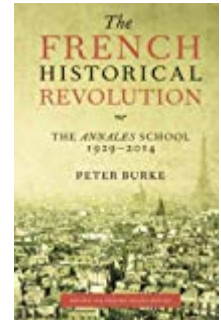


Peter Burke. *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929-2014.* Stanford University Press, 2015. pages cm paperback, ISBN 978-0-8047-9569-2.



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Among historians, the importance of France's "Annales school" counts as a truth universally acknowledged. Since Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch founded the journal in 1929, many of France's best historians and social scientists have contributed to it, and *Annales*-inflected ideas have been influencing historians outside France for almost as long. After World War II, a series of institutional innovations further magnified that influence. In 1947 Febvre was placed in charge of a new section of the long-established Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, and in 1975 that became the free-standing, degree-granting, lavishly funded Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Most historical schools exist only as loose collections of like-minded individual scholars. The *Annales* school exists also as an enduring set of powerful institutions, shaping careers, publication options, and research budgets.

If there is general agreement that *Annales*-style history matters, though, there is much less clarity on what exactly it *is*—partly because the *Annales* movement remains so very much alive

and so ready for self-reinvention. The journal has changed its subtitle five times, most recently in 1994, and its orientations have changed more often still. Into the mid-1990s, *Annales* history could be confidently described as centering on structures rather than individuals, ordinary people rather than elites, the long term rather than events, societies rather than states.[1] In fact such descriptions were always oversimplified, and they provide limited help in understanding today's *Annales* scholarship, much of which concerns elites, events, politics, and the lives of prominent individuals. Even specifying the population of "Annales historians" is no easy task. The movement has always been quick to adopt accomplished outsiders (like Philippe Ariès), and some historians (like François Furet) eventually distanced themselves from it as well.

Peter Burke is an especially well-qualified guide through these interpretive difficulties. As a distinguished historian of early modern European culture, he shares the research concerns of some of the most important *Annales* historians, and he

thus can speak with authority about the substance of their work as well as about their programmatic manifestos. He also has an insider's familiarity with French academic life. He mentions his conversations with some of the school's leading figures, and he displays real familiarity with the institutions they work in. Above all, he is a wide-ranging and insightful reader, both of *Annales*-associated works and of the large literature commenting on them. Burke first addressed these issues in 1990, in the first edition of *The French Historical Revolution*. Now he has revised the text, mainly to include developments between 1989 and 2014; few of his evaluations and interpretations have changed since the first edition.

The result is a book that can be read partly as introductory survey, partly as historiographical argument. As argument, the book raises some thorny issues that I will take up below, but there is no question about its value as a survey. Burke presents thoughtful, well-informed commentary on dozens of important books, interpretations, and debates. He provides a reasonable response to the problem of *Annales* intellectual diversity by underlining the movement's evolution over time. A first chapter describes historical thinking in the years around 1900, before the *Annales* founders rose to academic prominence. Burke stresses the ongoing dominance of political history in that intellectual world, but he also notes the voices that called for a different approach to the past. The following two chapters center on the key personalities who shaped the movement through the mid-1970s, first the *Annales* founders Febvre and Bloch, then Febvre's student Fernand Braudel, who succeeded him both as editor of the journal and as director of the movement's institutional base at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. No such dominant figure can be found in what Burke terms the movement's third generation, lasting from Braudel's 1972 retirement to 1989, but Burke does see in it a unifying interest in cultural history. Even that degree of intellectual unity falls away thereafter, and for summarizing the fourth-

generation *Annalistes*, those active between 1989 and the present, Burke can find only the label "New Directions." Like the historian François Dosse, who in 1987 described historical knowledge as having "crumbled" (*en miettes*), Burke thus sees accelerating intellectual fragmentation as a principal feature of the movement's development over the last half-century; and he raises the possibility that this loss of unity has made talk of an "*Annales* school" obsolete (p. 140).[2] The final chapter considers "The *Annales* in Global Perspective," examining responses to *Annales* historical writing outside France and offering an overall evaluation of the movement.

