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HISTORICAL ACTION AND NARRATIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF HISTORIOGRAPHY IN RICOEUR AND RANCIERE

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ABSTRACT

The argument of this study is that a critical encounter between the 'historiographical' texts of Ricoeur and Rancière on the theme of historical action and narrative provides us with a fruitful approach to the political stakes of the act of writing history. More specifically, I claim that attention to how these two authors frame narrative agency in the construction of our identities in history reveals two points of salience that give orientation to our attitude toward history, namely, disruption and harmony. Framing history as a problem in this way makes visible the centrality of how to conceive agency within the two poles of modern existence: on the one hand, statistical regularities that govern behavior in the form of impersonal forces and, on the other, individual projects, the trajectories of which form a coherent life (and define autonomy for the subject). The merit of narrative history is to bridge these poles; but it thereby occludes the antagonisms characteristic of modernity. It is in order to make these visible that we need a disruptive attention to the way narratives are constructed retrospectively.

***Keywords**: Narrative Agency, Historiography, Narrative, Nominalism, Ricoeur, Rancière.*

RICOEUR VE RANCIERE'İN TARİHYAZIMINDA TARİHSEL EYLEMSELLİK VE ANLATI

ÖZ

Ricoeur ve Rancière'in tarihyazımsal metinlerinin eleştirel bir şekilde ve tarihsel eylemsellik ve anlatı kavramlarına vurgu yaparak birlikte okunması, tarihyazımının siyasal önemini göstermektedir. İki yazarın anlatısal eylemselliğin tarih içinde kimliklerin inşasındaki rolüne yaklaşımı, tarihe dair oryantasyonumuzu belirleyen iki öğeyi, parçalanmayı ve uyumu, görünür kılmaktadır. Tarihi bu şekilde bir problem olarak tasvir etmek ise, eylemselliği modern yaşamın bu hususta iki temel kutbu arasında nasıl konumlandırdığımızın önemini vurgulamaktadır: davranışı, kişisiz toplumsal kuvvetler olarak belirleyen istatistiksel düzenlilikler ve gelişimleri uyumlu bir yaşamı oluşturan ve birey için otonomiyi vurgulayan kişisel tasarılar. Modern yaşamın barındırdığı çatışmaları görünür kılmak adına, anlatıların 'geriye dönük' inşasına dikkatimizi vermemiz gerekir.

***Anahtar Kelimeler**: Anlatısal Eylemsellik, Tarih Yazımı, Nominalizm, Anlatı, Ricoeur, Rancière.*

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, when social reconstruction and integration were the orders of the day, and liberal parliamentary principles contested the political terrain against socialist/communist ones, history was also seen as the new battleground for philosophy and became the focus of intense debate. The stakes of the debate were not exclusively political but were motivated principally by the social conditions and antagonisms characterizing that 'present'. Likewise, the debates around the notion of history characterizing our present (including the difficulty of demarcating the present) should be seen as essentially motivated by the social problems and struggles that confront us today: it is because we are not sure how to figure a notion of society that would provide a principle of integration without a remainder—or whether this is desirable—that the past has become increasingly problematic and that we ask whether history is a narrative or a science, what kind of objectivity it exhibits, etc.

The works of two authors, Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Rancière, are particularly helpful in grappling with these problems, especially the one concerning the problematic proximity of history to the social sciences.[1] Both authors approach history in a mode of interrogation rooted in philosophical inquiry and engage with questions about the nature of historical understanding. Moreover, both authors emphasize the significance of interpretation in the study of history. However, a critical encounter between these two authors reveals important differences that throw in relief the stakes of choosing our assumptions about the present in shaping our visions of the past and vice versa. Ricoeur's concern with how narratives give meaning to human actions contrasts with Rancière's emphasis on dissensus, the disruption of established orders and the emergence of new political subjectivities. Ricoeur's valorization of shared

