



“Is the essential invisible to the eyes”? Essence and Appearance of (Medieval) Societies

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ABSTRACT. Rationality and critical knowledge have lost much of their prestige, and their internal disputes have become more pronounced. For some decades now, History has been an intellectual field characterized by a variety of dissensions. Its epistemology is diverse, as are the theoretical and methodological frameworks that underpin its operations, including even the absence of such parameters in favor of the supposed overcoming of the constraints of objectivity and of any aspiration to attain historical truth. In this article, I address some of these issues, particularly the still-prevailing perspective in medieval studies and beyond. By granting historical agents, their conceptions and their worldviews ‘gnoseological’ preeminence in the apprehension of their own societies, History becomes an emically grounded discipline reduced to uncritically reproducing the ideologies of dominant classes, both past and present. I advocate for an epistemology that reaffirms the ultimate purpose of historical knowledge: to objectively understand the laws and tendencies that govern the functioning and transformation of human societies.

Keywords: epistemology; scientific history; medieval history; essence; appearance.

“O essencial é invisível aos olhos”? Essência e Aparência das Sociedades (Medievais)

RESUMO. A racionalidade e o conhecimento crítico perderam boa parte do seu prestígio, amplificadas as suas dissensões internas. A História constitui, há algumas décadas, um campo intelectual marcado por dissensos variados. Diversa é a sua epistemologia, os referenciais teóricos e metodológicos que sustentam as suas operações, e até a ausência destes parâmetros em prol da suposta superação das amarras da objetividade e de qualquer anseio de alcance da verdade histórica. Neste artigo, evoco algumas dessas questões, em especial a perspectiva que segue presidindo a nossa medievalística e além. Concedendo aos agentes históricos, às suas concepções e visões de mundo a superioridade ‘gnosiológica’ na apreensão das suas sociedades, constitui-se a História como uma disciplina de base êmica que a reduz à reprodução acrítica das ideologias das classes dominantes de ontem e de hoje. Defendo uma epistemologia que reafirme a função última do conhecimento histórico, a compreensão objetiva das leis e tendências que regem o funcionamento e a transformação das sociedades humanas.

Palavras-chave: epistemologia; história científica; história medieval; essência; aparência.

“¿Lo esencial es invisible a los ojos”? Esencia y Apariencia de las Sociedades (Medievales)

RESUMEN. La racionalidad y el conocimiento crítico han perdido gran parte de su prestigio, con sus disensiones internas amplificadas. La Historia, desde hace algunas décadas, es un campo intelectual marcado por variados disensos. Diversa es su epistemología, los referentes teóricos y metodológicos que sustentan sus operaciones, e incluso la ausencia de estos parámetros en pro supuestamente de la superación de las ataduras de la objetividad y de cualquier anhelo de alcanzar la verdad histórica. En este artículo, evoco algunas de estas cuestiones, en especial la perspectiva que sigue presidindo nuestra medievalística y más allá. Al conceder a los agentes históricos, a sus concepciones y visiones de mundo la superioridad ‘gnoseológica’ en la aprehensión de sus sociedades, la Historia se constituye como una disciplina de base émica que la reduce a la reproducción acrítica de las ideologías de las clases dominantes de ayer y de hoy. Defiendo una epistemología que reafirme la función última del conocimiento histórico, la comprensión objetiva de las leyes y tendencias que rigen el funcionamiento y la transformación de las sociedades humanas.

Palabras clave: epistemología; historia científica; historia medieval; esencia; apariencia.

Introduction

In these dark times in which we live, every initiative that subjects conceptions of truth and opinion to historical scrutiny renders an essential service to the historicization of the exacerbated relativism that, from within the ivory towers of academia itself, has called into question the excellence of scientific knowledge and helped foster challenges to its primacy as a superior instrument for understanding reality! Scientists, in general, are not exempt from responsibility for the dark and heavy clouds obscuring the horizon of human civilization at this outset of the third millennium, a time when denialism and the most ignoble objection to all rationally grounded critical reflection and knowledge are rampant.

