

## The Meaning of Representation

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**To understand the concept of political representation, Roger Chartier, the historian of the book, proposes to relate it to the different meanings encompassed by the French term “représentation,” from its broadest sense—to show an absent object—to its legal and political sense—to hold someone’s place.**

This article is a reprint of a lecture delivered on November 13, 2012 before the seminar of the workgroup on “Political Representation: History, Theory, and Contemporary Transformations” of the Association française de science politique (the French Association of Political Science)<sup>1</sup>. It is a synthesis of Chartier’s previous writings on the question of representation, including two texts in particular.

The first, “The World as Representation,” published in *Annales* in 1989<sup>2</sup>, had a major impact and contributed to changing the traditional perspective of the history of mentalities. By resituating “mentalities” within the broader concept of representation, Chartier emphasized the performative effects of the world pictures that individuals and groups create for themselves, questioned the relationship between the production of images and other aspects of the work of representation, and overcame the sterile dichotomy between social history and the history of “mentalities.”

The second text, “The Powers and Limits of Representation,” was published after Louis Marin’s death<sup>3</sup>. Drawing on the work of the French philosopher, historian, semiologist, and art critic,

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Lola Zappi for his assistance in editing the text.

<sup>2</sup> *Annales E.S.C.*, November-December 1989, 6, p. 1505-1520. A translation of this article by Arthur Goldhammer appeared in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, eds. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt, New York, The New Press, 1995, p. 544-558.

<sup>3</sup> The original French version was originally published in *Annales H.S.S.*, March-April 1994, p. 407-418. An English translation of this article can be found in Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 90-103. The French versions of both texts were published in *Au bord de la falaise*, Albin Michel, Paris 2009, p. 75-98 and 203-224.

Chartier demonstrates the reductive character of the view that representation consists primarily in making something that is absent present—an position shared by philosophers like Heidegger and Derrida, as well as political theorists such as Carl Schmitt and Hanna Pitkin. The emphasis on “representation” in the sense of putting someone who is present on public display (a sense that one still finds in contemporary French, as in: “*elle est toujours en représentation*”—“she’s always on stage”) has important consequences for political analysis. In old regime societies as in modern representative democracies, those who embody central authority are necessarily called upon to display it before the public they are supposed to represent, particularly through ritualized (and usually sexualized) behavior. Such activity makes a decisive contribution to power’s legitimacy, well beyond elections. It helps to transform power relationships into symbolic relationships, reinforcing what Bourdieu calls “symbolic domination.”

By recognizing the analytical distinctions between the various meanings of “*représentation*,” Chartier brings to light a number of conceptual short circuits (when authors unconsciously play on several distinct registers), “un-thought” meanings (when a meaning is neglected), and rich semantic correlations (such as when “representation-mandate” is coupled with “representation-embodiment”). This approach also makes it possible to examine, following Ricœur, the way in which the historical sciences (and the social and human sciences more generally) contribute to representing the very reality they are committed to studying.

(Yves Sintomer)

### **Presenting an Absent Object**

The *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Dictionary of the French Language) published by Furetière in 1690 identified two apparently contradictory families of meaning for the word “representation.” It defined the word as follows: “Representation: an image that brings to mind and memory absent objects and which paints them as they are.” In this first meaning, representation displays an absent object (a thing, concept, or person) by replacing it with an “image” that adequately represents it. To represent is to convey something indirectly through words and gestures, figures and signs: enigmas, emblems, fables, and allegories. In a legal and political register, to represent can also mean “to hold someone’s place, to be in possession of their authority.” Hence the twofold definition of representatives as someone who represents, in a public office, an absent person who is supposed to occupy it and someone who, for an inheritance, is summoned in the place of individuals whose rights have been bestowed upon him.