[1] Even though studies that investigate these authors individually on the theme of narrative action and historiography exist, their critical juxtaposition has received little attention. Some studies on this theme in Ricoeur and Rancière, respectively, are the following. Donald Polkinghorne, "Ricoeur, Narrative and Personal Identity", in Cynthia Lightfoot, et al., *Changing Conceptions of Psychological Life* (Psychology Press, 2004). Angelos Mouzakitis, 'From Narrative to Action: Paul Ricoeur's Reflections on History', *Rethinking History* 19, no. 3 (3 July 2015): 393–408, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.901654. Laura Quintana, *The Politics of Bodies: Philosophical Emancipation With and Beyond Rancière* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020). Iwona Janicka, 'Who Can Speak? Rancière, Latour and the Question of Articulation', *Humanities* 9, no. 4 (December 2020): 123, https://doi.org/10.3390/h9040123.

meanings contrasts with Rancière's interest in the conflicts and ruptures within historical narratives. Narrative identity occupies a salient position in this encounter, giving rise to the question of whether the emphasis should be placed on how individuals and communities construct their identities through stories or on a 'politics of aesthetics' that challenges existing political orders.

The argument of the present study is that a critical encounter between the 'historiographical' texts of Ricoeur and Rancière on the theme of historical action and narrative provides us with a fruitful approach to the political stakes of the act of writing history. More specifically, I claim that attention to how these two authors frame the respective roles of memory and forgetting in the construction of our identities in history reveals two poles or points of salience that give orientation to our attitude toward history, namely, disruption and harmony. Moreover, framing *history as a problem* in this way makes visible the centrality of how to conceive agency within the two poles of modern existence, namely, statistical regularities that govern behavior in the form of impersonal forces and individual projects, the trajectories of which form a coherent life (and define autonomy for the subject). The merit of narrative history is to bridge these poles; but it thereby occludes the antagonisms characteristic of modernity.

Nominalism in History

Rancière claims that "history is, in the final analysis, susceptible to only one kind of architecture …—a series of events happens to such and such a subject."[2] Moreover, 'history' is intrinsically ambiguous: it designates the lived experience of events, its narration, the explanation people give of them, and a fictional story. In short, both the series of past events and the accounts we give of these events.[3] Thus history offers us a story of some sort about a series of events in the past. The question then becomes: what kind of story does history tell? I want to suggest a nominalist answer to the effect that history tells several kinds of stories and that it would be a mistake to formulate an overarching semantics that would govern every kind of historical account there is and there could be. The answer is motivated by the variety of historical questions we ask. For example, we might want to know how a given social category came into

[2] Jacques Ranciere, *Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, (Minneapolis, Minn: University Of Minnesota Press, 1994), 2.
[3] Ranciere, 1–4.

existence and try to formulate the conditions under which it was formed and how these determined its logical relations and moral connotations; but we might also want to ask questions about an individual's life, discern the ways in which it was formed at the intersection of myriad paths, conscious and unconscious.

A nominalist approach to the subject matter of history also gives us several critical tools that enable us to conceive of history as a problem-oriented discipline in productive dialogue with the other social sciences. The relationship between history and the social sciences exemplified in the Annals school has come under criticism from a number of quarters.[4] Although the respective positions from which the criticisms originate are not homogeneous, the upshot is that history spells its own end as it becomes an adjunct of political science or sociology; what is urged, given this predicament, is that history come to terms with its inherently narrative and literary mode of being.

The basic nominalist thesis is that we make up the categories we use to describe the world. The question to which it addresses itself is whether there are any natural kinds independent of how we think or act and to which we refer with the appropriate general concepts. The claim bears a certain initial plausibility when we consider the view that biological species, the paradigm cases of natural kinds, are not given once and for all, but are the result of contingent modifications in organisms as they interact with their environment. Thus, general terms seem to be linguistic artifacts, designed as shorthand to refer to individual entities. Yet the nominalist thesis stated thus, *tout court*, immediately suffers from an inadequacy, since it cannot account for the apparent tightness of fit between certain of our classifications and what they purport to describe. Camels may have evolved over time from different organisms, but it is a very strange thing to say that the only property they share is the name. The common features among camels and their differences from cats seem to be real enough. So, some qualification is called for in the basic thesis to accommodate this.