Common sense has been elevated to the status of a superior instrument for apprehending reality, and irrationalism marches triumphantly across several sectors charged with the critical assessment of the world and of reality. For those interested in — and with the stomach for! — surveying a terrifying, if brief, inventory of the principal and varied absurdities presently in vogue, I recommend Marcos Barbosa de Oliveira's article, in which he reports:

The most important cases are those of global warming, whose existence or anthropogenic character is contested by climate denialists; the Theory of Evolution, called into question by creationists and proponents of intelligent design; and [...] the case of vaccines, supposedly responsible for causing autism in children. Not to mention the adherents of the Flat Earth theory, whose numbers are growing at an alarming rate. Another manifestation of the loss of science's credibility is the proliferation of conspiracy theories and urban legends that show a complete disregard for evidence. As for global warming and climate change [...], I believe it unnecessary to underscore the gravity of the problem: it is the future of humanity itself that is at stake (Oliveira, 2018, p. 4).

The maxim that there was more future in the past seems to make perfect sense!

But what is the state of critical and systematic historical knowledge amid such prevailing 'tendencies'? It does not seem reasonable to suppose that the apprehension of the historicity of human societies could remain sheltered from the 'ideologically grounded revisionisms' that reign across the most diverse fields concerned with understanding. Allow me to explain the quotation marks: scientific knowledge, in general, and History, in particular, are necessarily and intrinsically self-critical, always disposed and inclined towards revising perspectives that supersede one another. This process complexifies, refines, and transforms the understanding of their respective subjects. The critical confrontation of all established knowledge is a *sine qua non* condition of the evolution of knowledge itself — something intrinsically positive whenever practiced with the methodological rigor forged over decades within the scientific field itself. Critique must be directed at improving the state of knowledge rather than disqualifying the effort involved in producing it.

However, the 'revisionisms' to which I refer here primarily serve to disqualify systematic critical knowledge rather than develop it — precisely because this is their aim. Ideologically oriented, they serve aprioristic projects and perspectives that, by virtue of being so, evade, when they do not distort, and even falsify (to varying degrees), the most basic rules and practices of critical knowledge production. This amounts, then, to the deliberate promotion of impostures to affirm irrationalism as a superior posture in the face of the complexity of human existence! As João Leonardo Gomes Medeiros highlights,

There are not enough clichés to describe a social situation in which reason came to be perceived as ethereal, as something that may be exercised privately without any need for social legitimation. Armchair philosophers, alongside lay and religious charlatans, seem to have taken the lead in ideological formation much like how compulsive sinners became theologians and notorious criminals dared to deliver lessons in moral conduct within politics (Medeiros, 2021, p. 444).

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that all of these afflictions stem solely from the actions and initiatives of detractors and 'external enemies'. A great deal of 'friendly fire' contributes to the field's discreditation, whether by supporting and elevating irrationalist epistemological perspectives (Cardoso, 2005) which deny professional History any differentiated status in apprehending the 'past', or through the promotion of new and falsified interpretations grounded in the manipulation and distortion of the very process of knowledge production. Within the broader scope of our discipline in Brazil, the recent past seems particularly susceptible to the revisionisms to which I refer. Thus, in an article published ten years ago concerning the long and

tenebrous period of military rule in Brazil, Demian Bezerra de Melo set out to discuss the use of a notion which, disguised as 'conceptual renewal', would ultimately undermine the understanding of the effective role played by certain historical agents within that context.

From the trivial observation that both the coup d'état and the dictatorship that followed involved significant participation by non-military sectors occupying relevant positions, this idea seeks to define such a situation through the term 'civil-military', qualifying both the 1964 coup and the dictatorship that followed. Drawing on a survey of the literature, it seeks to point out the inadequacies and deceptive implications that such a notion contains [...] insofar as it fails to account for the real nexuses articulating monopoly capital with the state apparatus in that historical juncture (Melo, 2012, p. 39, author's emphasis).

As for our specific area of work within the discipline, a certain interpretation of medieval history has become the preferred foundation of far-right groups worldwide, including in Brazil. This interpretation portrays the Middle Ages as a quintessential period of the formation of Western Judeo-Christian values and white supremacy in the struggle against infidels and heretics. The Crusader motto '*Deus vult* – God wills it', has been invoked on numerous occasions in recent years, even by Brazilian government authorities (Pachá, 2019). Having had to confront, from the very inception of the field, the many distorting 'legends' surrounding the Middle Ages – both the obscurantist and the romanticized varieties – I venture to suggest that medievalists are, by their (de)formation, particularly well-equipped for the daily jousts where the tournaments of appropriations of the past are contested, ready for the confrontation with the anachronistic 'crusaders' of today.

