

FACTS BEING...

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Who are you going to believe,
me or your own eyes?
Groucho Marx
It's a basic truth [...] that everybody lies.
The only variable is about what.
Gregory House
If it didn't happen it could have happened.
Inimigo Público

What do we mean when we mention 'a fact'? Strasser, at the third Royaumont meeting, dedicated to Husserl, summarised that there were three characteristics to be considered¹. A fact must be: a) isolatable, b) complete (in the sense of being irreversible and invariable) and c) opposable by a subject, which implies a distance which for Minkowski, on the same occasion, meant that immediate data should not be considered as 'facts'². Both recognized the aspect of construction as being present, an aspect which has led to Michel de Certeau's formulation where he refers to facts as «units of meaning»³. I shall therefore consider what has occurred as being identifiable, circumscribed and verifiable and/or accepted. Let us consider the difference between factuality and fact.

Their scopes are varied, in the fields of information, justice, history, physical sciences and natural sciences. Within the legal or scientific areas the need for a high degree of precision requires their own explicit formulations, where the notion of the real that has been carried out in the former, can be distinguished from the regular formalisable real of the latter. As such the word does not possess the same value in every situation.

Despite the political tensions which now surround the 'incontestable' economic fact and its resultant reduced margin for manoeuvre within democratic decision-making which we have observed, it is certainly the case that facts from information and justice have for centuries been more frequently discussed in daily life. To ascertain a fact or not, and consider what has been ascertained, has consequences in the life of concrete people and also the way they act, inquire, describe, form conclusions and decide.

A 2006 book by the journalist Marco Travaglio, entitled *La scomparsa dei fatti*.

¹ S. Strasser, «Misère et grandeur du 'fait'. Une méditation phénoménologique», in AA.VV., *Cahiers de Royaumont. Philosophie III. Husserl* (Paris, 1959), 176-177.

² E. Minkowski, «Discussion», in AA.VV., *Cahiers de Royaumont. Philosophie III. Husserl*, 185.

³ M. de Certeau, «L'opération historique», in *Faire de l'histoire. Nouveaux problèmes* (Paris, 1974).

*Si prega di abolire le notizie per non disturbare le opinioni*⁴, argues that the relationship between fact and opinion in the media has now changed in favour of the latter. The problem now is the reduced ability to ensure that verifiability criteria are able to overcome the force (the power) of points of view. Nonetheless, many options taken daily are imposed with argumentation based on the authority of facts which have not been verified or questioned. Like a classical detective novel (or one of its modern variations, the television series which take place in forensic labs or diagnoses made in hospitals), logic and deduction are applied to irrefutable objective facts. The apparent scepticism of certain characters does not hide the realistic perspective of the occurrence, an essential aspect of the genre.

Cases in the news which are pure invention are irrelevant, since the assumed notion of fact is not affected. There is just deception. But when the very dynamic of the media produces incontestable facts, it changes what we are talking about.

Carlo Ginzburg has shown conceptual connections and disconnections in discussing facts of legal cases⁵. More concerned with the notions of proof and truth, Ginzburg discusses contemporary cases (to deny the consistency of concrete legal proof and, as a result, the ascertainment of facts) and seeks, in the questions of judges and inquisitors from the past, to get at the facts beyond the concerns, purposes and conceptions of those who were asking the questions. He also discusses criteria concerning validation and the value of witnesses, specifically when there is a single isolated voice, a single trail which 'survives'. The historian has margins for plausibility and probability in defining facts which the judge cannot allow, even when, through present-day eyes, justice appears arbitrary. Along with the legal fact comes the requirement of a standard which defines it and which has specific consequences, which can be seen in a restriction of the concept.

On the other hand, a unique item of data may be a fact for the judge and not be relevant for the historian. Diverse criteria of relevance can lead to diverse facts. However, Ginzburg's concern is the possibility of distinguishing between the imagined fact and the event, even when considering the imagined as an instrument of ascertaining the event.