However, if we set aside nominalist claims about the description of the natural world and focus on the description of the historical world—that is, on people engaging in meaningful actions with one another and with themselves—what we have is "the time of action and of suffering,"[5] in Ricoeur's telling phrase.

[4] See chapter twelve in Francois Dosse, *History of Structuralism; The Rising Sign 1945 1966* (University Of Minnesota Press, 1998).
[5] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Volume I*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, (The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 70.

The nominalist thesis concerning this domain would be that kinds of objects come into existence only with the classifications (categories) that make it possible to talk about them. The kinds of objects at issue are human beings: workers, psychiatric patients, account managers, schoolteachers, etc. There are general terms people use to describe themselves and these terms have histories, in the sense that they come into being, ossify into stable identities, and vanish into the annals of social history. If the basic thesis above is right, then it means that people also have histories, because kinds of people come into existence and disappear along with the kinds that are used in classifications. Ian Hacking refers to Elizabeth Anscombe's view of intentional action to explicate the basic nominalist thesis described here: intentional actions are actions under a description.[6] Descriptions are possible in a specific social setting and are subject to transformations and modifications through historical processes. If a given kind of description is not available at a given time, then intentional actions under that description are not possible. Thus, if we get a better understanding of what description and possibility are, then the nominalist claim cited above will become clearer.

The kinds of descriptions at issue are the ones that use general social concepts to characterize behavior, which presuppose (institutional) social practices. Hence what is claimed by the nominalist thesis is not a reduction of all social/historical phenomena to linguistic terms, since these terms are embedded in concrete practices of individuals. For example, the concept of obsessive-compulsive personality required all sorts of practices and discourses to become possible as a term of classification and identification which can be historically specified.[7] Once it was available, a new kind of person had come into being, not only for psychological discourse, but also for the individuals to identify with. If new descriptions come into being, new possibilities for action become available. This means that an individual's possibilities are bounded and historically conditioned. Within the social space surrounding the individual, we find designations that are possible ways of being people. People come to occupy certain roles and functions that are available at a given time, and this means performing a whole set of behaviors prescribed by these roles. Even in those cases when a certain category has been 'invented' by a number of discourses and

[6] Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 108.
[7] For a detailed example of what this entails, in the case of multiple personality, see Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

imposed upon people, once it assumes a stability within the social space, it thereby makes possible strategies of identification and subversion. To be a 'medieval king' requires a set of conditions for it to be a possible description for action, but a given king may perform certain actions, which, when in conjunction with a gamut of other conditions that can be described only after the fact, can lead to a transformation in the very conditions that made it possible.[8] This is to say that human spontaneity is possible only within a limited space of historically determined conditions that set certain limits on what can be thought and done.

Although I think that this account provides a plausible 'methodology' for historical studies in dialogue with the other social sciences, its shortcomings are clear, and hence cannot be taken as a general philosophy capable of answering all the questions we would like to ask about history. The reference I have made to intentionality and agency above seems too thin and the emphasis on social categories seems to fall short of our strong intuitions about personal experience and its role in historical events. The approaches which Ricoeur and Rancière bring to bear on historiography help us in not so much resolving as intensifying this problem, thereby clarifying the stakes of formulating our assumptions about the writing of history.

Time and Narrative Action

Ricoeur has argued that historical exposition, even when at its most scientific, remains within the realm of narrative. The emplotment of events into a coherent story effects a semantic innovation comparable to that at work in metaphor. The plot brings together goals, causes, and chance within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action. The new organization of events is thus an operation of synthesis that productive imagination performs: "the plot of a narrative is comparable to this predicative assimilation. It 'grasps together' and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole."[9] The plot, for Ricoeur, is the mimesis of action, and this is what is directly relevant for my purposes. Mimesis has three stages: a) reference to the familiar pre-understanding we have of the order of action, b) entry into the realm

[8] For a detailed discussion of this point, see Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press 1984).
[9] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. x

of poetic composition, c) a new configuration by means of this poetic refiguring of the pre-understood order of action. By means of plots we can indirectly describe our confused, unformed and mute temporal experience: the referential function of the plot resides in this ability to describe the features of temporal experience.