Our discipline constitutes – as attested by the very diversity of perspectives that characterize it today – an arena of conflict between opposing projects of synthesizing past and present, and of desires for the future. I argue that our most essential responsibility is to vehemently denounce the supposed 'inevitability of the present', the notion that the current state of affairs is the result of an absolute lack of alternatives, and the unilateral nature that supposedly defines the historical process. But how is such a denunciation to be made? By unveiling the diverse alternatives of the future in each past, the possibilities of becoming that it contained and that were defeated and superseded by the dominant current that imposed itself on History. Every 'fixed point' in the temporal flux contains diverse, open-ended possible futures in contention. Therefore, no historical becoming is inevitable.

Thus, what we rather generically allow ourselves to refer to as the 'past' becomes the object of intense dispute within each 'present', which seeks to appropriate it to validate its own meaning. This dispute does not take place in a vacuum, but rather within the field of historiography itself, fostering diverse and systematic revisionisms of different hues. For my part, without intending to place myself beyond my own share of complicity in the prevailing state of affairs, I shall address, in what follows, a central issue evoked by this theme. I refer to what seems to me to constitute a marked tendency within our medievalist studies, one undoubtedly stemming from the enormous authority of the guiding premises of the History promoted by the so-called 'third generation' of the Annales School, most clearly manifested by one of its most distinguished disciples, Alain Guerreau, to whom I shall return. I refer to what I describe as the primacy granted to the 'medieval' in the apprehension of their own reality, rendering them superior 'analysts', supposedly authorized to teach us how the societies they reproduced through living were effectively structured. Nevertheless, two preliminary caveats seem necessary.

First, it is important to note that historians rarely make explicit the theoretical perspectives that inform their analyses. They usually devote little space to theory, including the theory underlying their own work. Medievalists, in particular, tend not to clearly present or name their specific approaches. It is rare for a historian to begin a study of a topic in Medieval History by explaining, even minimally, the perspective from which they are working. For example, concerning the matter that interests me here, what is the nature of the role attributed, within the historian's approach, to the internal parameters and referential frameworks of the society under study, such as its conceptions of the world and of society, its intrinsic expressions and visions? Do these immediately constitute the subject's core characterization, or are they raw materials that will only become so after being critiqued, confronted, and 'untwisted', so that, once their limits are exhausted, they may allow us to apprehend the object in its maximum complexity?

Second, it hardly seems an exaggeration to say that History, our discipline, is perhaps at the top of the list of systematic bodies of knowledge whose current vocabulary is among the least technical. Anyone who has 'grappled with' a paper from the field of botany, for example, will have noted the use of a highly technical

vocabulary, largely restricted to the specific field of knowledge pertaining to that ‘slice of reality’. By contrast, History is practiced throughout the world essentially on the basis of the current vocabulary of various national languages. Consequently, the words historians routinely use in their discourse tend to have multiple meanings, accumulated through usage and widespread ‘consumption’. In short, the vocabulary of History is polysemous to its very roots, bearing the weight of decades, even centuries, of usage that stretches the meanings of words to their limits.

Appearance and Essence

Having established this, it is fitting to begin by examining the most prevalent dictionary definitions of the terms ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’, which form the basis of our title. The *Dicionário Houaiss da Língua Portuguesa* defines two basic meanings of the word ‘essence’ that merit attention here. The feminine noun ‘*essência*’ (essence) is defined in its first meaning as “[...] that which is most basic, most central, the most important characteristic of a being or thing; that which confers an identity and distinctive character” (Houaiss et al., 1986, p. 1241). The fifth definition of the entry renders ‘essence’ as ‘existence’ itself (Houaiss et al., 1986, p. 1242). I also note two fundamental definitions of the feminine noun ‘*aparência*’ (appearance), which are recorded in the same dictionary. The first definition identifies ‘*aparência*’ as “[...] the external configuration of someone or something, that which is immediately apparent.” The second definition refers to ‘*aparência*’ as deceptive exteriority, false indication, or illusion as opposed to reality (Houaiss et al., 1986, p. 652).