Divergent utilisation of the term can lead to ambiguities, above all when thinking of the relation between the fact and the person who observes it. Situations where research interferes and alters what is being looked for, or can only be known when it transforms what you wish to learn about, are banal and commonplace nowadays. The non-static fact takes within itself the action of its observer. We are thus in a place where we are debating notions such as 'truth', 'evidence', 'explication', 'witness', 'interpretation', 'understanding', 'representation', 'imagination', 'error', not to mention what could be a complete hoax.

⁴ (Milano, 2006).

⁵ Cf. C. Ginzburg, *Il filo e le tracce. Vero falso finto* (Milano, 2006), and *Il giudice e lo storico* (Torino, 1991).

I. DO FACTS SPEAK?

Much of what has been said and written about this concept is the expression of concerns which nowadays are not necessarily ours. Meanwhile, contradictory tendencies have given life to ancient questions, with the wish to deepen the notion of 'fact' and therefore go beyond a supposed cyclical movement between dogmatism and scepticism or, to avoid such radical terms, between realism and constructivism. Various have been the authors who have made statements in this regard. Let us highlight Hilary Putnam, smashing equally violently what he calls «metaphysical realism» and relativism. The first term seems to him much weakened given that, in his opinion, «The idea that truth is a passive copy of what is 'really' (mind-independently, discourse-independently) 'there' has collapsed under the critiques of Kant, Wittgenstein and other philosophers even if it continues to have a deep hold on our thinking»⁶.

Let us now consider the notion of fact taking into account its wider use, and above all consider an apparently less inflammatory concept, but with implications at every level, namely, the concept of 'historical fact'. What distinguishes it in particular from legal, journalistic or scientific facts, with which it is frequently compared, as well as literary facts?

Certain doubts or even the denial of some facts are not innocuous: for example, those connected with extermination practices during the Second World War, or those which determine the (factually debated) nature of the dictatorial regimes of the 20th century, or the 'reasons' (here as facts) which form the basis of resentments and recurring traumas (the Armenian question in Turkey or the Balkan conflicts).

The doubts concerning whether human beings reached the Moon in 1969 have their parallel in the persistent conspiracy theories concerning 11 September 2001 (its possible invention), with implications at intellectual and political levels, or furthermore the idea that journalists embedded within armed forces can broadcast facts live. Whilst being apparently contradictory, the scepticism of conspiracy theories and faith in the transparency of live television broadcasting raises questions close to what the reality of facts is. It can be understood that implications concerning the notion of fact do not just relate to what happened, but also relate to the organisation of doubts and beliefs.

In reconsidering the relationship between 'fact' and 'idea', or 'fact' and 'representation', it is of interest to consider that which is individualised and fixed⁷. This notion raises problems precisely since it appears simple, evident and unquestionable.

The word fact refers to a real, expressed occurrence, happening, event, action, or accomplished and achieved act or event. The term may be richer and more

⁶ H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge, 1981), 128.

⁷ See, concerning the relation between real and representation, what R. Chartier wrote in «Histoire intellectuelle et histoire des mentalités», *Au bord de la falaise. L'histoire entre certitudes et inquiétude* (Paris, 1998), 58-59.

ambiguous. It may be understood in isolation or as an element of a causal relation. It may be associated to that which is concluded or that which is recurrent. It may indicate only what took place or what merits identification. It may be an occurrence and, under certain circumstances, may be a happening, event or phenomenon. The term is used more frequently for a manifestation of that which is real, discontinuous, identifiable and susceptible of being specified. Close to 'deed', it takes on a less neutral sense if we associate it with an act of conscience. The word is thus used in the sense of 'reality' or 'singular reality', as something which opposes the imagination, through being an event, an action, empirically accessible data or as a proven statement. Do facts 'speak' or 'speak for themselves'?