This definition of representation is derived from the old, material meaning of “representation,” understood as an effigy which replaces the king’s body on his funeral bed. This sense of the term, in English as well as French, is inseparable from the political theory analyzed by Ernst Kantorowicz in *The King’s Two Bodies*. It found visible expression in the funerals of French and

English kings and was conceptually formulated by sixteenth-century jurists. In these moments, which were essential to dynastic continuity, the sovereign's dual presence as both a mortal individual and the embodiment of never-ending royal dignity underwent a dramatic reversal. This ceremony involved "the custom of placing on top of the coffin the 'roiall representation' or 'personage' a figure or image *ad similitudinem regis*, which—made of wood or leather padded with bombast and covered with plaster—was dressed in the coronation garments or, later on, in the parliamentary robe. The effigy displayed the insignia of sovereignty: on the head of the image (worked apparently since Henry VII after the death mask) there was the crown, while the artificial hands held orb and scepter. Wherever the circumstances were not to the contrary, the effigies were henceforth used at the burials royalty: enclosed in the coffin of lead, which itself was encased in a casket of wood, there rested the corpse of the kind, his mortal and normally visible—though now invisible—body natural; whereas his normally invisible body politic was on this occasion visibly displayed by the effigy in its pompous regalia: a *persona ficta*—the effigy—impersonating a *persona ficta*—the *Dignitas*<sup>4</sup>." As Furetière explains, "when one goes to see dead princes on their funeral beds, one sees only their representation, their effigy." Thus we see a radical distinction between the absent person—either fictive or real—who is being represented and the object that makes it present and visible.

In Shakespeare's *Richard II*, three essential scenes that Kantorowicz discusses (III:2, III:3 and IV:1 according to the divisions of the 1623 folio) trace the stages whereby the king's natural body gradually withdraws from his political body—in which Richard the individual sheds the sacred royal dignity of God's lieutenant and chosen one. Kantorowicz magnificently shows how these three scenes are premised on the political theory of the king's two bodies<sup>5</sup>. Multiple metaphors transform the theory into poetic, religious, and political imagery: hence the comparisons with nature (night and day, sun and shadow), the Biblical parallels (notably between the king and Christ and between his enemies and Judas or Pontius Pilate), and the images of a world turned upside down, which upend the relationship between the sovereign and his subjects and the king and his fool. The text is structured around the tension between two possible ways of understanding the king's renunciation of power: as an abdication, which fully legitimates the new king, or as a violent overthrow, which threatens the peace of the kingdom. It is also based on the two forms of incorporation implied in the "two bodies" theory. If the king's natural body incorporates the political body into the same individual, the reverse is equally true; when the political body is transferred to another, the king is no longer anything at all. He ceases to have a name or a face. He is only a "king of snow," melting in the new sovereign's sun.

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare alters Holinshed's account at a critical moment: the scene in which the king is deposed. In the chronicle's 1587 edition, which Shakespeare read, the Parliament's role consisted in confirming Richard's purported abdication and giving its consent to the

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981 (1957), p. 420-421.

<sup>5</sup> The theory that postulates that the king has two bodies, one natural and one political, which coincide in his person.

accession of Bolingbroke, who became Henry IV. Only after this dual acceptance did Parliament request that the reasons for both events be explained. Shakespeare's play—or, in any case the 1608 quarto edition—differs in that the Commons demand, according to Northumberland's account, the king's public destitution. This difference, which undoubtedly reflects a dramatic rather than a political choice, explains why most of the Parliament scene (IV:1, verses 154-317) is missing from the first three quartos of the "tragedy," published in 1597 and 1598, and why, in the 1623 folio, in which the play became a "history," the text of the 1604 scene is revised so that it is Bolingbroke, rather than the Commons by way of Northumberland, who demands that the king appear.

### **The Public Presence of a Person or a Thing**

For Furetière, the term "representation" has a second meaning:

"At the Palace [of Justice], representation refers to the exhibition of something"

which leads us to the definition of representation as appearing in public and exhibiting something. Here, representation is showing a presence, the public presentation of a thing or a person. It is the thing or person which is itself its own representation. That which is represented and its image form a single body and join together: representation sometimes refers to living people.