The goal that guides Ricoeur's rich analysis is the claim that "time becomes human to the extent that it is organized as narrative [and] narrative is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence."[10] Thus narrative ultimately points to the paradox that is human temporality, and is, to this extent, allegorical: it says something (the features of temporal existence) without saying it directly, i.e., while saying something else. This "something else" that is said directly is human action (and passion). By making the explicit theme of narrative meaningful human action, Ricoeur also argues that narrative is the proper 'medium' of history, that there is an adequation between this form of discourse (narrative) and what it narrates (the content), and, finally, that we cannot easily separate the literal from the figurative elements in our account. Raymond Aron claimed that history is a novel that is true.[11] Ricoeur would agree to the extent that historical narrative and fictional narrative share the same form of discourse, while the former claims to refer to real events within time (without this reducing the truth proper to fiction to nothing). The key claim he makes to establish the intrinsically narrative character of history is that human action is itself a narrative. It is this claim that interests me most here.

The three stages of mimesis form a circle that anchors the accounts we give of historical actions in the time and meaning of the actions themselves as given to us; it brings about a fusion of horizons between us who compose and understand history, and those to whom we refer through our histories, while effecting a poetic operation that completes the incomplete and as yet untold character of human praxis. The first stage requires that we pre-understand what acting is, its semantics, symbolic system and temporality; the second stage 'opens the kingdom of the as if', the imaginative organization of events into a

[10] Ricoeur, 3.
[11] Raymond Aron, *History, Truth, Liberty: Selected Writings of Raymond Aron*, First Edition (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Pr, 1986); see also Pierre Hassner, 'Raymond Aron and the History of the Twentieth Century', *International Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1985): 29–37, https://doi.org/10.2307/2600477.

coherent whole, and the third stage marks the intersection of the world of the text and that of the reader, thereby returning to the world wherein real action occurs. Historical events possess the same structure as narrative discourse and the emplotment of events mediates between the pre-understanding and post-understanding (of the order of action and its temporal features).[12] An event is more than just a singular occurrence; its value is a function of its contribution to the plot: a story is always more than just the enumeration of singular events and it composes them into an intelligible whole. The difference between the experience of time as mere seriality (which is only a derivative form of the experience of time for Ricoeur) and one in which events take on aspects of stories (with a beginning, middle, and end) is that, for the latter, the transitions are meaningful and directional. If we apply this characterization to history, we get something to the effect that the whole sequence of events has the character of a well-made story. Historical narrative is like fiction to the extent that it exhibits the coherence of a well-made story, and it retains its 'realist' credentials to the extent that it corresponds to events within time. This claim, however, while allowing Ricoeur to avoid reducing historical discourse to story telling *tout court*, turns historical 'reality' itself into a story.

Narrative is not only a description but also (actual) imitation of the events of which it speaks; this is because it is a product of the same kinds of actions as those that produce events in history. Ricoeur speaks of a 'pre-narrative quality of experience'. The question he raises in this regard is instructive: "without leaving everyday experience, are we not inclined to see in a given sequence of the episodes of our lives '(as yet) untold' stories, stories that demand to be told, stories that offer anchorage points for narrative?"[13] His answer is in the affirmative. A life story proceeds from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories, which the human agent can take up as constitutive of his personal identity: "it is the quest for this personal identity that assures the continuity between the potential or inchoate story and the actual story we assume responsibility for."[14] Stories bear witness to the human effort to endow their lives with meaning and "telling, following, understanding stories is. . . the 'continuation' of these untold stories."

[12] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 65–71.
[13] Ricoeur, 74.
[14] Ricoeur, 74–75.

