



# The challenge of meaning the past: The teaching of medieval history in Brazil

Mário Jorge da Motta Bastos

Universidade Federal Fluminense, Rua Miguel de Frias, 9, 24220-900, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. E-mail: velhomario@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT.** The professionals who teach History, at any level in which their teaching is exercised, are increasingly threatened in their activity and challenged in their essential condition of exercise – the mobilization of the public – by a growing sense of contempt for the past, especially the more remote, within the framework of capitalist societies that are only recognized in projections for the future. To this we dedicate, more and more, our greatest feeling of empathy! The ‘daily dismantling in the air of any and all expressions of historical solidity’ frees us from the feeling of the weight of time on our backs, accelerating history in a present that is experienced as a constant change that only links us to the future, only projects us ahead. Historicity increasingly seems to reside in science fiction, and past tense in novels that celebrate a lost world or that may not have even existed! In view of this scenario, historians in general, and medievalists (and antiquists!) in particular, need to reflect on the conditions, perspectives, practices and meanings of the study and teaching of our ‘time slices’ in all levels of education in Brazil. How is the present and what will be the future of this past in the intellectual formation of Brazilians?

**Keywords:** medieval history; brazilian medievalistic; historical consciousness; appropriations of the past; education.

## O desafio de significar o passado: o ensino da história medieval no Brasil

**RESUMO.** Os profissionais que lecionam História, em qualquer nível em que seu magistério se exerça, estão cada vez mais ameaçados em sua atividade e desafiados numa sua condição de exercício essencial – a mobilização do público – por um crescente sentimento de desprezo pelo passado, em especial os mais remotos, no quadro de sociedades capitalistas que só se reconhecem em projeções para o futuro. A esse dedicamos, cada vez mais, o nosso maior sentimento de empatia! O ‘desmanche cotidiano no ar de toda e qualquer expressão de solidez histórica’ nos livra da sensação do peso do tempo sobre nossas costas, acelerando a história num presente que é vivido como mudança constante que só nos vincula ao futuro, só nos projeta à frente, ao vir a ser. A historicidade parece cada vez mais residir na ficção científica, e o tempo pretérito nos romances que celebram um mundo perdido ou que talvez nem tenha existido! Tendo em vista este cenário, impõe-se aos historiadores em geral, e aos medievalistas (e antiquistas!) em particular, refletir sobre as condições, perspectivas, práticas e sentidos do estudo e da docência de nossas ‘fatias de duração do tempo’ em todos os níveis do ensino no Brasil. Como é o presente e qual será o futuro deste passado na formação intelectual dos brasileiros?

**Palavras-chave:** história medieval; medievalística brasileira; consciência histórica; apropriações do passado; ensino.

## El desafío de denotar el pasado: la enseñanza de la historia medieval en Brasil

**RESUMEN.** Los profesionales que enseñan Historia, en cualquier nivel en el que se ejerza su docencia, se ven cada vez más amenazados en su actividad y desafiados en su condición esencial de ejercicio – la movilización del público – por un creciente sentimiento de desprecio por el pasado, especialmente el más remoto, en el marco de sociedades capitalistas que solo se reconocen en proyecciones hacia el futuro. ¡A eso dedicamos, cada vez más, nuestro mayor sentimiento de empatía! El ‘desmantelamiento cotidiano en el aire de todas y cada una de las expresiones de solidez histórica’ nos libera de la sensación del peso del tiempo sobre nuestras espaldas, acelerando la historia en un presente que se vive como un cambio constante que solo nos vincula al futuro, solo nos proyecta hacia adelante. La historicidad parece residir cada vez más en la ficción científica, y el tiempo pasado en las novelas que celebran un mundo perdido o que puede que ni siquiera haya existido. Ante este escenario, los historiadores en general, y los medievalistas (¡y los anticuarios!) en particular, necesitan reflexionar sobre las condiciones, perspectivas, prácticas y

significados del estudio y la enseñanza de nuestras ‘frangas de duración del tiempo’ en todos los niveles de educación en Brasil. ¿Cómo es el presente y cuál será el futuro de este pasado en la formación intelectual de los brasileños?

**Palabras-clave:** historia medieval; medievalística brasileña; conciencia histórica; apropiaciones del pasado; enseñanza.

Received on August 10, 2020.  
Accepted on February 01, 2021.

## Introduction

Today, the diverse and continuous demands that are imposed on Human Sciences professionals seem evidently in favor of the affirmation of legitimacy and the need to preserve the fields of knowledge that feed their research. If systematic and generally academic knowledge is under attack, the Human Sciences, and in its scope, History and, at this level, the history of ‘remote societies’ have deserved particular redoubled condemnation. I have gathered in a recently published article (Bastos, 2017) some news of these attacks, which come to us from Latin America, Asia, and Great Britain, where, for example, the local equivalent of our Minister of Education ruled against the application of public resources in the payment of salaries of university professors dedicated to Medieval History (which in their case is terrifyingly conceived as Homeland History, that of Great Britain’s medieval past).

If there is anything positive about this whole movement — in an extreme effort of optimism —, it resides in the demand that is created in us to reflect on our practice, the composition and performance of our field, in short, the arguments for its legitimation and valorization. In the case of the study of ‘remote societies’ such as those incumbent upon us, an even greater effort is required to promote their updating, their significance in the ongoing present. I believe that professionals who teach History, at whatever level their teaching is exercised, are increasingly threatened in their activity and challenged in one of their essential exercise condition — the mobilization of the public — by a growing sense of historical contempt for the past, especially the most remote ones, in the framework of capitalist societies that, with increasing intensity, only recognize themselves in projections for the future.