These concluding thoughts display the same good sense and learning that run through the book as a whole, and students seeking guidance on the movement will find them very helpful. But Burke's final chapter also encourages queries, partly because its "global perspective" turns out to be surprisingly restricted. In tracing *Annales* influences on historians outside France, for instance, Burke deals almost entirely with scholars from Europe and the United States. Three Latin American historians also make the cut, but since one of them spent most of his career at Berkeley and another at the Sorbonne, they do not necessarily tell us much about the movement's global impact. He also pays surprisingly little attention to influences flowing the other way, from the rest of the world toward Paris. From the 1930s on, *Annales* scholars were deeply affected by France's colonial projects, sometimes as boosters (Febvre himself published a glowing account of France's 1931 Exposition Coloniale), more often as militant critics.[3] There is also the delicate question of American influence on the movement. Burke notes that the Rockefeller Foundation provided much of the funding for Febvre and Braudel's 1950s initiatives (p. 49), but he does not explore the intellectual influences that may have come with the money, or the intellectual commitments that may have made the *Annales* movement seem

a sound investment to Cold War American leaders.

The more fundamental queries concern Burke's central argument—for despite the rich learning it presents, *The French Historical Revolution* in fact offers a startlingly simplified story, with equally simplified moral overtones. As implied in his title, for Burke the *Annales* movement constituted a successful revolution against a sclerotic historiographical old regime; the *Annales* founders formed a "small, radical and subversive" band, "fighting a guerrilla action against traditional history, political history and the history of events" (p. 3). There is less heroism in the story after 1945, as the revolution's success propelled its leaders into the intellectual establishment, but Burke sees in the postwar era the same struggle between innovators and traditionalists; throughout, the *Annales* historians have remained true to the journal's founding spirit, continuing the fight to extend "the territory of the historian to unexpected areas of human behaviour and to social groups neglected by traditional historians" (p. 142).

Like most such dualistic narratives, this one fits imperfectly with the messy historical realities it attempts to capture. Burke acknowledges some of those realities without allowing them to change his argument; others are passed over entirely. For one thing, neither Febvre nor Bloch was really the outsider that the narrative of guerrilla revolution requires them to have been. Within four years of starting the *Annales*, Febvre was a professor at the Collège de France, the glamorous top rung on the French academic ladder, and three years after that Bloch became professor at the Sorbonne; both had already presented themselves in 1930 as candidates to the Collège, tacitly but publicly proclaiming themselves already members of the historian establishment. By that point Febvre had also shown himself to be a master academic politician, and by 1932 he had established a close working relationship with Anatole de Monzie, a

minister in several French governments of the 1920s and 1930s.[4]

There was also plenty of social history already on the scene in 1929, and that, too, complicates Burke's narrative of intellectual revolution. Elsewhere I have cited the example of Henri Hauser, who until 1936 held the chair that Bloch would assume at the Sorbonne. Burke mentions Hauser briefly, but does not consider how fully he and his colleagues took for granted the centrality of social history, long before the *Annales* appeared. For instance, in a 1901 speech, delivered before an audience of Sorbonne luminaries and reprinted in the ultra-mainstream *Revue Historique*, Hauser proclaimed that "history has always been a social science ... since the nineteenth century, the social perspective has been increasingly dominant in our ways of seeing history." [5] Still farther in the background of Burke's account are historical views that emerged outside the university. As Bonnie Smith first showed in *The Gender of History* (1998) (a striking absence from Burke's otherwise impressive bibliography), social history had always been a presence in nineteenth-century intellectual life; a whole series of free-lance intellectuals had all along been producing histories of the family, private life, women, the countryside, violence, and a variety of other topics that would eventually find a place in the *Annales*. [6] Like so many other intellectual movements, the *Annales* school did at least as much recycling as inventing—and some of that recycling came very late in its history.