I will not deny that we tell stories about ourselves and that there is an intrinsically narrative dimension to historical discourse. However, I would like to raise a few questions with respect to the attempt to endow all events with the coherence of well-made stories and to see these stories already prefigured in the world of action (before we compose them). Hayden White's query, "Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?" provides a good starting point.[15] It is very difficult to see how the narration of a series of events could conclude, i.e., not just terminate on a random note but provide a consummating point by means of which all that came before can be endowed with meaning and purpose, except with a 'moralizing' end: "there is no other way that reality can be endowed with the kind of meaning that both displays itself in its consummation and withholds itself by its displacement to another story 'waiting to be told' just beyond the confines of the end."[16] If we transform narrative as one form of discourse among others that history-making accounts use for specific purposes into the form that reality itself exhibits to consciousness, then we have to understand better what this involvement with moralizing judgment amounts to.

The coherence and integrity of a well-made story can only be the result of an operation of imagination. *Prima facie* this is not an objection. The function of imagination in the 'construction' of empirical reality and perception has a venerable tradition. But let us take Kant, because Ricoeur also refers to him.[17] Imagination is the capacity to represent an object even without its being present in intuition; and the historical past is precisely that which cannot be given in intuition. Kant had made the distinction between reproductive imagination and productive imagination. The former is 'mere fancy', as the phrase goes: it delineates possible worlds and is imagistic, as when I yearn for the warmth of the tropics I can 'portray' a sandy beach with palm trees. The latter is productive, and this is the one Kant emphasizes as essential in the construction of empirical concepts and perception of things. In order to establish the connection between the abstract concepts of the understanding and the manifold of intuition (so as to figure an object) imagination in the latter sense produces the transcendental schema as the mediating element between concept and intuition. The schema is given in the form of rules for the construction of the kind of 'figure' called for by the concept in any situation (e.g. for the concept of circle, a rule to the effect that

[15] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 25.
[16] White, 24.
[17] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

all the points of the circle are equidistant from the center). It is significant to note that the schemata are essentially based on time (both future-directed—'follow the steps prescribed by the rule'—and in the form of memory—if in the process of figuring (counting for 'number', tracing for 'line', etc.) I forget the previous elements, I would not be able to complete a representation).

Ricoeur is explicit about the role of productive imagination in the circle of mimesis: as I mentioned above, the second stage of mimesis is a synthetic operation that engenders (in the very process of emplotment) an intelligibility between the theme of the story and the intuitive presentation of circumstances, characters, and changes of fortune. This, for Ricoeur, characterizes the schematism of the narrative function.[18] This schematism is constituted within a history that has the characteristics of a tradition, which Ricoeur defines as "not the inert transmission of some already dead deposit of material but the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity."[19] Thus tradition is constituted by an interplay of innovation and sedimentation.

Given the doubt I expressed above, it should be noticed that this recourse to transcendental imagination cannot give the realist basis for Ricoeur's claims about the essentially narrative character of history. What warrant do we have to claim that the world presents itself to consciousness in the form of well-made stories, with a beginning, middle, and end—already narrativized and 'telling itself'—before our attempts to make sense of it? For Ricoeur the world is the "whole set of references opened up by every sort of descriptive or poetic text I have read, interpreted, and loved." The function of this 'definition' is to grant narrative the role it has in 'augmenting' the meaning of reality rather than in polluting it with weak copies and false representations. Without challenging this function, I would offer nationalist narratives as at least one instance in which it is all too clear that narratives are constructed retrospectively, in order to 'invent' a tradition so as to render invisible the antagonisms characterizing the present (from and for which they are constructed). It is precisely these antagonisms (which would resist the synthetic operation of narrativization in virtue of lacking a mediation) that are left out of the narratives that are constructed: the Third Reich and the Aryan tradition in relation to Judaism, the French Republic and the *ancien régime*, the Turkish Republic and the Ottoman Empire. It is not an