We dedicate, more and more, our greatest feeling of empathy to the future! The ‘daily dismantling into the air of any expression of historical solidity’ seems to free us from the feeling of the weight of time on our backs, accelerating history in a present that is experienced as constant change that only binds us to the future, projects us forward, to the coming-into-being. Historicity seems to reside more and more in science fiction, and the past in novels and media that celebrate a lost world or one that perhaps never even existed, lived by ‘half-human-half-beastly’ beings perhaps stranger than extraterrestrials! Our feeling of rupture with the past is almost quotidian! Given this scenario, it is necessary for historians in general, and medievalists (and antiquists!) in particular, to reflect on the conditions, perspectives, practices, and meanings of the study and teaching of our ‘slices of time duration’ at all levels of education in Brazil.

To promote this effort to keep History alive and pulsating in the present, it is important, first, to reaffirm the strictly social character of the exercise of the historian’s function. Every historian, no matter how reclusive and autonomous he or she intends to remain in his or her office, is a resonance box for the demands and anxieties imposed on him/her by the society in which he/she lives. Does the ‘environmental issue’ afflict us in the face of fear of the destruction of the planet? The historian gives it a temporal dimension, considering the possibilities, levels, and limits historically inherent to the basic condition of the existence of our species, the transforming relationship with nature developed by all human societies inscribed in History. Environmental History is then constituted; this line of reasoning could be applied to many other fronts.

To arrange, to situate in time, this is our fundamental ‘skill’. Every historian is, fundamentally, a ‘perspectivator’ of the present, which only assumes historical specificity and is only understandable through its temporal back projection. Historical knowledge is always the unveiling of a context, one which we only fully reach by contrast (with other contexts). History is always, although rarely assumed as such, comparative, and is performed for the benefit of the present, aiming at a future.

Our discipline constitutes — which is even witnessed by the diversity of perspectives that characterize it today — an arena of conflicts between opposing projects of synthesis of past and present, and of desire for the future. I affirm that our most essential responsibility resides in vehemently denouncing any supposed ‘inevitability of the present’, which has become as it is due to the absolute lack of alternatives and the unilaterality that would characterize the historical process. But how to promote the complaint? Unveiling in

each past its various alternatives for the future, the possibilities of becoming that they contained and that were overcome and surpassed by the dominant current that imposed itself on History. Every 'fixed point' that is considered in the temporal flux embeds in itself diverse possible futures — in the plural and open — in dispute, and, therefore, no becoming is inevitable. Historical knowledge is not just the 'technical' and 'cold' result of the synthesis between a documentary corpus and the theoretical-methodological instruments that the historian mobilizes to address it, but of an open policy towards the future, a terrain of struggle by the objectivity in which the past is also the object of disputes and appropriations (Frosini, 2013).

Recently, a certain history of the Middle Ages has served as a support base par excellence for extreme right-wing groups in the world and in Brazil, as a supposed and celebrated period of formation of Western Judeo-Christian values and the predominance of 'white power' in the fight against infidels and heretics. The crossword slogan '*Deus vult* — God wills it that way' was issued several times in recent years, including by Brazilian government authorities (Pachá, 2019). Having to face, since the beginning of the constitution of the field, the many deforming 'legends' elaborated about the Middle Ages — both the obscurantist and the romanticized ones —, I allow myself to assume that the medievalists are, by (de)formation, especially capable of daily attendance of the real contest where the tournaments of appropriation of the past take place, ready for the confrontation with the extemporaneous 'crusaders' of today.

Thus, what we are allowed to refer to, very generically, as the 'past' is the object of an intense dispute in each 'present', the latter intending to appropriate the former for the affirmation of its own meaning. And this dispute does not take place in any vacuum, but in the field of historiography itself, fostering diverse and systematic revisionisms of different shades. In view of this scenario, it is necessary for us to reflect on the conditions, perspectives, practices, and meanings of the study and teaching of our 'slices of time' at all levels of education in Brazil. How will national medievalism be equipped for the battles that we are, perhaps as never before, called to wage?

Next, what I am going to propose to you configure broad initial propositions in search of interlocutors that favor their improvement, or even, of course, their abandonment if they are found unsustainable. First, what is aimed here is the dialogue, which increases in profundity with controversy. I begin by considering the potential bases for the vigor of certain perspectives still predominant in (our) medievalism, and which seem to me to require revision. Above all, I consider the weight of the authorities that imposed themselves in our constitution, whose references we seem to want to perpetuate at all costs, even when several of their parameters were subjected to criticism, revision, and even abandonment in their centers of origin and diffusion.

### Dominant trends

From our context of 'institutional foundation' — which, without denying the work of the pioneers, I place in the second half of the 1980s — certain dominant perspectives of approach derive that were decisive in awakening the 'passion for the Middle Ages' which mobilized and set on the march a veritable 'Brancaleone's army'... I suspect, moreover, that the enormous power of seduction of medieval times at that time — which mobilized us to study it — was less a result of the 'Middle Ages itself', as a specific context, and more of the dazzling historiographical innovations that took place, especially in France, with the so-called 'third generation of the *Annales*', captained, 'fortunately for the medieval', by medievalists such as Jacques Le Goff and Georges Duby, among others (Bastos, 2016).

The full fertility seeds previously cultivated by giants such as Marc Bloch vivified, and the abundant fruits of their harvest would cross oceans to reach even Brazil. It was the historiographical renovation that was then promoted that, having to a high degree the slice of time that was conventionally called the Middle Ages as its preferential laboratory, reconfigured the field, redirected the interest of historians, led them to value dimensions of the real until then little considered, unveiling expressions of those societies that revolutionized the knowledge of the period. Medievalism would never be the same, but...

