



A Study on Marc Bloch's Historical Theory—Centering on *The Historian's Craft*

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Abstract. Marc Bloch, a noted French historian, is one of the founders of the Annales School. In his life, he put forward many innovative historical thoughts, which still have important reference value until today, and left significant historical materials for people. Bloch's systematic historical theory is reflected in his unfinished work—*The Historian's Craft*. By exploring and analyzing this text, this paper hopes to make a preliminary review and summary of Bloch's historiography methodology, so as to provide a reference for the current historiography research.

Keywords: Marc Bloch · The Historian's Craft · Annales School · Historical theory

1 Introduction

Marc Bloch (1886–1944) is a French historian. He is one of the founders of the Annales School. Bloch fought in two world wars and wrote a pamphlet called *The Historian's Craft*. It was a rich work of historical methodology, but Bloch died before it was finished. This book is an unfinished work, but the book has refined language, unique views, and a lot of historical experience, which incisively and vividly expounds the author's brand-new historical theory and summarizes the most vital historical thoughts in Bloch's life. Many of the theories in this book lay the foundation for the later development of the Annales School, so some people call this book “the Annales School Manifesto”.

In the 20th century history of historiography, the French Annales School was one of the most famous schools of historiography. The Annales School abandoned the stereotyped, monotonous, and pedantic thinking and practice of traditional historiography at that time, and broke the limitation that traditional historiography only centered on politics, military, and diplomacy. It also focused on long-term, holistic and interdisciplinary cooperation to investigate and study history, and the scope of historical research shifted from political history to social history, cultural history, and psychological history. The historical concepts advocated by the Annales School, such as Universal History, Intentional Historical Materials and Unintentional Historical Materials, Backtracking Methods, Interdisciplinary Combination, Questioning and Understanding, and long-term Theory, have exerted an extensive and far-reaching influence on the development of contemporary historiography.

Marc Bloch, the author of this book, was born in Lyon, France, into a Jewish family. His father, Gustave Bloch, was a professor of ancient history. “Bloch’s parents exerted considerable influence over him. Gustave Bloch, already in his forties, began his younger son’s historical training at an early age. Sarah Bloch, intelligent, musically talented, and a meticulous organizer, was devoted to her husband’s career and to her son’s education.” [1]. Bloch studied history at Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris. During this period he met his later collaborator, Lucien Febvre, also the founder of the Annales School. In 1908, he went to Germany to study in Berlin and Leipzig. Bloch was later drafted into the army and served in World War I. After the outbreak of World War II, Bloch still insisted on staying in France and sharing weal and woe with the French people. In that turbulent era, Bloch never gave up his pursuit of knowledge and adherence to his heart. He was born for history, and lived his life as history.

2 Question Raising: The Use of History

The origin of this book was a casual question from Bloch’s son. “Tell me, Daddy. What is the use of history?” As a historian, Bloch was confronted with a simple but thought-provoking question that seemed naive and boring. In fact, this question has been puzzling many historians at home and abroad. Because this question itself has ontological significance, the answer to this question is related to the rationality of the existence and development of the historical area, so it is not easy to respond.

To be sure, history does not translate into productivity as quickly as applied science, nor can it be directly applied to real life. It has always been taken for granted that history, like other natural sciences, should promote productivity and wealth. If a subject does not end up improving our lives in some way, it will look less than perfect in people’s eyes. It is precisely because history is less applicable that many people find it useless. But Bloch warned that: “We no longer feel obliged to impose upon every subject of knowledge a uniform intellectual pattern, borrowed from natural science, since, even there, that pattern has ceased to be entirely applicable.” [2] pp. 15.

In his view, the uncertainty of history is the reason for the existence of history. Bloch further emphasized: “The incomplete, if it is perpetually straining to realize itself, is quite as enticing as the most perfect success.” [2] pp. 15. Gu Jiegang, a modern Chinese historian, also took a similar view. He thought: “Although in specific application, knowledge should distinguish between useful and useless, in learning, one should only ask whether it is true or not, and it is not appropriate to ask whether it is useful. It is true that knowledge can be applied, but the application is only the natural result of knowledge, not the purpose of our study.” [3]. Therefore, it is not necessary for us to apply the invariable pattern from other disciplines to history. History need not deny itself, and should not abandon its own characteristics, let alone the advantages of history discipline.