Many consider that it is no longer accepted, as it was previously, that 'the facts speak for themselves'. In 1988, Peter Novick stated that, despite the differences,

There is somewhat less talk, though still a good deal, of approaching the past 'without preconceptions' and 'letting the facts speak for themselves'; increased tolerance for hypotheses, and a greater emphasis of interpretation being tested by facts, instead of derived from them⁸.

There are even those who consider it as given that «the old battle against naive, objectivist, 'scientific' history' is no longer at stake and that the ancient ideals of objectivity, 'total history' and 'vulgar-Rankean *Wissenschaft*' did surrender»⁹. These words of Donald R. Kelley cause us to ask two questions: firstly, if this surrender has occurred (if it is a verifiable 'fact') and secondly, which specifically concerns us, if this surrender or, in a softer version, this turning of the page, has meant a corresponding disdain for facts. Is the concept that all discourses are equivalent dominant nowadays? And will this provide proof for all, as Donald R. Kelley ironically states, for the «discovery» by some that «there is [...] no history without a historian?»¹⁰

I believe, on the contrary, despite a long tradition of those involved, from Kant to Langlois and Seignobos, from Claude Bernard to Durkheim, from Bergson to Wittgenstein, from Walter Benjamin to Jacques Le Goff, that that which appears evident and unquestionable still resists as if all this debate were a series of monologues and as if nowadays it were still valid to say that 'against facts there are no arguments'. Without denying the irreversible reality of what has occurred, I consider that questioning the conceptual nature of the fact engenders resistance. Against all this past reflection, the atmosphere still continues to be, from my point of view, one predominantly realist and dogmatic and not materialist, even amongst those who are aware of this designation.

Amongst historians, despite the articles since the 1970s which have, along with Paul Veyne and Hayden White, questioned certainties and the very scientific nature

⁸ P. Novick, *That Noble Dream, the 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 2.

⁹ D. R. Kelley, *Frontiers of History: Historical Inquiry in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, 2006), 219.

¹⁰ D. R. Kelley, *Frontiers of History*, 222.

of historical knowledge, there still continues to prevail the idea that facts inevitably take place in one way and not another. Some publications have shown the force of the realist tradition. In 2008 Gordon Wood, distinguished American academic, once more opposed the reality of facts against the manipulative attitudes of historians and politicians. In a series of essays, to which he adds comments to update his ideas, his critique of dishonesty and critique of relativism are of equal force¹¹.

As a result, whilst possibly somewhat banal, some considerations are justified as a reaction to fragile but dispersed truism, regarding what is supporting the entire realist construction. Is it legitimate to state that ‘facts are what they are’ when the very notion of fact has not been considered? The question comes to mind to ask in which way a word, however much it is used acritically, gives shape to (rather than interfere with) that which exists or that which happens.

Donald R. Kelley uses a series of counterpoints as an argumentative expediency. Does the past exist or not? Perhaps there never was ‘past’. And do ‘facts’ exist? A first hypothesis, from which the author clearly distances himself, is contained in the following statement: facts, like the past, do not exist.

There are no ‘facts’. There *were* facts, no doubt; but all we have is their recollections, records, or remains; and again such evidence will be viewed differently by different historians. This is not a deeply epistemological argument, for if we can often establish that a particular event did occur, its historical presence remains a product of human imputation. In the forest the tree does not ‘fall’ without an observer; the ‘fact’ is meaningless, indeed nonexistent, without human apprehension¹².

This statement is conditioned by the paradoxical admission (to which I do not really know who could subscribe) that «There *were* facts, no doubt». It seems to want to mean that, whilst there never was a ‘past’, something definitely happened. Something happened to the tree in the forest, without witnesses. Something happens to all the trees, avoiding the debate concerning the constructed character of the actual concept of tree. Despite the paradox, it seeks to represent the position of the sceptics, and, a little later, opposes it with an alternative:

There are facts – but these are not the noumena of conventional historiography but the inferences established, exchanged, and agreed upon by particular historians and are always subject to reverification and revision – and I might add that much of our store of received historical truth should indeed be reviewed in the light of how ‘facts’ are given definition¹³.