Time passed and, as the French themselves seem to recognize, the Medieval History they promoted has long since ceased to be the 'flagship of the discipline' (Franco Júnior, 1986), both of History, in general, and of Medieval in particular. And it is not me, a medievalist from the periphery of the academic world, who says so. Already recognized by Alain Guerreau (2001) at the beginning of this millennium and, since then, there have been several manifestations in the same direction, some explicitly nostalgic for the end of a time when a book like *Montaillou, Village Occitan de 1294 a 1324*, by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1975) reached the status

of best-seller, sold in France on newsstands... Still in the last decades of the past century, criticism of certain perspectives of the *Nouvelle Histoire* grew, with some theoretical weaknesses from which it suffered pointed out (Dosse, 1992), as well as certain distortions and preferential options of approach that would have captured the Middle Ages from certain specific angles, overestimated at the expense of many others...

Of all this potential debate, what matters to me, in essence, is the hypothesis that many of the dominant perspectives continue determining our priority ways of promoting medievalities, due to the original weight and function they had in our constitution. Perhaps a good part of their resilience derives from the authority assigned to the 'founding fathers', which demands reflection if we aim to take a critical position in relation to the promotion of Medieval History in our country. I need to point out, right away, two aspects: it is not about pointing out errors and circumscribing their reasons, but about prospecting trends and trying to consider what they represent and what they induce; moreover, when dealing with the teaching of History, I assume the production of historical knowledge at all levels in which such teaching is promoted, obviously keeping in mind the necessary specifics. I will focus on three basic propensities, and I regret doing this more schematically than I would like and should, to consider their ramifications.

In the first place, the predominance, in medieval's approaches, of an emic perspective (Kottak, 2006; Xia, 2011) which, insisting on the radical constitutive alterity of medieval societies in relation to those of their scholars (ours, in this case), invests in its scrutiny 'from within'. Thus, the viewpoint(s) of the 'natives' is assumed or privileged, operating with understanding schemes intrinsic to the society studied by mobilizing the categories of their own culture and worldview. This position is taken to the detriment of a perspective identified as 'ethics', that is, in which approaches are guided by promoting a kind of 'translation' of the elements of 'culture' analyzed to the categories and concepts that inform the researcher's context. This perspective would address the object it focuses on from its own analysis and interpretation schemes, that is, from 'outside' the society in question (as the *outsider* that it indeed is).

The medievalist that has the most emphatic defense of the predominant orientation I have just pointed out is French. I am referring to Alain Guerreau and his thesis, presented in several works (Guerreau, 1980 and 2001), of the 'double conceptual fracture' which, occurring in the 18th century, would have challenged our ability to perceive the medieval past. The advent of bourgeois society, with the transformations that have taken place since then, would have broken the ties with that past, depriving us of its categories of apprehension of the world and the ability to dialogue with it: realities were split, their institutions disfigured, promoting such a brutal and extreme rupture that the intercommunication would have started to promote, at most, dialogues between the deaf. We and the medieval people would not share systems of thought and would not even speak mutually understandable languages!

Thus, the imposition on the Middle Ages of categories and interpretation schemes foreign to the context itself would constitute a primary error that would lead to the unavoidable distortion of the representations we make of those societies. In a famous text (Guerreau, 2001), the author even insinuates that the translation of contemporary Latin expressions into our current languages would promote a complete loss of meaning and, with it, the incomprehension of the power of words. Regretting being brief in my criticism, I tell you that the position in question constitutes, in my opinion, a huge mistake, promoting several contradictions and limitations.

First, it derives from this position, to a great extent, a mystique or fetish of documentation manifested in many of the current propositions of a return to sources, to their hermeneutic exegesis that reigns in our medievalism. Well, the sources are not fragments of truth, faithful and effective records of a full past towards which we must bow in wonder, awestruck and dumbfounded. They are partial enunciations, both revealing and sublimating the portions of reality to which they refer, both promoting and limiting the knowledge of the society from which they emanate. Their speeches divulge the superficial appearance of social relations as they were presented to the individuals who were immersed in them, and confuse this appearance with the essence that structured that same society in its structuring social relations.

If I admit, with Guerreau, the profound transformations that marked the advent of industrial bourgeois society, I do not believe that it would result in an 'epistemological damage' that would have depressed our capacity to apprehend medieval society. On the contrary, the possibility of professional history arises precisely from this process! It was such a 'fracture' that inscribed us in a 'political economy' (Fontana, 1998)<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "An explanation of the system of relationships that exist between men, which serves to justify and rationalize them — and, with them, the elements of inequality and exploitation that they include —, presenting them as a form of social division of labor and functions, which not only appears now as a result of historical progress but as the form of organization that maximizes the common good" (Fontana, 1998, p. 7).

strange to the mystifications of the feudal order, and made it possible for us to approach it with conditions of perception and truly critical instruments. Our 'point of disposition' in the future of time and our potentialities of 'temporal projection' are a condition of the History we make, and they are an advantage. Our function is to translate the past into understandable bases for the assimilation of the present itself, which results from the contrasts and assimilations between them, just as the task of classical anthropology is not to explain primitive societies to primitive peoples, but to the societies in which anthropologists work. It is always about knowledge produced for the benefit of the other who is also us, and of the present in progress aiming to elucidate it.