From the foregoing, it seems reasonable to conclude, first of all, that in ordinary language ‘essence’ and ‘appearance’ occupy opposite poles, antagonistic extremes in which ‘essence’, identified with ‘reality’, stands opposed to ‘appearance’ as the exterior aspect of a thing, a limited and partial manifestation thereof. Something that appears to be, but is not! The use of the term ‘appearance’ denotes a clear distrust, suggesting that the external aspect of something may conceal its interior, what it truly is. In this sense, appearance and essence (or reality) would constitute distinct elements, insofar as the former tends to disguise, conceal, or even divert the effort of comprehending the latter. This idea is reinforced by a well-known popular saying: ‘Looks can be deceiving!’

However, despite being current and predominant, this dictionary perspective appears to overlook another meaning that diminishes the aforementioned opposition between the terms, one that is grounded in a neutral understanding that seems more etymologically accurate. According to this view, both essence and appearance are expressions of reality — distinct levels thereof that can be seen in the manifestation of the real. Moreover, contrary to the popular saying, not all appearances are deceptive, for there are those that are identical to the thing itself, which in such cases manifests or appears as it truly is. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this exposition, I should state that appearance is, indeed, deceptive; yet, it is no less effective than the reality it distorts, conceals, or masks.

According to José Ferrater Mora (1979, I, p. 175), the predominant perspective that distinguishes appearance from reality stems from two main causes. First, some realities manifest or appear in a certain form at first glance, but when subjected to careful analysis, they reveal themselves in ways quite distinct from how they were initially perceived. Second, knowing a phenomenon involves explaining it, which means establishing how and why it appears in a certain form, especially when that form is deceptive at first glance. Yet let it be made clear here: when this occurs, it is appearance itself that is deceptive, and not the testimony of our senses.

Let us consider a simple example, which may facilitate comprehension of the issue. Do you recall, reader, ever observing a piece of wood submerged in water? What happens? Even when intact, it appears twisted or broken. This is not the result of an error on the part of our sense of sight, which would supposedly mistake the wood for something it is not. Although the wood is in fact unbroken, the laws of light refraction present that submerged piece of wood to us in precisely that manner. This example teaches us that appearance is itself genuinely real, no less real than the thing itself. However, it is a different type of reality, which we might call ‘apparent reality’. It is not, therefore, illusory in the sense that it results from the limitations or weaknesses of our sensory capacities. Since appearance is also an expression of the real, we should keep in mind from the outset that it too demands an effort of explanation, especially when our intellectual aspiration consists in apprehending reality itself.

These brief references allow us to glimpse the high degree of controversy surrounding the topic. The issue of appearance and essence has a long philosophical tradition. Due to limitations of space and intellectual

capacity, I will summarize it by referencing a few key points that will allow us to recognize its main ideas. Since its inception, Western metaphysics, beginning with Parmenides, has distinguished between a true, essential world and an apparent world that conceals or reveals the former (Beltrán Villalva, 1982). Philosophers were expected to focus on being and distinguish it from appearances because only the pursuit of being could lead to truth, permanence, and essence. In contrast, pursuing opinion would trap us in error by confusing essence with appearances.

The tension between essence and appearance, established by pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, was shattered by the advent of Sophism and Plato, who radically separated essence from appearance. Appearance was restricted to the sensible world and contrasted with essence, which Plato projected into a separate realm: the superior world of Ideas. This separation was maintained and amplified by Christian thought, which identified essence with God and appearance with His creations. Subsequently, the Aristotelian perspective reinterpreted Platonic ideas as essences intrinsic to things themselves, the proper nature of each thing, that which makes it what it is, according to the original meaning of *physis* among the pre-Socratics (Beltrán Villalva, 1982).

This Aristotelian notion of essence dominated medieval thought and complicated the relationship between essence and appearance by introducing the relationship between essence and existence — between what a thing is and the fact that it exists. The theological implications of this issue are clear, as created beings, unlike God, have a distinction between their essence and existence.

The relationship between essence and appearance would receive an entirely different treatment within the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who interpreted appearance as phenomenon. His approach prioritizes the moment of the phenomenon's appearance and reduces essence to a mere thing-in-itself, which is knowable only in limited capacity. The reality of phenomena, or their essence, cannot be grasped through sensible intuition, but rather through a representation that Kant designates as an 'idea' and which is transcendent. Apprehending the systematic complexity of phenomena is possible only through reason, not understanding, thereby surpassing experience itself. The world as an idea is transcendent; it surpasses phenomena, of which it constitutes the complex and systematic totality (Kant, 1987).