However, the resistance of a factual idea which submits to the occurrence (or which identifies itself with it), can even be seen in the paradox of the first of Kelley’s statements. This submission links to notions which, according to the same author, are those of traditional historiography. What are we speaking of, then?

A point of reference with regard to history is the statement that what is being

¹¹ G. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past. Reflexions on the Uses of History* (Harmondsworth, 2008).

¹² D. R. Kelley, *Frontiers of History*, 239-240.

¹³ D. R. Kelley, *Frontiers of History*, 241.

sought is ‘what effectively happened’, the past ‘as it was’, the ‘facts as they really took place’. But that so frequently cited phrase by Leopold von Ranke, «wie es eigentlich gewesen»¹⁴, must be read with caution. The past ‘as it actually was’ may imply various contradictions and understandings, knowing that, for the 19th century writer, ‘ideas’ were facts and agents. In this sense, it is understood that individual acts, which history may capture, if documentally recorded, submit themselves to a moral order. Of further note is a call to attention issued by Georg Iggers. According to this historian, the word ‘eigentlich’, today translatable as ‘really’ or ‘actually’, could have had the more ambiguous meaning of ‘in essence’ in the first half of the 19th century, which would seriously alter the meaning which has been attributed to it¹⁵. But as I do not wish to discuss what Ranke ‘truly wanted to say’, I will only refer to the need to not acritically accept what may appear as evident.

The so-called ‘natural’ character of what is described places ‘fact’ as being amongst what could be considered as absolutely correct. However, from the point of view of its consistency, depth, limits, reality, agency or value, what a ‘fact’ is, is far from being simple¹⁶.

If the question is if facts can exist without witnesses, the question is not if there can only exist what we know, given that ignorance is not an argument, but whether we can call a fact that which is within the diffuse and infinite amalgam of what we do not know (or still not have known) and, thus, we cannot distinguish, we cannot identify and we cannot designate. The discussion of facts within this perspective leads to their autonomy by considering the event as beyond those who have witnessed it, giving it meaning or value, independently of the very possibility of becoming known. Historical facts, starting from the model which assumes the strict value of objectivity, will be prior to and independent of interpretation. What would follow is that research would find facts and never produce them¹⁷.

Starting from knowledge of the event, the formulation (the proposition) gains centrality. Accepting that ‘the image is a fact’ it is important to discuss the reason why the fact is an image, besides the need to «have something in common with what is represented»¹⁸. Hence the interest in the search for the ‘tension’ of the fact or its meaningful multiplicity, to use José Esteves Pereira’s expressions¹⁹.

The arc of possibilities thus widens because of the need to adapt formulations concerning facts to a real exterior, meeting within an intersubjective space, with a

¹⁴ L. von Ranke, *Geschichten der Romanischen und Germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, 1824, cit. in *The Theory and Practice of History*, eds. G. Iggers and K. Von Moltke (Indianapolis, 1973).

¹⁵ Cf. *The Theory and Practice of History*, eds. G. Iggers e K. Von Moltke (Indianapolis, 1973), xix-xx; Cf. also P. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, chap. 1.

¹⁶ Cf. F. Gil, «La bonne description», *Enquête*, 6 (1998): 129-152.

¹⁷ See P. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 2.

¹⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, the German text of Wittgenstein’s *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* with a translation by D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness and with the introduction by Bertrand Russell (London, 1969), § 2.141 and 2.16 (original ed. 1921).

¹⁹ J. Esteves Pereira, *Sobre a História das Ideias* [Concerning the History of Ideas] (Lisboa, 1992), 19.

unique ethics, until necessarily taking on the subjective character of the construction of facts, which can lead to equivalence between history and fiction and the lack of distinction between scientific knowledge and common sense. Which does not mean that a defender of history *qua* literature cannot take lessons from the facts which he/she had imagined. Such a paradox shows an expedient rhetoric which sustains narrative freedom without giving up arguments of authority²⁰.