Furthermore, the radicalization of the perspective of the 'conceptual and epistemological fracture' can lead us to a greater loss — here, in my opinion, is the essential point —, that of suppressing the sense of temporal articulation in the long historical duration. When we insist on the 'fractured' alterity of the Middle Ages, we abdicate the perception of temporal transit, and the worst result of this perspective is not so much the deformation of the past, but the impossibility of apprehending the constitution of the present as a result of the historical process, reducing it to mere contingency! Medieval societies are a radical specificity that constitute themselves, however, as a specific historical realization of fundamental structural elements of human sociability in all spatio-temporal quadrants of our existence.

There, men and women reproduced societies, organized themselves to produce, were subjected to exploitation, developed forms of struggle and resistance, loved, suffered, lived, died..., giving rise to specific manifestations of constitutive experiences of our humanity. The approach of any slice of temporal duration must overcome the emic and ethical perspectives in favor of dialectics (Rosa & Orey, 2012), which retains from the outset the representations produced within that society — after all, this is what the primary sources reveal to us, their 'self-image(s)' — submitting them to a rigorous interpretative critique that mobilizes the theoretical references and analytical instruments that we continue to improve in the practice of our discipline. Oblivious to such a perspective, we will be unable to dispute historical consciousness in the present, unable to speak of History with those whose hearing is feasible because they can hear us. Otherwise, we will continue trying to speak with the dead...

Secondly, I 'denounce' the predominance of analyzes preferentially devoted to the field of 'mentalities', or to the manifestations, above all, of the ideals that constitute the social reality. This is a trend in which perhaps the prevailing perspectives are most felt in the context of our foundation. Thus, even though one of the exponents of the third generation of the *Annales*, Georges Duby (1971), explicitly proposed the construction of a Social History that would work by promoting the articulation between phenomena of a material order and those inscribed at the level of mentalities, the generation in question was much more notable for the promotion of the latter. And, in doing so, if he did not treat it as an autonomous structure or even 'disincarnated' from the materiality of existence, he dedicated himself very little to the task of establishing the links, relations, and operative determinations between those dimensions of reality. Is this still a current perspective among us? The oneiric Middle Ages that we were in love with from the start was a world mainly manifested in dreams, imaginations, beliefs, and expressions of religiosity, a universe apparently alien to and uninterested in the most material and founding processes of human reproduction.

There is no doubt that the predominant content of medieval records feeds this perspective. In other words, medieval documentation is comparatively poorer in references that lead us more directly to its material expressions — in particular, to the world of production — compared to the vestiges in which phenomena of the generic order of the 'imaginary' are expressed. Will this result in further reinforcement that determines the main focus of our approaches? Does the handling, which tends to predominate among us, of printed and, in a broad sense, literary sources, once again particularly fond of those expressions, also derive from our distance from the main document collections? The power of attraction of these literary sources is undeniable. Is this not the face that continues to excite the public and promote the wealth of authors, publishers, creators of electronic games, and film producers, who disseminate a Middle Age full of dragons and warriors and alien to the presence — at most presented as part of the landscape — of their servile masses?

Honestly, I am mobilized by all the images of different professors and enthusiasts dedicating their efforts to the construction of costly replicas of medieval weapons, for example. However, with the preponderant incidence of these ways of resignifying the medieval, aren't we essentially reinforcing stereotypes? Or will there be time, in celebrations like these, especially when watered with mead, to discuss in depth the fundamental reasons for the structural violence characteristic of medieval society? Will we always make their critique or, above all, will we reproduce soothing images of shining knights who would fight for their honor

and for the help of the unprotected that they themselves, however, systematically took charge of impoverishing and tearing apart? In this way, perhaps we medievalists can share the crumbs of the success experienced by the celebrities of the virtual medieval, but at what cost? Is this the path of medievalism, disputing the historical consciousness of a public eager for distraction? Will the survival of the discipline depend on its transformation into an instrument for escapism?

Thirdly and finally, I address what might be taken to be a real heresy. With all the mistakes, problems, and deformations that characterized the proposals of the Common National Curriculum Base (*Base Nacional Comum Curricular* – BNCC, Associação Nacional de História [ANPUH], 2020) that we have confronted in recent years, they make a precise denunciation that, as such, makes us pale. Our Medieval History is decidedly Eurocentric! I anticipate saying that it does not need to and should not be, but let us recognize that it is. Perhaps even Francophile, but this is an assumption whose validity still depends on verification. If confirmed, I suspect that our origin plays, once again here, an essential role. After all, the ‘medieval West’ of the French at that time essentially encompassed the Frankish regions of the Carolingian world, that is, Gaul itself, the west of Germania, and the north of Italy. In the undergraduate course in History at the Fluminense Federal University, for example, where I have been teaching for 28 years, the syllabus of the basic discipline of Medieval History is still referenced by that ‘concept’ and having the Frank world as a reference, currently falling to some optional courses the shift of focus, for example, to the Iberian Peninsula.

The question is: what Middle Ages, after all, concern us? In countries like Brazil and so many others that have experienced the modern colonial system as colonies, the respective European Middle Ages are often requested as part of a projected story about colonization (Bastos, 2017). Those of us who are ‘young for a longer time’ will remember the debates about the feudal character of our colonization, a perspective that was also taken up on new bases a few years ago – with very little debate among us, by the way – by the French Jérôme Baschet (2006). If, as I suppose, our Brazilian medievalism is predominantly dedicated to French Medieval History, including in the classroom, would such a predominance be natural and legitimate? But on what basis is it founded? In the attribution to the ‘Frank World’ of a condition of centrality in the history of that period? This conception is inadequate in my judgment. Should we, on the other hand, request as ‘our heritage’ the Iberian medieval, especially the Portuguese? Initially, I note that, for the Portuguese medievalist Maria de Lurdes Rosa and André Bertoli (2010), the Portuguese medieval is not and should not be our reference, after all, the authors, in a relatively recent article, celebrate the fact that it is not we have taken the Portuguese Middle Ages as the ‘most remote past’ of Brazil!