"One says of a grave and majestic face: Here is a person in fine representation [*Voilà une personne de belle représentation*]."

Seventeenth-century dictionaries of other European languages make note of this twofold system of representation, which assumes either a relationship between a sign and a thing or the identity of a thing and a sign. Covarrubias' *Tesoro de la lengua castellana*, published in 1611, mentions only the first family of meanings: "To represent: to make something present with words or images that fix themselves in our imagination." This leads to the verb's legal sense ("to represent is to enfold another person within oneself, as if it were the same person, to replace them in all their actions and duties") and the theatrical meanings of words linked to "represent" and "representation": "Representation: a comedy or tragedy," or "representatives [*representantes*]: actors, because one represents the king and [...] acts as if he were present; another plays the suitor, another the lady, etc."

In the *Diccionario de Autoridades*, from the early eighteenth century, the meaning of representation is, as in Furetière, twofold. It means "making something present" in addition to a meaning that was unknown to Covarrubias: "to make something's exterior apparent." In this way, the two sets of definitions—the first assuming the absence of the represented individual or thing, the second entailing self-exhibition—became connected: "Representation also means a person's authority, dignity, character, or recommendation: thus one says, 'Fulano' is in Madrid a man of representation."

In considering the connection between the representation of political power and the political power of representation, Louis Marin never separated the term's two earlier meanings. In keeping within the theory of signs developed by Port Royal's grammarians and logicians, the word's first sense refers to both mechanisms of representation when they make an absent referent present:

One of the most practically applicable models for exploring how modern representation—be it linguistic or visual—functions is one that takes into consideration the system's dual dimensions: a dimension of "transitivity" or enunciative transparency, in which each representation *represents* something, and a dimension of reflexivity or enunciative opacity, in which each representation *presents itself* as representing something.<sup>6</sup>

This leads us, following the projection of the Eucharistic model onto the power of the Catholic sovereign, to a first dimension, which makes the host a representation of Christ's body and the king's portrait a representation of his own absent body. But this narrative and historical representation, which implies a relationship between a sign and that which signifies, does not exhaust the meaning of the Eucharist or the sovereign's image, which also participates in representation's second meaning: presenting something that is present. The host is the real presence of Christ's body, just as images of the king are visible manifestations of the presence of his sacramental body even in his own absence. It is this complex construct, based on the two meanings of representation, which was jeopardized by Louis XIV's introduction of his own natural portrait, using the symbolic signs that were meant to represent him in absence and presence. By associating in their very historicity these two systems of representation—the transitive and the reflexive—one's attention can be drawn to the mechanisms by which representation presents itself as representing something. In the introduction to *Opacité de la peinture* (Opacity in Painting), Louis Marin emphasizes the heuristic effects of such a displacement, which replaces a strictly semiotic or structuralist approach, based solely on the analysis of language, with an historical and material study of the modalities and procedures for "presenting representation." A close connection can be drawn between conceptual reflection on the notion of representation in the realms of logic, theology, and the politics and analytic perspectives that consider the semantic consequences of various forms of discursive inscription.

### **Collective Representations and the Social World**

The concept of representation provided valuable assistance for articulating, far better than the notion of mentalities could, the various relations that individuals and groups entertain with the social world in which they are invested. Thanks to its multiple meanings, the concept, understood in the sociological sense of "collective representations," refers in the first place to

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Marin, "Paolo Uccello au Chioostro Verde de Santa Maria Novella à Florence", in *Opacité de la peinture. Essai sur la représentation au Quattrocento*, Paris, Usher, 1989, p. 73.

patterns of perception and appreciation that effectuate the operations of classification and hierarchization by which the social world is constructed. In the older sense used in seventeenth and eighteenth-century dictionaries, it can designate the practices as well as the signs, symbols, and conduct that display and elicit recognition of one's social identity and power. Finally, in its political sense, it describes the institutional forms through which "representatives" (either single individuals or collective entities) visibly embody and "presentify" the coherence of a social category, the permanence of an identity, or the power of an authority figure. It is by articulating these three registers that the concept of representation has altered our understanding of the social world, as it requires us to consider that the construction of identities, hierarchies, and classifications are the result of a "struggle over interpretation," in which what is at stake is the capacity of signs—which may be acknowledged or denied—to present a form of domination or sovereignty as legitimate.