Only absolute idealism, as conceived by Hegel, could reverse the radical split between essence and appearance, reality and phenomenon. According to the philosopher, essence necessarily manifests itself through appearance, exhausting the essence completely. Essence is revealed through the externalization of the inner self, which gives rise to appearance. Therefore, essence is only what reveals itself. The unity of the internal and external, of essence and appearance, is reality itself (Borges, 1998).

Friedrich Nietzsche would, in his own way, reintroduce the essential duality of Western metaphysics. Appearance is an indication of the real. The philosopher returned to the pre-Socratics by defending a single world in which appearance and reality are united in a fruitful tension rather than being opposed by an irreparable split, as in Platonism. This inversion establishes a world of simulacra that replaces the duality of an original, essential world and a world of copies, of appearance (Neves, 2024).

To conclude this brief excursus, postmodern thought is widely regarded as having launched an intense attack on the distinction between essence and appearance. However, ironically, in doing so, postmodernism risks being confused with positivism's one-dimensional perspective, which also eliminates this distinction. As Herbert Marcuse emphasizes (Manieri, 2007), positivism conceives of absolute reality as consisting of facts. This leads to the conception of a one-dimensional world in which there is no room for critical recourse to the category of essence. Essence is flattened and stamped upon the facts themselves, thereby depriving them of all possible transcendence.

According to the postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida (Domingues & Maciel, 2019), if the form of opposition, the oppositional structure, is metaphysical, then the relationship of metaphysics to an 'other' cannot itself be oppositional. Applied to our theme, this implies that, rather than directly opposing the essence–appearance structure and annihilating it in a positive, idealistic manner, it is perhaps more appropriate to play ironically with it. This involves accepting that one can oppose presently existing appearances with a constructed, provisional essence. This essence can serve to obtain other appearances, which can then be subjected to the same process indefinitely. There is no essence to be unveiled once and for all; rather, there are many appearances to be transformed. This is possible only by renouncing the distinction between essence and appearance, however provisional and historically constituted it may be.

Emic and Etic Perspectives

At this point, it seems appropriate to clarify that my question is epistemological, not ontological. Rather than defining what (social) reality is, I am driven by the aspiration to determine which of its manifestations should be considered when attempting to understand it! As a historian — and a historian of a remote society —, should I consider the recorded and transmitted contents of a period's documents to be essentially the expression of its appearance? For societies so distant in time, should we take appearance as the univocal expression of the social reality of the period? Or should we conceive of social relations in such societies as transparent enough that sources express the essence of the time's reality?

If social reality is capable of manifesting itself as it truly is on certain occasions while manifesting through limited or deceptive appearances on many others, three distinct positions on the topic follow (Beltrán Villalva, 1982). The first position is radically focused on the thing as the most real entity, whether a state, object, situation, or process. This position considers appearance a deceptive expression that takes the form of mere representation or illusion. This illusion must be disregarded or overcome to reach the reality of the thing. If reality is masked, it must be unmasked, and one must adhere exclusively to it. The second position takes the representation or phenomenon as the only reality of the thing. It opposes any perspective that there are differences between the thing's reality and appearance. What exists is what appears to exist. This position's possible basis will be either the premise that there is no reality in itself, hidden by appearances or that, even if it exists, it is unknowable and inaccessible to observation and knowledge.

Finally, the third position stems from the perspective that things — or at least some of them — are indeed not what they seem. However, it holds that when a distinction between reality and appearance occurs, both are real, that is, both are part of reality. For the sake of simplicity, the latter includes the real reality — the thing as it is — and the apparent reality — the thing as it presents itself — and asserts that knowledge of reality involves knowledge of both. But why? Because both the thing as it is — which is only accessible through a process of unmasking — and its appearance or mask produce effects in reality; both are real in their effects. I would venture to say that this third position serves as a guiding light in my historical practice.

If, on the one hand, reality itself gives rise to its own appearances and disguises, is it not true that many historians are responsible for elevating such appearances to the status of the sole expression of the reality they study? Are we then the supreme guardians of appearances? Essentially mystifiers? Does Clio reveal herself in a mirror that distorts and obscures her true face? Reality, in itself, is neither transparent nor immediately knowable: what we immediately apprehend of it is what it presents to our senses. As Karl Marx highlights in a famous passage of *Capital*, “[...] all science would be superfluous if the appearance and the essence of things directly coincided [...]” (Marx, 2013, p. 1080).