But, in the event that, contrary to our colleague’s expectations, we request medieval Portuguese as part of our historical trajectory of formation, it would be essential to consider that its ‘traditions’ land on our backs in the context of setting up a violent and rapine colonial system, itself inscribed in a broader process of formation of capitalism that will inscribe us in a subordinate and dependent position in the global order then in formation. Therefore, there would be nothing to romanticize in this process and in the assumption of this potential inheritance...

### **Overcoming eurocentrism**

For my part, I assume, however, that, in any of these ways, Medieval History will maintain an undeniably Eurocentric orientation that needs to be overcome. In fact, the Middle Ages are conceived, by different historiographical traditions, either as a historical period, or as a civilizational stage, and even as a fundamentally Western-European sociological-historical concept. This is because the myth of the Middle Ages served above all as a negative parameter for the construction of Modernity. And the myth needs, I believe, to be definitively overcome, its marked Eurocentrism denounced. By which ways?

Inspired, for example, by our antiquist colleagues, it would be possible to take a more critical and conscious perspective on the integrative role of the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages, the axis of articulation between Western Christianity, Eastern Christianity, and the Islamic world. It is not a question of resuming the ‘old and forced’ perspective of the ‘Eastern Middle Ages’, decomposing the civilizations in question in its study, but of working essentially on their intersections. It would even be possible to rely on a notation explicitly internal to our own context, manifested in the famous medieval versions of the world maps or ‘T and O maps’ which, inspired by the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (Reta & Casquero, 1982), from the early 7th century, represented throughout the Middle Ages the articulation of the three continents, a predominant perspective until the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

This path would take us back to Global History, which would also promote a positive side effect, helping to reverse the predominance in our discipline of the ‘micro’ scale configuration of its objects of study. If for some it constitutes another recent field of studies, it seems to me that Global History (Conrad, 2019) is configured much more as a perspective of scale, approaching historical phenomena, events, and processes through the prism of its insertion in macro or global contexts. It turns, therefore, to the processes of connection and interaction between human communities, investing in the perspective that local, regional, and ‘national’ histories are connected at many levels. The perspective has been particularly dynamic since the end of the 20th century, amid debates about globalization and academic criticisms of the predominantly closed character of national – if not nationalist – histories and of the Eurocentrism that is often predominant in historiography. The establishment of the field took place with the primacy of England, the United States of America, and France itself, keeping a close relationship with the so-called subaltern and post-colonial studies.

And perhaps it is even possible to project an even broader and more radical perspective, that of a Global Medieval History (Frankopan, 2019) – or, in this case, worldwide, as some propose – promoted on a scale that would surpass the effective direct civilizational interactions current in the addressed period, on an even broader scale, the simultaneity of the historical validity of different civilizations that share among themselves a ‘gross chronology’ that would allow us to identify them in their similarities and specificities. In this way, historians would assume time as their matrix and essential raw material of reference, the simultaneous temporality of the existence of civilizations, opening their focus as much as possible to, having defined their parameters of analysis, consider, in a slice of established generic duration in the parameters of Archeology – years before the present –, the constitutive lines of force of these same civilizations laid out in the duration of their validity. A team of historians articulated by Great Britain has been working under such guidance since 2013, bringing together scholars from European, African, Asian, and American societies in the chronological cut of the Medieval period to carry out broad-spectrum comparative studies.

The possibilities are, therefore, many. And if the uncertainties about the medieval past must continue to mobilize us in our studies, above them the uncertainties regarding the potentialities of our own future as a species are imposed. But, the future is open and paves itself in the disputes waged in the present in progress, demanding our mobilization and organized political action aiming to build it against capital and in favor of the full and free realization of our humanity.

The systematic disputes waged – and recently radicalized in our country around the content and form of teaching, at all levels, especially in the area of Human Sciences, with accusations about its leftist ideologization and the mobilization of the infamous School Without Party, as well as reactions to it – are effective indications of the enormous relevance of formal disciplines of knowledge that they intend to deny, disallow and disable. And it could not be otherwise, given the ontological, essential, and organic demand of the human species, for example, for History. A recurring quote from Karl Marx helps us address the issue:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. Thus Luther put on the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately in the guise of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, and the Revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793-95. In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue (Marx, 1961, p. 58).

I count on my reader’s permission to give another long quotation, at least full of poetic language:

The past brings with it a mysterious index, which impels it to redemption. Are we not touched by a breath of air that has been breathed in before? Are there not, in the voices we hear, echoes of voices that have fallen silent? [...] If so, there is a secret meeting, set between previous generations and ours. [...] In this case, as in every generation, we were given a fragile messianic force to which the past appeals. This appeal cannot be rejected with impunity. [...] Just as flowers direct their corolla towards the sun, the past, thanks to a mysterious heliotropism, tries to turn towards the sun that rises in the sky of history. The gift of awakening the sparks of hope in the past is the exclusive privilege of the historian convinced that also the dead will not be safe if the enemy wins. And this enemy has not ceased to win (Benjamin, 1987, p. 222-223).

