proudly embraced the intellectual legacy of his masters, Langlois and Seignobos, saying that the very progress of our studies is founded upon the inevitable opposition between generations of scholars. 'I shall be keeping faith with their teaching in criticising them most freely whenever I may deem it useful; just as I hope, some day, that my pupils will criticise me in their turn.' [Bloch, 1996:137.] One of the first reviews of the first Hungarian edition also elaborated on this thought. 'In this rapidly changing world, and especially due to the spontaneous pressure by the disciplines of natural science that justify their existence every day and are often able to support themselves, social science research has gradually been forced to face the hard questions of "why do we exist" and "how can we contribute". History can only regain its diminished confidence and feeling of self-worth if it tries to answer questions instead of pushing them aside or trying to circumvent them.' [Szakály, 1974: 98.] According to Bloch, the problem was that critical techniques were practiced, at least with any consistency, almost exclusively by a handful of scholars, exegetes, and

connoisseurs. Besides oral and written documents that reveal personal motivations, historians must rely on a number of other sources that help them understand the facts and institutions of the social past. Writers engaged in historical works of the high-flown sort scarcely bothered to familiarise themselves with such laboratory exercises, far too detailed for their taste, or even to take their results into account. Now, as Humboldt put it, it is never good for chemists to be afraid 'of getting their hands wet.' [Bloch, 1996:65.]

Bloch the moralist

'This work has two objectives. First to educate the public about history, its methods, goals and limitations; second, and perhaps even more importantly, to offer to historians the fruits of experience that were acquired through the use of highly refined tools. Not only did he apply these tools often, but he also tested their effectiveness and capability to meet the requirements of the research topic and of creation. In this regard, this work is inevitably a commentary on *Introduction aux Études historiques*'. [Doehaerd, 1951] The book, in fact, is so much more. According to Granasztói, for the modern reader, who would prefer a more concise and sometimes more nuanced style, the style of the book is reminiscent of the spoken word.' [Granasztói, 1997:285]

What some see as a weakness is, in fact, what makes the book fresh and intellectually lively, offering a combination of source criticism and irony. "'With ink, anyone can write anything.'" Thus exclaimed an eleventh-century country squire of Lorraine in reference to some monks who had armed themselves in a lawsuit against him with documentary proofs.' [BLOCH 1996:99.] He warns that in the face of an abundance of forgeries, doubt was frequently a natural defensive reflex. Historians 'render history rather as they receive it, than as they evaluate it.' [Bloch, 1996:99.] Perhaps this is why he chose *Seignobos'* bon mot as his motto: 'It is useful to ask oneself questions, but very dangerous to answer them'. [Bloch, 1996:19.] Fortunately, he takes this idea further. 'Where would physics be today if the physicists had shown no greater daring?'

'History can be a science only to the extent that it explains, and one can explain only by comparing. But as history becomes comparable, it is no longer different from sociology.' [Gyula Benda quoting Durkheim]

'When the medieval merchant, after spending the day in violating church commandments on usury and just prices, went off to kneel sanctimoniously before the image of Our Lady, or when in the evening of his life he heaped up pious charitable endowments; when the great manufacturer of a sterner age built hospitals with money saved out of the wages of ragged children, were either of them seeking, as is usually said, only to obtain a rather cheap insurance against heavenly wrath, or were they not rather, by these outbursts of faith or philanthropy, also satisfying, almost without conscious recognition, those secret needs of the heart which harsh daily routine had forced them to repress?' [Bloch, 1996:107]

If Max Weber's style reflects a certain neurotic pressure, Bloch's style represents the disposition of a person with anxiety who wants to give an account, escape and find the peace of solitude all at once. (Granasztói, 1997:285) But this is exactly why we can relate more to the author not just as a scholar but also as a human being. In the chapter Historical analysis, he reveals his doubts: 'In daily life, the demands of conduct compel us to use these ordinarily rather summary labels. (...) Are we so sure of ourselves and of our age as to divide the company of our forefathers into the just and the damned?' (Bloch, 1996:99.) 'Hollow indictments are followed by vain rehabilitations. Robespierrists! Anti-Robespierrists! For pity's sake, simply tell us what Robespierre was.' (Bloch, 1996:99.)

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- 48 -

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Absztrakt: Bloch nem csupán historikus volt, hanem a szabadság, a becsület, az emberi méltóság védelmezője. Ha valakire, rá biztosan érvényes Seneca mondása: A bölcsesség titka, mikor a szavak és tettek összecsengenek. Polihisztor, aki megújította a történetírást, polgár, aki életét adta nemzetéért. Amikor a Gestapo letartóztatta kihallgató tisztje megkérdezte:

– „Maga tanult ember, miért csatlakozott az ellenálláshoz?”

Bloch válasza állítólag ez volt:

– „Mert tanult ember vagyok. Tudom, mit jelent a szabadság.”