If the appearance of phenomena, which is immediately manifested to our senses, and their essence always fully coincided, our species would merely need to exist to naturally enjoy immediate access to full and true knowledge of our reality. I believe that, in our everyday lives and social interactions, human historians fully perceive this fact. However, does it persist in providing guidance when we don our uniforms and prepare for work in our studies?

The Dialectical Perspective

For Karl Marx, the minimum indispensable condition for any activity to be considered scientific is unveiling the reality beyond the appearance that conceals it — this being the general requirement of any valid knowledge. As Norman Geras (1977, p. 52) suggests, we may consider that the very properties of the Marxian object of study “[...] compellingly demand that appearances be destroyed if reality is to be correctly grasped.” At this point, it is necessary to recall that, for Marx, theory is the ideal reproduction of the real movement of the object, as is written in the preface to the second edition of the first volume of *Capital*: “[...] inquiry must appropriate the material in detail, analyze its different forms of development, and to track down their inner connection” (Marx, 2013, p. 28).

Further on in the same work, Marx again indicates the priority of the object (matter) over theory when he sets out the differences between his own dialectic and that of Hegel:

For Hegel, the process of thought — which he transforms into an autonomous subject under the name of the Idea — is the creator of the real, and the real is only its external manifestation. For me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing more than the material world reflected in the mind of the human being and interpreted by it (Marx, 2013, p. 30).

For this reason, science is not in the least 'creative'; it does not produce its object but merely reproduces it. The object is posited by the very dynamic of reality itself.

Now, capitalist society itself is characterized by a certain opacity that necessitates an analytical methodology capable of penetrating appearances to unveil its essence. Consequently, it becomes possible to demonstrate why that reality takes on its characteristic appearance. The most famous example of this perspective is Marx's doctrine of commodity fetishism, which addresses how capitalist society appears distinct from its true nature to its agents.

Despite this reference's merit, I agree with Miguel Beltrán Villalva that Marx's theses are based on considerations that are far more general in scope. Thus, they transcend fetishism and capitalist society. The latter does not constitute the exclusive historical context in which the social scientist must adopt a critical attitude toward a deceptive appearance to attain the full reality of the phenomenon under study, whose essence, once revealed, unveils its manifest appearance.

As Beltrán Villalva (1982, p. 35) highlights, "[...] it is not only in capitalist society that the mystification of reality functions as a means of legitimization, but in all past and present societies, and let us not speak of future ones, so as not to close the door to utopia." This phenomenon appears to be widespread and intrinsic to human societies across their most diverse spatio-temporal dimensions. In any case, it is worth noting that Marx seems to recognize differences in degree and perhaps even in nature in the historical manifestations of the phenomenon in question. Thus, Emilio Lamo de Espinosa (1981, p. 51) states that "[...] the transition from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production is, with regard to the manifestation of appearance, a transition from transparency to fetishism and mystification." He believes that social relations were comparatively more transparent to historical subjects in medieval society than to those in the society that superseded it.

In the remainder of this article, I will draw on the preceding considerations to offer a final set of reflections on the study of medieval society. It is clear that the historical records that form the foundation of our understanding of this context are rife with ideologies and express limited, biased worldviews influenced by social factors such as class, gender, age, and more. Thus, regardless of the potential for social acceptance and dissemination of the perspectives conveyed by historical documents at the time they were written, these records remain a gateway to knowledge of societies precisely because they portray the prevailing appearance of social reality for certain sectors of society, mainly the dominant classes.

Historians should not lose sight of the biased character of the records they manipulate in their research. These documents allow us to glimpse the appearance that the real assumed for certain segments of the societies we address through highly precarious and distorted lenses. This assertion does not aim to discredit our work or undermine our role, which I have described elsewhere as that of 'prospectors of the present'. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent nature of our raw material, namely that it simultaneously expresses and confuses reality, evading its essence less as a deliberate effort to mystify and more as an expression of a perspective conditioned by diverse social determinations.