The passages quoted are open to diverse considerations, but at this point, I would like to highlight one aspect in particular: the realization of our species evoke our daily action on the world, which characterizes us as subjects of History, making our experiences accumulated — the ‘past’ and its projections for the future —, serve as a reference and parameter to any and all human act of creation. “Creation, and even reproduction, are only possible as a recreation of what has already existed, and the totally new, which frees itself from all the shackles of time, remains an unattainable dream” (Cerri, 2001, p. 94).

Is History, then, an essential need, an intrinsic requirement of our condition as a social being? In the temporal articulation in which our existence takes place, how much past is there in our present and in our future? To what extent will the future already be compromised by conditions given in the past and actions taken in the present? Wouldn’t the present be the most void temporal dimension of specific content for collectivities, in historical terms, given that it is constituted by ‘always unequally combined portions’ of elements carried from the past that are projected on it, and by elements in formation that point to the future in the process of constitution? In recent decades, an effective effort has been made — albeit unsystematic, discontinuous, and geographically unequal — to face these issues through the conceptual instrument entitled ‘historical consciousness’.

### **On historical consciousness**

Let us start by pointing out that there are different perspectives on the subject, which I will mention as soon as it is possible to do so here. Schematically, perhaps we should start with the controversy surrounding the ‘innate’ or ‘acquired’ character of historical consciousness. Is it a phenomenon inherent to human existence, a component of the species, or, on the contrary, a specific endowment acquired by certain individuals or social groups, a goal, or state that can and should be reached, generalized? Is it a constitutive element of the general consciousness itself, of the self-consciousness intrinsic to human existence? Or from a specific level of knowledge not immediately accessible to all individuals and, therefore, an acquired capacity such as awareness? In the latter case, can one suppose the occurrence of an unconsciousness or alienation that opposes historical consciousness?

This last perspective seems to be the one adopted by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1998) and shared, albeit in different ways, by Phillipe Ariès (1989), for whom historical consciousness is qualitatively superior knowledge that flows from institutions socially destined to the production of historical knowledge to those dedicated to teaching and dissemination. It then reaches a certain number of ‘lay’ or ‘non-specialist’ individuals, allowing them to climb — in variable dimensions — to higher levels of perception or apprehension of the real in terms of complexity. Historical consciousness is conceived as a stage that can be reached thanks mainly to a process of modernization in the most varied spheres of human life.

Another perspective is expressed in the works of two theorists reasonably distant from each other both in terms of training and intellectual activity: Agnes Heller (1993) and Jörn Rüsen (2001). For both, however, historical consciousness is not a goal to be achieved, but one of the conditions for the existence of thought: it is not limited, in its manifestation, to any specific period of history, to certain regions of the planet, to social classes or to individuals more or less prepared for historical or social reflection. For Heller (1993), historical consciousness is inherent to social being — based on the perception of the historicity of itself — and manifests itself in different stages of its social structuring. As for these, they range from the moment a given group creates norms of coexistence, replacing instincts with them, passing through the phase in which a given group becomes aware that it is part of humanity and that this is historical, that is, a human construction, thus being able to relativize their own culture from others, and arriving at the awareness that history does not march indelibly towards progress and that the future is the mission of each individual and of everyone.

Mobilizing one’s own historical consciousness would not, then, constitute an alternative or possibility, but an inexorable need to give meaning to any flow of time over which one has no control: life is transformation. Although one can imagine the possibility of ‘just witnessing the passage of time without giving it any meaning’, it seems to be impossible to act in the world without this attribution. For Rüsen (2001), human action in the world is fundamentally intentional, and it is only possible if it is based on the human interpretation of the world itself and of oneself according to the intentions of the action; one can only act (including the passive possibility of being the object of someone else’s action) under the guidance of intentions that depend on the interpretation of the world that supports them. György Lukács establishes, in his most famous work (2013), the essential teleological character of the founding category of social being,



labor, a set of actions that take place in the present, mobilizing the past and aiming for results that materialize in the future. All action results, finally, from a multidimensional synthesis that irremediably articulates the past, the present, and the future. It is not difficult to measure what the erasure of memory represents for individual existence. But will we be fully capable of considering what the erasure of history would mean for the existence of a human community?

Heller (1993) and Rüsen (2001) agree that the mobilization of history in thought and in everyday life is inherent to the human condition. If this is true, it is possible to infer that the historical reflection that is carried out professionally as academical practice, as systematic scientific knowledge, is not a different form in qualitative terms and in its nature from that carried out by the group of members of the species. Therefore, historiography is a comparatively more specialized and complex procedure of an attitude that, in its origin, is quotidian and that is inseparably linked to the human fact of 'being in the world'. The basis of historical thinking, therefore, is less cultural and optional than natural and social, in addition to being intrinsic to the human condition: birth, life, death, youth, old age are the basic demarcations that inform human beings of the action of time and its passage. According to Rüsen:

Historical consciousness is not something that men may or may not have – it is something universally human, given necessarily along with the intentionality of man's practical life. Historical consciousness is therefore rooted in the historicity intrinsic to practical human life itself. This historicity consists in the fact that men, in the dialogue with nature, with other men and with themselves, about what they are themselves and their world, have goals that go beyond [their immediate existence] (Rüsen, 2001, p. 78).

However, obviously, the forms of apprehension of this historicity vary, or, in the author's terms, the perspectives of attributing meaning to temporal experience. Thus, historical consciousness is a phenomenon of the vital world, immediately linked to practice, and can be understood as "[...] the sum of the mental operations with which men interpret their experience of the temporal evolution of their world and of themselves, in such a way that they can intentionally guide their practical life in time" (Rüsen, 2001, p. 57).