[18] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 68.
[19] Ricoeur, 68.

exaggeration to claim that it is precisely the present that is left out of narrative history (in the very attempt to incorporate it within a tradition). I do not want to claim that historical narratives, as conceived by Ricoeur, are condemned to the realm of ideology—this would be too simplistic and uninformative—but rather provide a rejoinder to its realist aspect. Maybe not incidentally, it is possible to discern a redemptive project in Ricoeur's fundamental goal, namely, the articulation of the levels of meaning in historical narrative that would correspond to the literal reference to historical actions in the past, the metaphorical representation of human temporality, and ultimately the depiction of human beings caught up in the paradoxes of temporality, death and eternity. This articulation, although admirable, skirts the danger of presenting the moral under the aspect of the aesthetic.

History as Disruption

It is precisely the difficulty of a redemptive project that underlies the modern project of democracy for Rancière. This difficulty is what Balibar might have in mind when he says that perhaps the typical characteristic of modernity is that there is no possible synthesis between its antinomies.[20] For Rancière, there is a certain kind of heresy that is coeval with the disappearance of monarchies and the appearance of social movements. The task of history is to bring to visibility the poetic moments of subjectivation in which the excluded put forward their claim to speak for themselves and to effect a change in the parameters of the social space in order to find a legitimate place for their claims within it. Those whose statements are not comprehensible in the ruling political space take the floor in a violent poetic/political gesture and start to speak for themselves, thereby rejecting others' claims to define their proper place within a purported objective order. Subjectivation involves the assertion of a singularity with a fragile attribute of universality ('we are the people,' spoken by a 'worker'). How does this dimension of political existence set a task for history?

The guiding question of Rancière in *The Names of History* is how history can become a science while remaining history. The name 'history' involves a homonymy that will define the stakes of the debate. 'History' is used to designate the lived experience of events, its narration, the explanation people give of them,

[20] Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas* (New York London: Routledge, 1994), 51.

and also a fictional story. More specifically, for historical discourse in particular, 'history' means both the series of past events and the accounts we give of these events. For Rancière, the history of history over the past 200 years or so has been an attempt to come to terms with this homonymy one way or the other, at times propitious for history, but more often fatal to it. He provides an analysis, the status of which is itself ambiguous—a sort of historical discourse-narrative—of the ways in which nineteenth century positivist historiography, the Annalists, the Marxist tradition, and 'Romantic' historiography have offered their resolutions of this homonymy. He calls the type of analysis he conducts 'poetics of knowledge,' which is "a study of the set of literary procedures by which a discourse escapes literature, gives itself the status of a science, and signifies this status."[21] The 'method' is concerned with the rules according to which knowledge is constituted as a specific genre of discourse and the mode of truth that belongs to such knowledge. As it is clear from the above definition, there is a primacy of literature and literary methods of analysis in Rancière's poetics[22]. The singularity of history is precisely to articulate a triple contract in a single discourse: a) a scientific contract that is committed to bringing out the latent order beneath the manifest order, b) a narrative contract that must assure the inscription of the hidden structures of (a) into the readable form of a story, and c) a political contract that ties (a) and (b) to the 'contradictory constraints of the age of the masses'.[23]So, to reformulate the initial guiding question, Rancière investigates how truth and narrative can be tied together, while fulfilling a certain political obligation, to make a properly historical discourse possible.

Rancière discerns in the treatment which the death of Phillip II receives in Braudel's historical study of the Mediterrenean basin[24], an event which signifies that kings are dead as centers and forces of history, a two-pronged operation: a) it represents the absorption of the system of narrative (a feature of old history) into that of discourse (the characteristic of scientificity) b) but also, it sets into narrative the categories of discourse (without which operation we would no longer have history.[25]Here Rancière is using a distinction made by

[21] Ranciere, *Names of History*, 8.
[22] In general, poetics is a theory of literature and its modes of production.
[23] Ranciere, *Names of History*, 9.
[24] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Vol. 1* (University of California Press, 1996).
[25] Ranciere, *Names of History*, 15.