At the borderland between outsiders and university insiders was the historian Lucie Varga, a Jewish Austrian who immigrated to France in 1933 and to whom Peter Schöttler and Natalie Zemon Davis have devoted illuminating studies. [6] These appeared shortly after the first edition of *The French Historical Revolution*, and Burke has now incorporated Varga into the new edition. His three passages about her are worth quoting almost in full, because they exemplify both the

strengths and the weaknesses of his larger approach. Early on, Burke mentions that Febvre and Bloch "owed a good deal both to colleagues and to assistants such as Paul Leuillot and Lucie Varga. Team-work had been a dream of Lucien Febvre's, as early as 1936" (p. 6). Two chapters later, he mentions "Lucie Varga (originally Rosa Stern), an Austrian historian who was Febvre's assistant from 1934 to 1947 [*sic*; in fact Varga died in 1941]. It was Varga who used the phrase 'history of the present' in a remarkable article on the history and ethnography of a valley on the border between Austria and Switzerland, an article that acknowledged the advice of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski" (p. 24). Finally, late in the book Burke again mentions Varga as pioneering the "history of the present," to which recent *Annales* historians have turned (p. 127).

In noting Varga's scholarship and influence, these passages display yet again Burke's ability to provide thoughtful capsule judgments on a wide range of important historical writing, some of it still poorly known. But the passages also leave out much of what Schöttler and Davis have brought to light about Varga. In fact she and Febvre were lovers, and their collaboration ended abruptly in 1937, when Febvre broke off the affair to preserve his marriage and career. Varga immediately lost both her position and her access to the *Annales*; she supported herself with a series of odd jobs, worked for a time at a Paris-based press service, then (fearing for her own and her daughter's safety) in 1940 fled the Occupied Zone. She died the following year, at the age of thirty-six, partly because of the privations she had endured.

More is at stake in how we describe this episode than just the historian's professional appetite for context and detail. Burke's account of Varga, omitting as it does the personal and political elements of her story, avoiding even explicit mention of her Jewishness and its significance in 1930s and 1940s Paris, reinforces a specific take on the *Annales* enterprise as centering on the dis-

interested search for truth and the struggle with historiographical traditionalists. From this vantage point, Varga illustrates the novel intellectual influences that reached the *Annales*, its innovative engagement with contemporary life, and its vision of scholarship as a collaborative undertaking.

Conversely, we may read the story as showing historians to be fallible, embodied human beings, subject to the normal range of emotions and ambitions, capable of both love and betrayal, always negotiating the societal pressures that attach to their specific identities, but not all facing pressures of comparable severity. That reading encourages other questions about the *Annales* historians' professional accomplishments and other ways of understanding them. As Smith has shown, for instance, that perspective draws attention to the "unacknowledged libidinal work" in Febvre and Bloch's insistence on their purely scientific ambitions and on their own distance from the other forms of social history around them. Davis has likewise shown how "the anxiety of influence" has affected historians' intellectual choices as they cope with the legacies of teachers and intellectual ancestors and seek to create spaces for their own originality.[7]

Any historian writing about the *Annales* confronts the problem of the movement's own sense of its history: almost from the outset, its members have presented strong narratives of its struggles, achievements, and evolution, and they have sought to define its unities and points of divergence.[9] For the most part, Burke adopts those narratives, writing (as he explains) as a sympathetic fellow traveler (p. 5), mixing occasional criticisms with sustained explication of the movement's intentions and its major works. As Burke also explains, that choice means that his book is not quite an intellectual history (p. 4). But it remains an outstanding introduction to an important movement that will engage both students and specialists for years to come.

Notes

[1]. Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 56-64; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1995), 83-84.

[2]. François Dosse, *L'histoire en miettes: des Annales à la "nouvelle histoire"* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987).

[3]. Lucien Febvre, "L'histoire économique et la vie: leçon d'une exposition," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 13 (January, 1932): 1-10; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Paris-Montpellier, P.C.-P.S.U., 1945-1963* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

[4]. Bertrand Müller, ed., *Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre. Correspondance, I: La naissance des Annales, 1928-1933* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), lii-iii.

[5]. Jonathan Dewald, *Lost Worlds: The Emergence of French Social History, 1815-1970* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006), 103.

[6]. Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[7]. Peter Schöttler, "Lucie Varga: A Central European Refugee in the Circle of the French 'Annales,' 1934-1941," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 33 (Spring 1992): 100-20; Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women and the World of the 'Annales,'" *History Workshop Journal*, no. 33 (Spring 1992): 121-37.

[8]. Smith, *The Gender of History*, 239; Davis, "History's Two Bodies," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 1 (1988): 1-30.

[9]. The most recent example is André Burguière, *L'école des Annales: une histoire intellectuelle* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006).

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