If historical consciousness is proper to the human condition, its production and reproduction mobilizes different means and mechanisms. Among these, the formal knowledge produced by historians and conveyed in educational training environments is only one of their expedients, and perhaps the one with the least relative power. In fact, a considerable degree of dystopia currently experienced on an extreme scale in Brazil, no doubt, but a general phenomenon seen all over the world – in central and peripheral countries – consists precisely in leveraging common sense to the superior form of apprehension and representation of the reality, in open conflict with scientific knowledge, a tendency desperately manifested, for example, in the success that the global movement of the 'flat earthers' attains. It is clear that scientists in general have – and are beginning to assume it – their share of responsibility in the current trend, but my object here par excellence is us historians, systematically harassed and discredited in everything that concerns our supposed authority as guardians of the keys of interpretation of the course of History.

## Final considerations

The fact is that the History that historians make has spent decades, centuries, millennia denying everyday men and women their character as subjects of History, making us disbelieve the power of our lives and actions not only as subjects but, what is also serious, as objects of history. What the almost inaudible echoes, lost in the night of time, of the historical subjects referred to by Benjamin reveal to us is not the prosaic tone of strange events experienced by an 'other' so far away that we cannot recognize ourselves in. Their muffled screams reveal the temporal range and richness of human experience lived in conditions of oppression and the struggle against it, in addition to the effects of movement and transformation that this struggle produces. It is in favor of this perspective that we are required to highlight the historicity of the present, disrespectfully lashing the past to subvert the becoming that carries the possibilities of the future, and vice versa. All History must be, ultimately, contemporary, because it can and must be one of the elements of the struggles of the present, waged by different minorities and, in particular, by the oppressed majorities. But it can only be, and it will be more efficiently, when its militancy in this sense is not at the cost and to the detriment of the seriousness and quality of the professional work of the historian.

I share with several colleagues, both near and far, the general perspectives on the social functions of our discipline, and I am radically opposed to those who think it is possible to deny it at any level of manifestation. How can history be denied its status, par excellence, as a promoter of citizenship? How to deny the History of

remote societies, its importance in unveiling the radical otherness that characterizes human societies in their spatio-temporal diversity? The current list of learnings that enrich being and existence and that are derived from the knowledge of history is not small. But there is more and on many levels. Starting with the fact that the radical alterity of today's and yesterday's societies is combined with a vigorous underlying identity that articulates the globality of human history on the planet in its many and varied structural elements. But this, unfortunately, the History made by historians systematically refuses to consider, given the dominant myopia and narrowness of vision and resulting from the reduced scale in which the discipline insists on operating. Let us hope that Global History, which has been gaining ground, will come to end such lukewarmness disguised as rigorism.

Moreover, if the historical consciousness intrinsic to our daily process of humanization as social beings is an essential instrument for our action in the world, it is imperative to radicalize it and guide it towards promoting the transformations necessary for a superior existence for all of us. I fear there is not much time left for indolence and embarrassment in this regard. Does anyone doubt that barbarism is already on the horizon? That what is at stake is not the discussion about more or less adequate or developed political-economic systems, but the imperative suppression of the voracious process of destruction of the planet and human life that are impossible to revert within the framework of the current system and under the demands of the expanded reproduction of capital? I understand that it is easier to believe in the colonization of new worlds than in the overcoming of this system, but in all science fiction imagined and projected, it is the system itself that promotes colonization to continue reproducing... Under it, there is practically no more present and, certainly, there will be no future for humanity.

Thus, the dispute for the promotion of historical consciousness requires a systematic and systematized historical knowledge that, as proposed by our aforementioned Walter Benjamim, is elaborated against the grain, not only in the counterflow of the traditionally dominant sense of time so that we can make of History, finally, not the study of the past, but the study of the historicity of the present, besides bringing out from its entrails the struggles, conflicts, and contradictions that have always guided the course and direction of History. And every effort needs, moreover, to transcend its traditional ways to expand the scope of the promotion of historical consciousness in many other spaces where, in addition to the school, it is needed and desired.

In Brazil, moreover, it is the very future of the university, as we know it today, that depends on the strengthening of its social bases, including those derived from the organized sectors of civil society and social movements. In the face of all the attacks, without the support of anti-systemic social movements, the defense of a strategic place for the public, critical and autonomous university in the nation's project will remain weak and possibly unviable. The articulation of critical sectors of the university with the struggles of social movements helps them acquire more systematic and grounded knowledge on many problems, strengthening social struggles; at the same time, the interaction of movements with the university, demanding greater attention to social problems, strengthens critical sectors in the academic space, favoring the struggle for university autonomy in the face of power devices (Leher, 2015). The closer relationship between academic history and social movements is fundamental.

But the tribe of historians (especially of medievalists?) seems to be guided by a ceremonial tone that makes them, much more often, bow respectfully to the hegemonic myths and worldviews of the elites of yesterday and today, making History, strangely, much more a manifesto of alienation in the face of everyday horrors — and, thus, an ingredient for preserving the status quo — than of overcoming it. As for me, a historian of a remote society in a peripheral country, I say that I am the bearer of a desire for the future (Bernardo, 2006) much more than a tributary of a vision of the past. What is in dispute, readers, in view of the escalation of daily and global miseries promoted by a system that potentiates, at a unique and historically incomparable speed, human and environmental degradation, is nothing more or less than the very survival of our species!

## References

- Ariès, Ph. (1989). *O tempo da história*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Francisco Alves.
- Baschet, J. (2006). *A civilização feudal: do ano mil à colonização da América*. São Paulo, SP: Editora Globo.
- Bastos, M. J. M. (2016). Quatro décadas de História Medieval no Brasil: contribuições à sua crítica. *Diálogos*, 20(3), 2-15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4025/dialogos.v20i3.33600>.

