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Royal Therapy as a Collective Error

[Note: This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.]


In 1924, when *Les rois thaumaturges* was first published by the University of Strasbourg’s own Faculty of Arts Press, Marc Bloch was still at the beginning of his distinguished career. Lecturer in Medieval history at Strasbourg University since 1919, associate professor since 1921, Bloch was a veteran of the Great War who had spent almost four years in the trenches, and was among the small initial staff at Strasbourg, appointed by the French authorities in order to ensure the functioning of the University after the expulsion of the German teaching staff across the Rhine.[1] It was the forced closure of the ancient Kaiser-Wilhelms University that finally, although indirectly, led to the generation of what would become the famous “Strasbourg milieu,” known for its discussions and productive interdisciplinary exchanges.

Bloch and his friend, colleague, and co-founder in 1929 of the *Annales d’histoire economique et sociale* Lucien Febvre, took part in these discussions, along with the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, the psychologist Charles Blondel – like Halbwachs a former student of Emile Durkheim – and a few others. This intellectual surrounding provided Bloch with the necessary stimulation for his first great book, *Les rois thaumaturges*, which was written during the early Strasbourg years, the initial project reaching back to the war period.[2]

In hindsight, *Les rois thaumaturges* stands out as an extremely bold first book (Bloch was forced to suspend work on his thesis by the outbreak of the war; in 1920 he benefited from a special regulation that allowed him, as a war veteran, to publish *Rois et serfs* in a significantly abridged form). *Les rois thaumaturges* is significant not
only for crossing national boundaries as a comparative study of the sacred monarchy in France and England, but also for its coverage of a time span of roughly one thousand years – from the first Capets to Charles X, who in 1825 still touched, albeit half-heartedly, sufferers from scrofula. He was the last king to do so. But there is more than that in this history of the healing powers of the French and English kings, who were thought to be able to cure scrofula and diseases presenting similar symptoms, as well as, in the case of the English monarchs, epilepsy.

Bloch had assembled an impressive mass of source material on the “king’s disease” and its royal doctors. He treated it in a manner that blended solid historical erudition [3] with new and exciting questions about the symbolic impact of rituals, the efficacy of myths, and the possible motor of collective behaviour – questions that make him, in the words of Jacques Le Goff, the “father of historical anthropology”.[4] Here it is relevant to focus on Bloch's interests within the “Strasbourg milieu” mentioned earlier. At the same time as Bloch worked on his Les rois thaumaturges, his colleague, Maurice Halbwachs prepared Les cadres sociaux de la memoire, published one year after Bloch's book). Halbwachs dealt with the interaction between individual and collective memory. Bloch thought in similar terms about the popular belief in the healing power of the kings, speaking of "idees collectives," "opinion collective," "representations collectives," or "immagination commune." He consequently gave a favourable opinion of Les cadres sociaux de la memoire, though – historian that he was – he wrote in his review "Libre a nous de prononcer le mot de 'memoire collective', mais il convient de ne pas oublier qu'une partie au moins des phenomenes que nous designons ainsi sont tout simplement des faits de communication entre individus".[5]

Still, the boldness of Bloch's study lies not only in the unusually wide time span covered, nor in its stimulating questions. What makes it stand out is the subject per se, a subject that might seem all too anecdotal to be treated in this length and depth. Bloch himself anticipated such reactions, stating in his introduction that he deemed it possible to write history "avec ce qui n'était jusqu'a present que de l'anecdote" (p. 18). History that is – one should add – after all picturesque, yet rich in far-reaching implications. In fact, besides being an early forebear of the historical practice that would come into prominence in France in the 1970s, the so-called "histoire des mentalites",[6] Les rois thaumaturges offers no less than a new approach to political history, as important as Ernst H. Kantorowicz's The King's Two Bodies (1957), with the difference that Bloch's perspective takes into account the bottom of society.