Emile Benveniste between discourse and narrative.[26] Narrative is a more constrained form, using the 3rd person pronoun and the past and pluperfect tenses. In it there is no reference made to the narrator and its feature is to be 'objective,' a chronological recording of events as they appear on the horizon of the story; it is as if the events speak for themselves. Discourse is a more open form, using the I-you pronouns and the present, present perfect, and future tenses. It is subjective in that there is the presence of an 'I' maintaining the discourse, and thereby bringing its affirmative powers and the character of certainty.[27] Historical discourse in general is to be understood in terms of the play of this opposition between discourse and narrative.

Traditional history is the one that offers a narrative (the story of what happened) and builds a discourse around it to comment on and explain some features of this story. The discourse of new scientific history, however, deregulates the play of this opposition "to construct a narrative in the system of discourse."[28] Rancière claims that this is the invention of a new regime of truth in historical discourse, one that combines the objectivity of narrative with the certainty of discourse, so as to be more than a story while still remaining one. This is the essential literary contract without which history cannot be. So, new history cannot substitute a series of statistical data and anonymous subjects for the narrative mode of discourse without losing all historical intelligibility; yet it must also strive to understand the more general, hidden structures, determining the evanescent layer of surface events, if it is not to be the official chronicling of the days and works of the State. Braudel's text attests to this ambiguity, which keeps the homonymy of history alive. But at the same time, it brings to light a strange complicity with what Rancière calls royal-empiricist history.

From Michelet to Braudel, the period Rancière calls the age of history[29], historians try to formulate the triple contract of history in the equilibrium of narrative and science; thus they are able to come to terms, in varying degrees, with the excess of speech that characterizes the democratic age, neutralizing the excess but also articulating a site of truth specific to the knowledge of the masses (in both senses of the genitive). However, when the scientific contract claims

[26] See Clara Mallier, 'Tenses in Translation: Benveniste's "Discourse" and "Historical Narration" in the First-Person Novel', *Language and Literature* 23, no. 3 (1 August 2014): 244–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947014536507.
[27] Ranciere, *Names of History*, 14.
[28] Ranciere, 14.
[29] Ranciere, 41.

domination over the other two, it confronts the "theoretical scandal of the event in general."[30]The result is that "nothing happened such as it was told,"[31] because the names social agents give themselves and most frequently use (noble, clergy, worker, etc.) have no close relation to the corresponding social realities. Since there is this fundamental gap between words and things, and since social agents claim they do things on the basis of words that do not designate any list of finite properties (for example, "I fight the nobility because I am a bourgeois"), they are mistaken as to their contemporary reality. The reality of the event in which they believe, then, is fundamentally suspect. Thus, the historian who tries to account for the fact that "something took place that had no place to take place,"[32] either tells us that what took place was almost nothing (some modification in the holding of property) or that "the Revolution is the illusion of making the Revolution, born from ignorance of the Revolution already being made."[33] In either case the event is reduced to and explained on the basis of a nonevent (social relations, vacuum of power, etc.) This spells the euthanasia of history for Rancière, since history exists on the minimum requirement that sometimes, something happens.[34] History is absorbed by historiography, and the latter becomes a branch of political science or sociology.

For Rancière, Michelet has a privileged place in historiography because he founds a new history "detached from the old tradition of chronicling but also freed from the royal-empiricist resentment toward deceptive and murderous words."[35] So Michelet is supposed to have avoided the two horns of the dilemma 'either science or narrative' by figuring a site common to democratic politics and scholarly/scientific history, thereby renewing the triple contract. He does this by virtue of the principle of narrative I mentioned above in Braudel's treatment of the death of Philip II, i.e. by declaring the equivalence of narrative and science, thereby elaborating a new figure of truth proper to historical discourse. This principle is: "the document is identical to the event itself."[36] We know that this poetic figure of truth is not mimetic, that is, a mere imitation of a model or reality, or of simply what is said; it is not a propositional content, nor meaning separate from what is said; for both of these characterizations risk introducing the distinction between the apparent and the real, lie and truth. The historian in the