- Bastos, M. J. M. (2017). Estabelecidos e 'outsiders' na medievalística contemporânea. *Revista Ágora*, 26(2). Recuperado de <https://periodicos.ufes.br/agora/article/view/18722>
- Benjamin, W. (1987). Teses sobre o conceito da história. In W. Benjamin, *Magia e técnica, arte e política. Ensaio sobre literatura e história da cultura* (Vol. 1, Obras escolhidas, Sérgio Paulo Rouanet, Trad., Pub. Original de 1940, p. 222-232). São Paulo, SP: Brasiliense.
- Bernardo, J. (2006). Propostas para uma metodologia da história. *História Revista*, 11(2), 193-197. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5216/hr.v11i2.9006>
- Associação Nacional de História [ANPUH]. (2020, 15 de dezembro) *BNCC História* (Documentos Diversos). Recuperado de <https://anpuh.org.br/index.php/bncc-historia>
- Cerri, L. F. (2001). Os conceitos de consciência histórica e os desafios da didática da história. *Revista de História Regional*, 6(2), 93-112. Recuperado de <https://revistas2.uepg.br/index.php/rhr/article/view/2133/1614>
- Conrad, S. (2019). *O que é História Global?* Porto, PT: Edições 70.
- Dosse, F. (1992). *A história em migalhas: dos Annales à Nova História*. São Paulo, SP: Ensaio; Campinas, SP: Unicamp.
- Duby, G. (1971). Les sociétés médiévales: une approche d'ensemble. *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 26(1), 1-13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/ahess.1971.422453>.
- Fontana, J. (1998). *História: análise do passado e projeto social*. Bauru, SP: Edusc.
- Franco Júnior, H. (1986). *A Idade Média. Nascimento do Ocidente*. São Paulo, SP: Brasiliense.
- Frankopan, P. (2019). Why We Need to Think About the Global Middle Ages. *Journal of Medieval Worlds*, 1(1), 5-10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jmw.2019.100002>
- Frosini, F. (2013). A 'história integral' desde a perspectiva dos subalternos: contribuição para uma teoria marxista da história. *Crítica Marxista*, 37(2), 27-46. Recuperado de <https://bitlybr.com/REVkmlISS>
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1998). Problemas epistemológicos das ciências humanas. In P. Fruchon (Org.), *O problema da consciência histórica*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Fundação Getúlio Vargas.
- Guerreau, A. (1980). *Le féodalisme: Un horizon théorique*. Paris, FR: Sycomore.
- Guerreau, A. (2001). *L'Avenir d'Un Passé Incertain. Quelle histoire du Moyen Âge au XXIe siècle?* Paris, FR: Éditions du Seuil.
- Heller, A. (1993). *Uma teoria da história*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Civilização Brasileira.
- Holmes, C. & Standen, N. (2018). The global middle ages. *Past & Present Supplement*, 13, 1-44. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds\\_no1\\_2015s106](https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no1_2015s106)
- Kottak, C. (2006). *Mirror for Humanity*. New York, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Ladurie, E. L. R. (1975). *Montaillou, Village Occitan de 1294 a 1324*. Paris, FR: Gallimard.
- Leher, R. (2015). Movimentos sociais, padrão de acumulação e crise da universidade. In *Anais da 37ª Reunião Científica da Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Educação – ANPEd* (p. 51-75). Recuperado de <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=dmx.appyou.anped37>
- Lukács, G. (2013). *Para uma ontologia do ser social* (Vol. 2). São Paulo, SP: Boitempo.
- Marx, K. (1961). *O dezoito brumário de Luis Bonaparte*. Rio de Janeiro, RJ: Vitória.
- Pachá, P. (2019). Why the brazilian far right loves the european middle ages. *Pacific Standard*, 18 fev. Recuperado de <https://psmag.com/ideas/why-the-brazilian-far-right-is-obsessed-with-the-crusades>
- Reta, J. O., & Casquero, M. A. (1982). *Isidoro de Sevilla. Etymologiarum* (2 Vols.) Madrid: BAC.
- Rosa, M., & Orey, D. C. (2012). O campo de pesquisa em etnomodelagem: as abordagensêmica, ética e dialética. *Educação e Pesquisa*, 38(4). Recuperado de <http://www.scielo.br/pdf/ep/v38n4/06.pdf>
- Rosa, M. L., & Bertoli, A. (2010). Medievalismos irmãos e (menos) estranhos? Para um reforço do diálogo entre as historiografias brasileira e portuguesa sobre Portugal medieval. *Revista Portuguesa de História*, (41). Recuperado de <https://bitlybr.com/B6yu>
- Rüsen, J. (2001). *Razão histórica. Teoria da história: os fundamentos da ciência histórica*. Brasília, DF: UnB.
- Xia, J. (2011). An anthropological emic-etic perspective on open access practices. *Journal of Documentation*, 67(1), 75-94. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220411111105461>

### AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Mário Jorge da Motta Bastos:** Associate Professor at the History Institute, Fluminense Federal University (UFF), where he has been working for many years in undergraduate and graduate courses in History. Ph.D. in Social History from the University of São Paulo, he is the author of several articles and books. He is a member of the *Translatio Studii* and coordinates the *Ciro Cardoso Center for Research on Pre-Capitalism (CCCP-Prék)*, research groups based at UFF. He is a CNPq Research Productivity Fellow.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6048-8824>

E-mail: [velhomario@gmail.com](mailto:velhomario@gmail.com)