It thus becomes possible to understand how confrontations between contrary forms of violence and brutal forces are transformed into symbolic struggles in which representations are both the weapons and the goals. Representations have this capacity, according to Marin, because they "replace the external manifestation of a force, in which it appears only to annihilate another force in a struggle to the death, with signs or, rather, signals and clues of force which must only be *seen, acknowledged, shown, and later spoken about and narrated* for the force of which they are the effects to be believed."<sup>7</sup>

Clearly a reference to Pascal is lurking in the background of this discussion. When Pascal unveils the mechanism of "showing," which is directed at imagination and produces belief, he contrasts those for whom such a mechanism is necessary and those for whom it is not. The former includes judges and doctors:

Our magistrates have known well this mystery. Their red robes, the ermine in which they wrap themselves like furry cats, the courts in which they administer justice, the *fleurs-de-lis*, and all such august apparel were necessary; if the physicians had not their cassocks and their mules, if the doctors had not their square caps and their robes four times too wide, they would never have duped the world, which cannot resist so original an appearance. If magistrates had true justice, and if physicians had the true art of healing, they would have no occasion for square caps; the majesty of these sciences would of itself be venerable enough. But having only imaginary knowledge, they must employ those silly tools that strike the imagination with which they have to deal; and thereby in fact they inspire respect.

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<sup>7</sup> Marin, "Introduction. L'être de l'image et son efficace", in *Des pouvoirs de l'image. Gloses*, Paris, Seuil, 1993, p.18.

But for those who can master brute force, this kind of manipulation of signs is completely useless: “Soldiers alone are not disguised in this manner, because indeed their part is the most essential; they establish themselves by force, the others by show.”<sup>8</sup>

The contrast that Pascal identifies is particularly relevant to the history of old regime societies. It helps us to conceptualize forms of symbolic domination—through images, “showing,” or “equipment” (*attirail*—the term is La Bruyère’s) as a corollary of the monopoly on the legitimate use of force that sovereigns claimed to establish. Force does not disappear from the operation that transforms it into power, since, like men of arms, it is always at the prince’s disposal; however, it is placed in reserve, thanks to the multiplication of signs (portraits, medals, monuments, praises, narratives, and so on) which display sovereign power and seek to elicit obedience and adoration, with no violence whatsoever. Consequently, the tools of symbolic domination simultaneously guarantee “the negation and conservation of the absolute of force: negation, since force is neither exerted nor manifested, since it is at peace in the signs that signify and designate it, and conservation, since force through and in representation will give itself as justice, that is to say, as law that obligatorily constrains under pain of death.”<sup>9</sup>

Exercising political domination relies on the ostentatious use of symbolic forms representing royal power, which is put up for show and belief even in the king’s absence. Pursuing this fusion of Marin and Elias, we could add that it is precisely the pacification of social space (relatively speaking and as a general trend) between the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century which allowed violent confrontations to be transformed into struggles over representations, the stakes of which were the organization of the social world and thus the rank granted to each estate, *corps*, and individual.