The questioning becomes more complex when it does not merely deal with knowing if there is the noise of a tree falling in a virgin forest, when nobody can hear it, but in confronting the incidental scepticism or cynicism of the observer with the moral implications which the formulation of the facts gives rise to, even if apparently neutral.

These three lines of questioning are interconnected and their distinction will be understood by associating them with others, which will enable us to clarify that which we are discussing.

II. AND CAN'T YOU DELIMIT THEM?

Un documento è un fatto. La battaglia un altro fatto
(un'infinità di altri fatti). I due non possono fare uno.
[...] L'uomo che opera è un fatto. E l'uomo che
racconta è un altro fatto.

Renato Serra (1912)²¹

If occurrence is linked to what was diffusely, an event will be a fragment based on the relevance which is attributed to it. It requires a relationship which is extracted from factuality and not from any pre-established or related facts. It then implies an attribute of singularity.

Starting from the relevance criteria of the historian and the journalist, we can talk about facts which are transformed into events, with the understanding of event here as being a highly meaningful unit. The same is not the case for the converse. We do not speak of event when the fact is a fall of a gravitational body. It is not just in physics that not all facts are events. A potato as food for a 21st Century European can be a fact, but we could call it an event if it reached the table of a German in the 17th Century or a French person in the 18th Century. The price of wheat in 1750 may be a fact, but it is not an event in the sense in which one speaks of a battle, a decision or a disaster. But even the noisy fact implies a fragment which is not supplied by nature.

This distinction between fact and event is underlined by the non-static character of the way of accounting for factuality. The data which the historian chooses do not have the same meaning during the various stages of their path.

²⁰ See, for example, F. Bonifácio, *Apologia da História política* [Apology for Political History] (Lisboa, 1999).

²¹ Cited in C. Ginzburg, *Il filo e le tracce. Vero falso finto* (Milano, 2006), 223.

When historians seek, organise and isolate factuality, they constitute facts. When this has been presented, integrated and structured we then move on to being able to talk of events. The process changes that which is talked of, such that in the two cases, the object of the first approach is that of an unfragmented factuality upon which acts a different way of ‘accounting for’.

If the event links to everything which was, the fact must be partial and finite, like any description, even if it be objective and rigorous. The assumed partiality of the fact, in its dual meaning of choice and limitation, does not have to compromise to either its adaptability or its ability in order to clarify the event. On the contrary, when fact and occurrence have been identified, the limits of the description itself are then attributed to what is real. Or that is, if we accept that the occurrence is made up of objective facts, independent from our view, we cannot avoid facing a problem. Our possibility of description would perhaps be an approximation to facts which it will only be possible to account for in an incomplete manner. But then what is a fact, if we do not recognise limits? The problem is not merely one of designation given that, whilst what is understood as fact is essentially that which we have previously labelled occurrence, there remains the question of the limits of the singularity necessary for the fact, limits to which the occurrence is not bound.

Which leads us to the need to clarify what we are talking about, when talking of facts. Are we talking:

a – about the unrepeatable? unique? *individualised fact* linked to individuals, resulting from the acts of some specific person? the expression of a wish, will, idea, project? or natural accident?

b – about the *recurrent, formalisable fact*, whilst equally circumscribed to the action of individuals – what is eaten, that which is believed in, the relations they have established, for example?

c – about the *necessarily formalised fact*, resulting from the work of the person who synthetically describes, analyses and reformulates, which is not reducible to the act of a single individual, but always representing the ‘event’? Are ‘natural laws’ facts? ‘Laws’, in general, are facts in addition to that which results from individual intentions, choices and formulations? Are ‘trends’ facts?