3 Backtracking Method: Understanding the Present by the Past and Understanding the Past by the Present

Time is a momentous factor in historical study. For historians, time is an ever-changing continuum. Without talking about history at a specific time, the study of history will

lose its authenticity. Mr. Wang Guowei once said, “Science refers to the description of things, the exploration of their causes, and the discovery of laws. Referring to explanation of cause and effect, historiography is the study of the ancient and modern changes of things.” [4]. Thus, in popular terms, history is the study of changes through the ages. In other words, history deals first with the relationship between past and present. The relationship between past and present is bidirectional, interconnected, and reflective. Their relationship between them is so close that there are no absolute boundaries. Therefore, Bloch put forward the research method of backtracking, that was, from near to far and retroactive.

In the long history, there are some eternal and fundamental things in human beings and human society. If you want to discover these things, you have to start from the past and search for the root and truth of things. This is the meaning of understanding the present by the past. If we do not know the nature and possibility of things, then we may as well explore their essence and source. Outstanding historians excel in tracing back to the roots and finding out the truth of history, just like an instinct to start with life and find out the details of life. After all, a focus on reality and a love of life is the first trait of an excellent historian. “For historians, fieldwork is a rare and emotional process.” [5].

We can understand the present by the past and also understand the past by the present. Bloch thought, “Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself out just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present.” [2] pp. 36. In Bloch's opinion, the desire to understand life is one of the most basic qualities of historians and is common to all distinguished historians. Bloch tells a funny story about a trip to Stockholm to see the city hall with his friend Henri Pirenne. If you are a collector of antiquities, you only have an old, fixed, rigid object in your eyes, but a real historian does not just observe these old objects, he observes things around him and loves and understands life. For a historian, besides writing books and influencing the world, he also needs to taste life. To some extent, the historian's observation and love of his own life are the source of inspiration for his writing. Because knowledge of the present often helps us understand the past in a more effective way. The inspiration for historical research sometimes comes from the revelation of reality. If a scholar doesn't even care about the life around him and doesn't experience it carefully, he is at most an antique fan, not a historian.

The method of backtracking is of great significance to historical research. Because once history passes away, there is no way to redo it. We need to feel and experience the historical scene personally, and try to reproduce and restore the historical scene. At this time, we need to rely on our imagination to broaden our horizon and walk into the historical places with a rich imagination. Imagination comes from our real life, pushing the known to the unknown, just like a telescope looking farther and farther.

4 Classification of Historical Materials: Intentional Historical Materials and Unintentional Historical Materials

Historical research cannot do without the arrangement of historical materials, which is helpful to historical research, and the two are interdependent. The so-called “historical

materials” refer to the basis for research or discussion of history, and are all resources conducive to understanding history and restoring the historical reality. Once history has passed, it is impossible to repeat it. Historians can only understand what happened in the past by looking for historical sources. But the collation of historical materials has always been a huge project, because the classification standards are difficult to confirm. Historians want to sift out reliable, authentic materials, but the practical task is not easy.

It was Bloch’s consistent style of study to attach importance to textual research of historical materials. Although Bloch opposed positivism historiography, he did not despise the textual research of historical materials, nor did he deny the significance of historical materials for historical research. He himself was a well-known historian who was very good at using historical materials and believed that historical materials played a crucial role in historical research. On the classification of historical materials, Bloch creatively proposed to divide historical materials into intentional historical materials and unintentional historical materials. The former is the historical materials formed by some people in order to interfere with people’s judgment, such as historical works, memoirs, news reports, historical stories, and so on. The latter is the historical materials produced by some people without direct intention, such as internal archives, military documents, private letters, cultural relics, and so on, which are all the evidence left by people at that time without special purpose.