Hence the importance of the relationship, which was so strongly felt in the early modern period, between collective mental representations and theatrical representations. The latter, as Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, took the social energy located in the language, discourse, rituals, and practices of the social world and transformed them into powerful fictions: “What then is the social energy that is being circulated? Power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe, free-floating intensities of experience: in a sense, the question is absurd, for everything produced by the society can circulate unless it is deliberately excluded from circulation.”<sup>10</sup> In turn, the representations displayed on stage shaped those of the audience: “Through its representational means, each play carries charges of social energy onto the stage; the stage in its turn revises that

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<sup>8</sup> *Pascal’s Pensées*, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1958, p. 25-26. The original French can be found in Pascal, *Pensées*, Éditions Lafuma, p. 44; Éditions Brunschvicg, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Marin, *The Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha M. Houle, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988 (1981), 7. The original French version can be found in *Le Portrait du roi*, Paris, Minuit, 1981, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1988, p. 19.

energy and returns it to the audience.”<sup>11</sup> The circulation of representations between plays and spectators or readers can thus be defined as “the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape, and organize collective physical and mental experiences.”<sup>12</sup>

Though it can be historically situated in this way, the heuristic relevance of the concept of representation is not confined to old regime societies regulated by the legal codification of social distinctions. It is also a powerful tool for understanding how, in contemporary “democratic” societies, classifications and hierarchies are constructed at the intersections of objective social properties and the representations volunteered by classes or groups and which may be either accepted or refused. As Bourdieu writes in *Distinction*:

One has only to bear in mind that goods are converted into distinctive signs, which may be signs of distinction but also of vulgarity, as soon as they are perceived relationally, to see that the representation which individuals and groups inevitably project through their practices and properties is an integral part of social reality. A class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *being*, by its consumption—which need not be conspicuous in order to be symbolic—as much as by its position in the relations of production (even if it is true that the latter governs the former)<sup>13</sup>.

Struggles over classification and representation can thus be understood as just as and possibly even more constitutive of the social world than the objective determinations separating classes and groups. The individual’s incorporation of the social world’s structures is thus tied to the forms of domination that are made possible by the perpetuation of representations upon which their legitimacy is based. When these representations come apart or collapse, criticism and change become thinkable.

This is undoubtedly the reason why so much work in recent decades has made use of the concept of representation, which now encompasses cultural history as such, and of the notions of symbolic domination or violence which imply, as Bourdieu explains in *Pascalian Meditations*, that victims of such violence, by believing in the legitimacy of the principles that subjugate them, contribute to their efficacy:

Symbolic violence is the coercion which is set up only through the consent that the dominated cannot fail to give to the dominator (and therefore to the domination) when their understanding of the situation and relation can only use the instruments of knowledge that they have in common with the dominator, which, being merely the incorporated form of the structure of the relation of domination, make this relation appear as natural; or, in other words, when the schemes they implement in order to perceive and evaluate themselves or to perceive and evaluate the claims of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1984 (1979), 483. The original French version can be found in *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, Minuit, 1979, p. 563-564.



the dominators (high/low, male/female, white/black, etc.) are the product of the incorporation of the (thus naturalized) classifications of which their social being is the product<sup>14</sup>.

It is well known that the articulation of these two concepts has deeply altered our understanding of several fundamental realities. One such reality is the exercise of authority, which is founded on adherence to the signs, rituals, and images through which it is seen and obeyed. Another is the construction of identities of any kind, which are always situated in a tension between imposed representations (by power, the powerful, and orthodoxy) and the individual's own sense of belonging. Another still is relations between the sexes, which be alternatively be considered as the imposition of roles through representations and practices justifying male domination and as the assertion of female identity through the rejection or appropriation of masculine models.

Thinking about how representations construct male and female identities is a perfect illustration of an imperative that now pervades historical practice in its entirety: to understand both how representations, whether spoken, figurative, or acted out, define relationships of domination and how these representations are themselves dependent on the unequal resources and contradictory interests that can mobilize those whose power they legitimate and whose subjugation they perpetuate. Far from distancing us from the realities of the social world, as some believed and feared, a perspective that makes representations central is, in fact, the most social history there is.