We are all aware that History is currently an intellectual field characterized by a significant disagreement about the nature of its knowledge, the perspectives that guide its development, and the extent of its ability to perceive the phenomena it addresses. Its epistemology, fields, and subfields of specialization are diverse, as are the theoretical and methodological frameworks that sustain its operations. In fact, even the (supposedly beneficial) absence of such parameters is accepted in favor of a historiographical practice liberated from the constraints of objectivity. History may even be conceived as an 'art of reinventing the past', a 'literary' and 'discursive' construction free from obstacles and limits potentially imposed by demands grounded in aspirations toward historical truth. For my part, I defend and advocate for an epistemology based in Marxism and Critical Realism, one that reaffirms the ultimate function of historical knowledge: to objectively understand the laws and tendencies that govern the functioning and transformation of human societies, particularly those of the Western Middle Ages.

Emic Predominance in Medieval Studies

As I have previously noted, an emic perspective remains prevalent in studies of the medieval world, a lasting legacy of the third generation of the Annales School (Kottak, 2006; Xia, 2011). This perspective emphasizes the radical constitutive alterity between medieval societies and their scholars (in this case, us) and examines them 'from within'. The 'natives' point(s) of view are thus assumed or privileged, leading historians to understand the society under study through its own cultural and worldview categories. This

position is adopted to the detriment of an 'etic' perspective, in which approaches are oriented by a kind of 'translation' of the elements of the 'culture' being analyzed into the categories and concepts that inform the researcher's own context. In this approach, the researcher examines the subject through their own analytical and interpretive frameworks — that is, 'from outside' the society in question (as the outsider they are).

It is a French medievalist who offers the most emphatic defense of the predominant orientation I have just outlined. I refer to Alain Guerreau and his thesis, presented in various works (Guerreau, 1980, 2001), of the 'double conceptual fracture' that took effect in the eighteenth century and undermined our ability to perceive the medieval past. The advent of bourgeois society and subsequent developments would have severed our connection to the past, depriving us of its categories for apprehending the world and of the capacity to engage with it: realities were split apart and its institutions were disfigured, producing a rupture so brutal and extreme that any form of communication would, at best, resemble a dialogue of the deaf. In his view, 'we' and the 'medievals' would share no systems of thought, nor would we even speak mutually comprehensible languages!

Thus, applying categories and interpretive frameworks from outside the Middle Ages' context to it would be a fundamental error, inevitably leading to distorted representations of those societies. In a celebrated text, Guerreau (2001) even suggests that translating Latin expressions from the period into modern languages would result in a total loss of meaning, preventing us from grasping the power of those words. While I regret the brevity of my critique, I must submit that this position is, in my judgment, a major mistake that promotes several contradictions and limitations.

Above all, this perspective leads to the mystification or fetishization of documentation. This is evident in the numerous current calls for a return to sources and hermeneutic exegesis in medievalist scholarship. Sources are not fragments of truth — supposed faithful and effective records of a complete past before which we should stand in silent wonder. Rather, they are partial statements that simultaneously foster and constrain knowledge of the society from which they emanate by revealing and sublimating the portions of the real to which they refer. Their discourses convey the surface appearance of social relations as they presented themselves to individuals immersed in them and confuse that appearance with the underlying essence of the social relations that structured that very society.

While I agree with Guerreau that the advent of industrial bourgeois society was marked by profound transformations, I do not believe that they resulted in an 'epistemological impairment' that diminished our ability to understand medieval society. On the contrary, professional History is possible precisely because of this process! This 'fracture' situated us within a 'political economy'¹ (Fontana, 1998) that was foreign to the mystifications of the feudal order, enabling us to approach it with genuinely critical tools and conditions of perception. Our 'vantage point' in the unfolding of time and our capacity for 'temporal projection' constitute both the conditions of the History we practice and an advantage. Our role is to 'translate' the past into terms that the present can understand, a process stemming from the contrasts and similarities between the two. Similarly, classical anthropology's task is not to explain primitive societies to the primitives themselves, but rather to the societies in which anthropologists operate. Knowledge is always produced for the benefit of others like us, aimed at elucidating the ongoing present.

Furthermore, radicalizing the perspective of 'conceptual and epistemological fracture' can lead to an even greater harm: the suppression of temporal articulation across the *longue durée*. Here, in my judgment, lies the essential point. When we insist on the 'fractured' alterity of the medieval world, we abdicate the perception of temporal continuity. The worst outcome of this perspective is not so much the distortion of the past, but the impossibility of grasping the constitution of the present as the result of the historical process, thereby reducing it to mere contingency! Medieval societies represent a radical specificity that nonetheless constitutes a particular historical realization of the fundamental elements that structure human sociability across all spatio-temporal dimensions of our existence.