[30] Ranciere, 30.
[31] Ranciere, 36.
[32] Ranciere, 40.
[33] Ranciere, 39.
[34] Ranciere, 36.
[35] Ranciere, 43.
[36] Ranciere, 44.

mold of royal-empiricism pretends to control the excess of speech by either explicating, or explaining, or dismissing what was said by the actors in the past; Michelet makes us see them (the documents) by introducing himself on the scene as the one who makes us see them: "[Michelet] tells us what [the documents] say: not their content but the power that causes them to be written, that is expressed in them. The historian will *show* us this power, which is their true content but which they are powerless to show us themselves, by staging it in a narrative."[37] Hence a new subject of history is enunciated, what Rancière calls the 'silent witness', the one who does not speak about history, but who *is*, in a sense, history. The operation that makes the 'witness' visible while rendering her silent is that of the historian who tells us not the content of what was said, but the meaning of the content; and this operation is precisely the narration that the historian composes.

But the status of Michelet's poetics is ambiguous with respect to what history should become for us (who want to understand the age of social and workers' movements and who need a new poetics for that purpose): Michelet achieves, on the one hand, a reconciliation of democracy with its past, makes possible a democratic interpretation of the time of monarchies and inquisition (the Church), and gives a voice to the unheard of those times (the tortured, the abject subjects), thereby making possible the histories of mentalities of New History; but, on the other hand, he stifles the 'democratic rupture' in the new subject of history, which is Republican France (and to that extent, I think, a prefiguration of a social totality adequate to itself, the ideal of social science). Thus Michelet's poetics and New History (which retains some of the elements of the former, while violating it in favor of science) cannot account for their own history, are not adequate to deal with the 'democratic rupture' which gave rise to them: "the history of the masses that belongs to the age of the masses finds its seat only in speaking of the times of kings."[38] (p. 90) The way in which 'they' regulate the excess of speech and its violence, viz., by transforming heresy into mentality by giving it its place and body in the movement of the masses and its realities (the village, the Republic, etc.), is no longer adequate. A new poetics is needed now, one that elaborates a figure of truth and a mode of narrative capable of 'presenting' these singular names (without reducing them to social or economic determinations, imaginary ideologies, general culture, or consciousness). This figure of truth must articulate the fact that the mode of being of subjects in the democratic age is that of singular names, "of a being-together without a place or body"[39].

[37] Ranciere, 45.
[38] Ranciere, 90.
[39] Ranciere, 94. Rancière does not use the term 'utopia' in this connection, but I do not know how else to make sense of this 'being-together without a place'.

Conclusion

A critical encounter between the historiographical texts of Ricoeur and Rancière reveals how our conceptions of narrative agency and our assumptions about the present provide different orientations with respect to history and its political relevance. Taking philosophical inquiry seriously and maintaining a cautious distance from the social sciences, both authors underscore the significance of interpretation in the study of history. However, the differences between the two throw in relief the political stakes of the writing of history. Ricoeur's concern with how narratives give meaning to human actions contrasts with Rancière's emphasis on dissensus, the disruption of established orders and the emergence of new political subjectivities. Ricoeur's valorization of shared meanings contrasts with Rancière's interest in the conflicts and ruptures within historical narratives. Hence, it is precisely a conflict over our visions of the present that conditions our conflicting interpretations of the past and vice versa. Both authors agree that if historiography renounces its narrativist aspect, it thereby renounces its specific mode of being. They also agree that there is a certain obligation to the past which consists in rendering the unheard voices audible, thereby saving historical judgment from domination in the courts of the victors.[40] However, the political implications of this obligation are far from obvious and depend on the respective emphasis one places on consensus or dissensus in the formation of community in the present.

[40] Rancière's insistence on this point is clear from the above. Cf. Ricoeur's claim that "the whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 75.

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