### **Representation and “*Représentance*,” or the Regime of Historical Discourse**

In recent years, Paul Ricœur has unquestionably given more attention than anyone else to the convergence and competition between different modalities of representing the past: narrative fiction, the workings of memory, and historical knowledge<sup>15</sup>. In his last book, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, he makes a series of distinctions between two ways in which the past can present itself to the present: anamnesis, when the individual, as Borges put it, “descends into his memory,” and historiography. The first opposition is between testimonial and document. The former is inseparable from witnesses and the credit that is either granted or denied to their words; the second offers access to a past that is no one's memory and requires the mobilization of the techniques of historical criticism. The second distinction is between the immediacy of reminiscence and the construction of historical explanations, which can either emphasize trends and causes of which the actors themselves are unaware, or the actors' avowed motivations and conscious strategies. Finally, the recognition of the past which memory promises stands opposed to the accurate representation of the past achieved through the critical examination of documents and explanatory constructs, which are unique to history.

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<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 170. The original French version can be found in *Méditations pascaliennes*, Paris, Seuil, 1997, p. 204.

<sup>15</sup> The term “*représentance*,” which I have borrowed from Ricœur, refers to the way in which historical narratives seek to provide accounts of reality.

This explains representation's dual status in Ricœur's thought. It refers to a particular object in the historian's list of questions, which has become central to the approach developed by cultural history and the entire regime of historical utterances, which are governed by the discipline's desire for truth and verifiable knowledge. To paraphrase Marin's distinction, one can say that the historical representation of the past is indeed two-dimensional: it is transitive, because it represents what was and is no more, and it is reflexive, because it does so by displaying the rules and exigencies that govern its representational work. In the case of social and cultural history, which we mentioned previously, the representations of the actors themselves become the objects that historical representation represents. This explains, for Ricœur, the ambiguity and relevance of the term representation, which links object to be known to the operation of knowledge itself:

The historian in this way finds himself confronted with what appears at first to be a regrettable ambiguity of the term 'representation,' which depending on context designates as a rebellious heir of the idea of mentality the historian's represented object, and as a phase of the historiographical operation, the operation of representing ... A hypothesis then comes to mind: Does the historian, insofar as he does history by bringing it to the level of scholarly discourse, not mime in a creative way the interpretive gesture by which those who make history attempt to understand themselves and their world? This hypothesis is particularly plausible for a pragmatic conception of historiography that tries not to separate representations from the practice by which social agents set up the social bond and include multiple identities within it. If so, there would indeed be a mimetic relationship between the operation of representing as the moment of doing history, and the represented object as the moment of making history<sup>16</sup>.

The latter always offers itself in the form of a narrative. Yet must one conclude that history is simply a fiction like any other? There are several reasons to think so. First, the fact that history and novels use the same rhetorical tropes and the same narrative structures has dissolved the former's capacity for knowledge into a form of narrativity which no epistemological difference can distinguish from the truth of a fable. Next, the historical representation of the past is always threatened by the referential illusion. Certainly, as Barthes has shown, the power of such an illusion, which presents a referent with no historical objectivity as real, is not the same for novels which, though they dispense with the category of verisimilitude, abound in realistic notations designed to give them historical ballast, as for history, for which the "having-been-there of things is a sufficient principle of speech"<sup>17</sup>. And historians do indeed introduce into their narratives evidence that attests to this "having-been-there of things": quotes from the archives, reproductions of documents, and photographs. Hence historical discourse's twofold structure—

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2004 (2000), p. 228-229. The original French version can be found in *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Seuil, 2000, p. 295.

<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect" (1968) in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, University of California Press, 1989, p. 147. The original French version can be found in "L'Effet de réel," in R. Barthes, L. Bersani, Ph. Hamon, M. Riffaterre, I. Watt, *Littérature et réalité*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 87.

which de Certeau calls “laminated” or layered—which incorporates into historical analysis traces of the very past that it seeks to understand.

Yet, as both historical falsifications and fiction that presents itself as historical narrative demonstrate, accurate representations of the past are never completely protected from the seduction of the referential illusion. At a time—that is, our own—when the temptation of imagined and imaginary history is powerful, this task is nevertheless essential, as it establishes criteria that allow us to consider the distance separating historical discourse as an adequate representation of the past or—to put it better—of the past as the historian constructs it.