In contrast, unintentional historical materials have no direct purpose, and their authenticity will be greatly enhanced. They can also play a role in making up for and correcting intentional historical materials, so they will be more favored by historians. Unintentional historical materials can help people to distinguish the truth of history and fill the blank of history. Bloch admitted, “There can be no doubt that, in the course of development, historical research has gradually been led to place more and more confidence in the second category of evidence, in the evidence of witnesses in spite of themselves.” [2] pp. 51. It is indeed a wise choice for us to verify the rationality of the historical conclusion by referring to the unintentional historical materials, and to discard the false and retain the truth. However, does this mean that unintentional historical materials are perfect information? Although Bloch emphasized that unintentional historical materials were more reliable, his thinking was very clear. He did not resist intentional historical materials and took an objective attitude towards intentional historical materials. Although unintentional historical materials are more credible, there are still many errors and falsifications. The study of history requires a combination of the two. We also need to pay attention to historical materials that are not conducive to our own opinions, so that historiography can make great progress. As the famed Chinese historian, Yan Gengwang pointed out: “We should pay attention to all historical materials on this issue. We should not only pay attention to historical materials that are favorable to our point of view, but also should not arbitrarily select a few historical materials that are favorable to our point of view.” [6].

5 Historical Analysis: Judging and Understanding

Understanding is a reflection of research ability and attitude. It is relatively easy to judge the thoughts and activities of historical figures, but it is more complicated and difficult

to make a proper understanding. Understanding is a prerequisite for historical judgment. Before we judge history, if we do not understand it correctly, it will become a fallacy. “Therefore, for historians, understanding is mainly a way, an attitude that is always accompanied by historical interpretation, a way of equal dialogue with ancient scholars, and a means to put themselves in a collective environment with predecessors.” [7].

Bloch believed that understanding “includes a vast experience of human diversities, a continuous contact with men. Life, like science, has everything to gain from it, if only these contacts be friendly. [2] pp. 119”. Bloch stressed that the method of understanding is not limited to history. Communication between people and cooperation between countries need to be understood. “Understanding, in all honesty, is a word of pregnant with difficulties, but also with hope.” [2] pp. 118. Bloch put forward such a view, of course, was related to his time. But it had more to do with his own experience. It was difficult to describe his mixed feelings as a Jew when he saw his fellow citizens persecuted. Bloch lived through the First World War and later felt the devastating effects of the Second World War. Facing the disaster brought by the war, the dilapidated country and, countless civilian casualties, Bloch suffered a great psychological shock. In this situation, he felt the importance of mutual respect, understanding, and sympathy among different races and countries. Therefore, different races and countries should have more understanding and tolerance, less blame and attack, if we have time to understand each other, then many times unnecessary conflicts can be avoided.

As Mr. Li Jianming said: “Understanding precedes evaluation, understanding is more important than evaluation, and understanding is also difficult to evaluate.” [7]. Chen Yinke, a master of Chinese culture, once said, “A person who is truly known as an understanding person must have a rich imagination and be in the same realm as ancient scholars. Only by diligently studying the theories of ancient people and expressing a sympathetic attitude can we comment on their academic viewpoints and avoid becoming a superficial and vague view.” [8]. Historiography is ultimately historical hermeneutics. In short, understanding is the premise of historical interpretation, and the process of understanding is the key to constructing historical interpretation. Understanding is the indicator light of both historical research and the world.

6 Conclusion

As an advocate of the new historiography method, Marc Bloch, in his book *The Historian's Craft*, raised the topic “What is the use of history?” which led to the discussion at the center of the proposition. In his book, he defended history, put forward lots of historical thinking and classic historical methodology, provided reference and guidance for the history of the later researchers. He made an indelible contribution to the progress of history. The ultimate aim of historical study is to advance the interests of mankind and benefit the whole world. People study history, from textual research to analysis and then to understanding, which is a complex process. It's needed to constantly think, dig and show the breadth, depth, and causal relationship behind history, and always have the quality of understanding and compassion, so as to benefit and contribute to the development of human beings and human society. Historical studies are by no means rote memorization and simple piling up of knowledge points. It is more important to

explore the value and significance of history itself and find the ultimate goal of historical research.

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