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Alejandro E. Gómez

From Representations to Perceptions: Towards a New "Horizon of Expectation" in Historical Theory?

In the late twentieth century, the historical discipline passed through a period of epistemological skepticism that was described as a "crisis of history" (Noiriel 1996). In a global context of major geopolitical, economic, and technological change, traditional nationalistic historiographies began to seem inadequate and alternative approaches to history emerged. Some of the most important theoretical developments that emerged from this context result from the influence of the cognitive sciences, to the point that some scholars began to speak of a "cognitive turn" that has affected most of the social sciences. Hence the emergence of new fields of research such as cognitive anthropology and cognitive sociology (Brubaker et al. 2004; Zerubavel 1999). Daniel L. Smail's (2008) concept of neurohistory, which argues that changes in the brain can shape human history, is a particularly good example of how researchers have applied insights from neuropsychology and the cognitive sciences to the study of the human past. These fields are particularly relevant for historical topics where psychological factors play an important role, such as the history of representations or the history of emotions.

The history of representations developed during the aforementioned period of crisis in the 1980s. It was presented as an alternative to the paradigm of mentalities—which at the time was much criticized for its excessive inductiveness and semantic fuzziness (Lloyd 1990)—and is concerned with the historical study of beliefs, customs, and values (Ricœur 2004; Chartier 1989). The basic framework is derived from Durkheim's (1898) notion of "collective representations" and inspired by the work of social psychologist Serge Moskovici (1961), which suggests that when a representation attains a social level, the ideas, practices, and systems of values inherent in that representation become a sort of "collective knowledge" that operates like a "cognitive filter" that influences the interpretations of reality (Gosling and Ric 1996; Jodelet 1989).

However, in spite of the influence from social psychology, the historical paradigm of representations has remained essentially unchanged since its outset. This means that—unlike the history of emotions—it has overlooked the very suggestive research carried out in the last decades within different branches of the cognitive sciences. The

aim of this essay is therefore to expose some potential advantages for the "historian's workshop" of revising the epistemological basis of the history of representations in the light of theoretical formulations issuing from recent research.

Firstly, neuropsychology has looked at the influence of "secondary" or "social" emotions on the rationality of individuals (i.e. on their actions and attitudes). Social emotions—that is, emotions that are affected by the attitudes of other people and the psycho-cultural context, such as shame and pride—produce sentiments that António Damásio (1994) defines as "somatic markers." These sentiments combine with the memories and experiences of individuals to give an "orientation" to their interpretation of a reality, which in turn affects the way they react in certain circumstances.

Secondly, research has been conducted in social psychology on the subject of social representations. The work of Jean-Claude Abric (1994) about the existence of long-lasting "central cores" and more flexible "peripheral zones" is especially interesting. He argues that social representations can be affected by personal experience, for example when individuals face a certain reality that does not correspond to what they had expected, or when they consciously assume unusual practices in order to adapt themselves to a new social environment. The modifications resulting from those situations can occur only at the peripheral level of the representation, where "social images" associated with experience seem to be generated (Moliner 1996), while its essence or "central core" remains intact for as long as it is not replaced by another representation. A representation may also disappear completely when its incompatibility with the reality it describes becomes too evident (Flament 1994; Rouquette and Rateau 1998).

And thirdly, research in biopsychology regarding the function of perceptions in the process towards individual decision-making has shown that human decisions are not based merely on rationality, but are also affected by emotional states (including secondary emotions), which have proven to have an important role in "awakening the conscience" at the outset of the perceptive process. In the initial phase of identification, the mental elements required for the process are selected, immediately organized, and, finally, interpreted. They can lead then to the desired action while, at the same time, other possibilities are ruled out or simply inhibited. The nature of some of those emotions may vary according to the cultural and psychological characteristics of each individual, which will guide, to a large extent, the perceptive process. In the words of Alain Berthoz (2003), the

emotions only establish a preparatory context for taking an action, which is comparable to what "posture is to gesture."

These three lines of research agree on giving secondary or social emotions a role in the development of certain attitudes in individuals. Furthermore, they also consider that social or cultural features, acquired mainly through *memory* and *experience*, are important in forging these emotions. These two variables have traditionally been of the utmost importance in historical theory for their usefulness in helping to explain collective behaviors in the past.