Once again, Ricœur shows us a possible path when he asserts that it is only by working back from the writing of history (which is related to fiction writing) to the research techniques and critical procedures that are the basis of the explanatory frameworks and approaches to documentary proof that are uniquely historical that historical discourse can accredit its truth claims:

[O]nce the representative modes supposed to give a literary form to the historical intentionality are called into question, the only responsible way to make the attestation of reality prevail over the suspicion of nonpertinence is to put the scriptural phase back in its place in relation the preliminary ones of comprehensive explanation and documentary proof. In other words, it is together that scripturality, comprehensive explanation, and documentary proof are capable of accrediting the truth claim of historical discourse. Only the movement that moves back from the art of writing to the “research techniques” and “critical procedures” is capable of raising the protest to the rank of what has become a critical attestation.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Reality of Representation**

The historian’s use of the concept of representation has been criticized in two ways. The concept, it is claimed, is doubly harmful: it detaches history from the study of the objective realities of which the past is constituted by emphasizing the study of illusions, dreams, and fantasies and—an aggravating circumstance—it undermines the definition of history as knowledge, replacing it with a fiction about fictions, and perpetuates the myths that historical actors have themselves constructed. In my view, this is not at all the case. The concept of representation, in its various meanings, allows for a sharper and more rigorous understanding of the social world’s cleavages and hierarchies. And to accept that historical discourse is and can only ever be a representation of the past does not destroy its claim to be scientific; on the contrary, it is the foundation of this claim.

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<sup>18</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 278; *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, p. 363.

The representations on which perceptions and judgments are based and which govern the ways we speak and act are just as “real” as processes, behavior, and conflicts that are considered “concrete.” The emphasis that some of social history’s defenders place on the “concrete,” in opposition to representation’s purported abstraction, is cause for concern. Recalling Foucault, one might wonder if this does not entail a “quite meager idea of the real,” which is identified only with “concrete” situations. Foucault wrote:

There is not “a” real to which one would return if only one spoke about all or some of the things that are more “real” than others and that would elude us, to the advantage of inconsistent abstractions, if one limited oneself to showing other elements and other relations ... A type of rationality, a way of thinking, a program, a technique, an array of rational and coordinated efforts, specific and sustained goals, the tools to achieve them, and so on—all this is real, but it does not claim to be “reality” nor “society” as a whole<sup>19</sup>.

This warning should suffice to rid intellectual debate of false alternatives that continue to burden it.

Of course, the practices that are in various ways directed at representations can never be reduced to the discourses that describe, regulate, prescribe, and proscribe them. They are neither subsumed nor absorbed by the representations that refer to them. The question can thus be formulated as follows: how can the historian grasp those mute practices that do not obey the specific logic of the discourses—whatever they might be—that by representing them make them readable? In his analysis of *Discipline and Punish*, Michel de Certeau identified the tension (and risk) that underpins any effort to account for the effectuation of practices:

When theory, instead of being a discourse upon other preexistent discourses, ventures into non- or pre-verbal domains in which there are only practices without an accompanying discourse, certain problems arise. There is a sudden shift, and the usually reliable foundation of language is missing. The theoretical operation suddenly finds itself at the limits of its normal terrain, like a car at the edge of a cliff. Beyond, nothing but the sea. Foucault works on this cliff when he attempts to invent a discourse that can speak of non-discursive practices<sup>20</sup>.

The history of practices necessarily works at the edge of this cliff and must accept, while using the techniques of documentary critique as a control, the obligatory mediation of representations.

### **Further reading:**

Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

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<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, “La poussière et le nuage,” in *Dits et écrits IV, 1980-1988*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Michel de Certeau, “Micro-techniques and Panoptic Discourse: A Quid pro Quo,” in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 189. The original French version can be found in “Microtechniques et discours panoptique: un quiproquo,” in *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987, p. 44.

[Website of the group dedicated to the study of political representation.](#)

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