There, men and women reproduced societies, organized themselves in order to produce, were subjected to exploitation, and developed forms of struggle and resistance — in short, they loved, suffered, lived, and died —, giving rise to specific manifestations of experiences constitutive of our humanity. The study of any given period of historical duration must move beyond both the emic and etic perspectives in favor of a dialectical approach (Rosa & Orey, 2012), which understands the representations produced within that society as a mere starting point — after all, this is what primary sources reveal to us, their 'self-image(s)' —, subjecting them to a rigorous interpretive critique that draws upon the theoretical frameworks and analytical tools refined through our discipline's practice.

¹"An explanation of the system of relations [...] that serves to justify and rationalize them — and, with them, the elements of inequality and exploitation they contain — presenting them as a form of social division of labor and functions [...]" (Fontana, 1998, p. 7).

Final considerations

Finally, let us address the fog of appearance manifested in the classification of medieval society's tripartite nature. Two Latin sentences, echoes of one another, convey the image of a perfect society. This notion was first expressed in the early eleventh century by Adalberon, Bishop of Laon, and Gerard, Bishop of Cambrai:

Triple, therefore, is the House of God which is believed to be one: below, some pray (*orant*), others fight (*pugnant*), and still others work (*laborant*); the three groups remain together and cannot bear to be separated, so that upon the function (*officium*) of one rest the labors (*opera*) of the other two, each in turn assisting the others (Duby, 1994, p. 9).

And the second:

It has been demonstrated that, from the very beginning, humankind has been divided into three: those who pray (*oratoribus*), those who farm (*agricultoribus*), and those who fight (*pugnatoribus*); this provides clear evidence that each is the object, on the part of the other two, of reciprocal care (Duby, 1994, p. 10).

Three functions, as Georges Duby highlights in his masterful work, all harmoniously combined. This constitutes a sublimated, ideological vision which both conceals and reveals, in the author's perspective. It reveals that, in this society, land plots — the peasant family holding — constituted the basic and essential productive unit in a predominantly agricultural economy, even though the importance of village solidarity, consolidated through the performance of collective tasks, was considerable. However, it also conceals the fundamental condition of direct producers, who maintained stable access to the means of production (in part through ownership, in part through tenancy), which meant that the extraction of surpluses produced above subsistence level in the form of feudal rent demanded — at minimum, alongside the peasants' acceptance of the supposed reciprocity that animated the system — the use of various forms of extra-economic coercion by the ruling class, most notably the structural violence intrinsic to the expanded reproduction of the system.

It reveals the formal assimilation of the fundamental social classes of that society under the generalized and characteristic manifestation of the essential personalism of social relations, conflating the relations of dependence that bound peasant families to lords — the domain of relations of exploitation — with the personal subordination that internally articulated the feudal ruling class, thereby mystifying the essential difference between vassalage and serfdom. The fact that sources from that period operate this distortion seems to me to constitute merely the dominant tendency of documentary projections; however, the fact that a number of historians continue to do so today reveals both their propensity for mystification and the fact that they practice History from political positions, projecting them even onto the most distant pasts to which they devote themselves.

Finally, it masks the fact that the supposed divinely rooted solidarity that supposedly united the different orders in a system of mutual support aimed at the common good was based on lordly violence — including symbolic violence — which was intrinsic because structural to the system. Above all, it conceals the fact that the contradictions in that society regularly gave rise to the everyday manifestation of peasant resistance, not infrequently expressed through revolts. In my view, this is perhaps the most harmful obliteration imposed on our present by idealist approaches identified with the position and ideology of the dominant classes of the past: the assumption that the systems of domination that characterize History do not necessarily carry within themselves the forms of resistance that opposed them, which are an expression of the dialectic that constitutes their nature. Thus, finally, as Walter Benjamin (Löwy, 2005) noted in another era perhaps nearly as dark as our own: If not even our dead are safe, what can be said of us living who continue to try to survive? The historian is not indebted to a vision of the past but to a desire for the future. If we are indifferent to this perspective, we will be unable to dispute the historical consciousness in the present and unable to speak of History with those who can hear us because they are willing to listen. Otherwise, we will continue trying to dialogue with the dead...

Data availability

Does not apply.

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