Memory is not passive and fixed, but rather something that is continually renewed and recalled. Evocations of the past, as argued in the pioneering work of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1952), would not take place unless there were needs in the present that justify it (cf. Valensi 2009; Laurens and Roussiau 2002). These needs confer those memories (either collective or historical) a significance whose meaning will depend on the social framework in which they appear. This implies that the same event can be recalled at different moments and in different manners according to the community and the reasons its members have to evoke it (Ricœur 2004).

Experience, too, can influence the future behavior of individuals, and there are a number of historical theories that consider this factor. Reinhart Koselleck (1985) has underlined the importance of what he defines as "spaces of experience" to explain the future attitudes of individuals on the basis of their "horizons of expectation": a future made present, in which they express their hopes, concerns, and desires. In other words, past experiences can influence what people expect from the future, and thus also their actions and decisions. On a similar note, Jean Delumeau (1978) has postulated the existence of "climates of insecurity" to describe the collective feeling of uncertainty towards the future experienced in early modern societies. More recently, other historians have also mentioned the importance of experience in the study of emotions, by proposing more general theoretical notions such as "emotional regimes" and "emotional communities" that take into account this variable (Rosenwein 2006; Reddy 2001).

The importance given by historians to emotional climates is also shared by social psychologists, who have studied how the collective behavior of members of a group

is influenced by the underlying emotional culture and other more ephemeral emotive atmospheres (De Rivera 1992; Fischer 2003). Claude Bonnet (2003) suggests that the perceptive process can be divided into three phases: sensorial coding, gathering of information, and interpretation. In this final stage, experiences and memories seem to combine to generate social or secondary emotions that will prompt or inhibit—just as happens with basic or primary emotions—the actions of social actors in certain circumstances. In this sense, whether we describe this *predispositioning* as a conscience awakener, somatic marker, or cognitive filter, in all cases past experience is shown to play an important role in behavior that cannot be ignored by historians. Furthermore, these insights seem to substantiate the theoretical formulations made by Koselleck (particularly his notion of "horizons of expectation") by adding to them a psychological basis, and even to enrich them by granting them a cognitive dimension.

This supra-disciplinary approach could improve the analytical frameworks used by historians working on emotions, mentalities, sensitivities, and social representations by justifying the inclusion of factual situations taking place in the short term. The purpose of this would be to help identify collective patterns and individual exceptions (with or without collective impact), both in everyday life and in the course of major historical events. Accordingly, we should expect to find exceptions to prevailing perceptive patterns in individuals who had different life experiences, and who, therefore, could not have developed the same predispositions towards certain local realities as the rest of the population.

A brief example from my research (Gómez 2010) will help to demonstrate how these theories may be applied to specific historical situations. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the racial categories of white and black and the accompanying negative racial attitudes were closely connected with the societies of the Americas in which Afro-descendents (resulting from the slave trade) were numerous. However, there are examples of Europeans and Euro-descendants in the Americas who did not develop a white identity because they had not spent significant amounts of time in these multiethnic societies. They did not, therefore, share the negative racial attitudes of local whites towards Afro-descendant colored people, nor did they share the locals' chronic concerns regarding slave rebellions that characterized the "climates of insecurity" that affected those societies. Because their decision-making processes were based on a specific, atypical set of experiences and recollections, they acted in ways that

would have seemed inappropriate and even rash from the perspective of local white inhabitants.

In conclusion, there is clearly a need for updating the current episteme of the history of representations; or even for conceiving a new one based on the more inclusive notion of perceptions that includes emotions, mentalities, sensibilities, and representations. This new theoretical framework should focus on the third and interpretative phase of the perceptive process, where experiences and memory seem to come together to generate social emotions that guide or inhibit the taking of certain decisions. The resulting "predispositions" and "horizons of expectation" would then become the basis for understanding the generation of emotive climates, as well as the attitudes of those we may consider as cognitive outsiders. This methodological approach may also serve to enrich the palette of research in experimental psychology by unveiling new possibilities for the development of new protocols and experimentations through the exploration of the role of social representations and other related notions. A potentially fruitful field of research might be opened by focusing on the interaction between life experiences, the different kinds of memories (collective, historical, episodic, etc.), and specific social features or situations culturally recognizable by individuals.

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