Certainly, the royal touch was, from the ruler's point of view, a tool of propaganda, all the more so because this heavenly gift was limited to the rightful heir on which it was conferred on the occasion of the consecration. But at the same time, the belief in the efficacy of the touch of a given monarch depended on his personal reputation: a king who had lost his prestige was not requested for effecting cures any longer. People flocking to the king's place in order to get touched by the monarch were given alms that were noted in the records of the exchequer, so that Bloch could draw conclusions on the popularity of certain kings. These results are, of course, of particular interest in the case of territorial struggles. In 1299/1300 Edward I for example seems to have lost his therapeutic faculties when penetrating Scotland. Between 20 November 1303 and 25 August 1304, however, no less than 995 sufferers are known to have sought relief from their disease when Edward sojourned North of the River Tweed. Some of them at least were likely to be of Scottish origin.

There is another remark in Bloch's review of Les cadres sociaux de la memoire that demands our attention: "M. Halbwachs n'étudiera-t-il pas
un jour les erreurs de la memoire collective?" Bloch asks. This question leads right into the heart of Bloch's attempts to interpret the collective belief in the therapeutic power of the two European monarchies. This belief lasted as long as it was possible for the people to uphold it, Bloch argues somewhat tautologically, and it was the new times, the Reformation, the English and the French Revolutions that finally caused its decay. Yet, how was it possible in the first place to believe in the efficacy of the rite? "Ce qui cra la foi au miracle", Bloch answers, "ce fut l'idee qu'il devait y avoir un miracle" (p. 429).

However, this self-fulfilling prophecy was nothing else but, as Bloch concludes in an overrationalistic manner that betrays its time, a collective error. A hasty, and slightly disappointing dismissal. Yet, Bloch did not make light of this "erreur collective", as he considered it to be a motor of human action. As such it appears like a leitmotiv in Bloch's historical thinking. "De faux recits ont souleve les foules", he wrote in 1921 in his famous article on "les fausses nouvelles de la guerre", which was inspired by the historian's own experiences in the trenches.[8]

Indeed, he compared life in the trenches with that of distant times: the ubiquitous censorship, and the almost total absence of news fostered a particular climate where hearsay flourished, escalating to mass panics. Bloch's own war notes reveal the tormented state of mind of men under pressure that are cut off any trustworthy source of information: "Sauf par quelques lettres, je ne savais a peu pres rien des evenements qui s'accomplissaient sur les divers fronts de bataille. Cette ignorance m'agacait et m'inquietait."[9] The reflections on the social efficacy of rumors, together with those on the psychology of the testimony appear once more in Bloch's Apologie pour l'histoire ou Metier d'historien, his last, posthumously published book, in which he gave an insight into his own "atelier" (the book remained unfinished as Bloch was shot in 1944 by the Gestapo because of his activities in the French resistance).[10] This fact demonstrates the importance attached by the historian to the conditions in which stories and rumors spread and multiply until they become true, to the effect that they cause people to wander for days to the king's court in order to be healed from their disease.

Except for some corrections concerning the first attestations of the king's miracle,[11] Les rois thaumaturges has passed the test of the time. The author himself abandoned this way of writing history, and turned to more conventional subjects; several reasons for this re-orientation have been proposed, one of them being the rather cool reception the book was given by his contemporaries. Yet, there were also favourable reactions, such as the one that was published in The English Historical Review: "In his researches into royal healing, M. Bloch may appear to have followed a curious bypath; but by bearing in mind the greater issues raised by the beliefs and superstitions analysed here he has made, to our thinking, a more useful contribution to the study of the medieval origins of divine right than any that has appeared since the publication of Dr. Fritz Kern's Gottesgnadentum und Widerstandsrecht in 1914."[12]

Notes

[1]. The literature on Marc Bloch is abundant. We limit therefore our references to a few chosen titles. On Bloch's life, see Carole Fink, Marc Bloch: A Life in History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).


[3]. Despite their polemics against the "histoire historisante", the founding fathers of the Annales did in no way dismiss the traditional historian's craft. Marc Bloch defended his thesis before a jury presided over by Charles Seignobos, author, together with Charles-Victor Langlois, of an Introduction aux etudes historiques (1898), which despite its admittedly narrow scope reads well...
thanks to the good sense that is displayed in it. Almost needless to say that Bloch gained the highest possible marks. He attached much importance to the "savoir faire" of the historian, and it is certainly no accident that his last, posthumously published book has in its title Metier d'historien.


[7]. Marc Bloch, 'Memoire collective', p. 80.


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