II.1. THE SINGULAR AND UNREPEATABLE FACT

Let us remember that the event, the privileged object of history was, from the 1920/30s onwards, a target to be shot down. The event to which history referred to as *évènementielle*, as a singular, essentially political, fact, no longer satisfied the questions of historians who, using the example of Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, sought to widen the extent (object and relations) of the historic real which concerned them. Bloch criticised those who were, in their documental ordering, obsessed by the narrative and, in their factual ordering, by the event²². In 1935,

²² M. Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* (Paris, 1949), 20.

during the same period, Charles Beard in the United States of America ridiculed the idea, until then dominant, of facts objectively existing in a past waiting for someone to study them²³. Historical facts, for Beard, and Bloch and Febvre, should be understood as a function of the new items within the field of science and the attraction for social and economic facts.

However, the notion of fact as an isolated act was not resolved, in the same way as the notion of its place in the work of historians was not. To follow the way in which fact and event are conceived, let us use Thucydides as a reference, and the discussion which took place concerning the meaning of his work.

In 1961, Raymond Aron sought to set out his position regarding what was then dominant, using the magazine *Annales* and Marxist historiography. Evoking Thucydides, Aron stated that history should be written in the manner of human action ‘as it is’, by understanding «the action of one or several related men»²⁴. The notion of the object present in this reasoning, which had led to the identification of what was relevant as historical fact, implied the leaving culture and society to one side if it was not associated with singular faces and acts. In searching for human action ‘as it is’, the notion of ‘historic fact’ and ‘event’ was discussed, not the notion of fact in general. In the words of Aron, «*l’histoire des événements est irréductible à celle des sociétés, des classes et des économies*»²⁵.

In this reasoning what is curious is the compatibility between a perspective, as was the case with Aron, which valued the role of the historian in the ‘construction’ of narratives (and not in their ‘discovery’) and the determination of a natural level of historical narrative, or singular event.

L'événement, au sens que nous donnons à ce terme, c'est-à-dire *l'acte accompli par un ou quelques hommes, localisé et daté*, n'est jamais réductible à la conjoncture, à moins que nous n'éliminions par la pensée ceux qui ont agi et décréions que n'importe qui à leur place aurait agi de même²⁶.

This notion of ‘event’ allegedly did not privilege events due to their greater or lesser consequences, but due to their unity.

In this perspective, the introduction of an act within a series would result in the elimination of the singular agent which had produced it. Maintaining that ‘nothing would have been the same’ sustains the idea that the historian who opts to search for recurring facts (with associations which are durable to some extent) and works on the anonymity of acts, actively ‘hides’ the individual. As such the contrary hypothesis cannot be accepted, whereby the active role of the historian prefers to be centred on individual acts and goals, separating out names. His conclusion is that there are facts which naturally offer themselves to the historian, those individual acts which can be focused upon through simple description. Along with Thucydides, Aron sought to instantiate this notion of fact.

²³ C. Beard, «That noble dream», *American Historical Review*, 41 (1935): 74-85.

²⁴ R. Aron, «Thucydide et le récit des événements», *History and Theory*, 1 (1961): 103-128.

²⁵ R. Aron, «Thucydide et le récit des événements», 116 (in italics in the original).

²⁶ R. Aron, «Thucydide et le récit des événements», 116.

During the same period, José Antonio Maravall argued the exact opposite in a small work where he reflected on what a historical fact was. In it he argued that a fact carried out exclusively by an isolated person was pure abstraction, and added that such a fact would not be real, nor could it be History²⁷.

That an act or goal of a single person what not a historical fact, resulted from the datum's own isolation, but if it was constructed it would already have a precise sense relative to the artificial character of the isolation which Michel de Certeau also underlined when talking of historical operation²⁸. The isolated datum, as a singular act, would be observable, not naturally, but through a process of removing elements which would form part of it and which would make sense within a greater framework.

More than forty years after Raymond Aron, authors from various schools have resorted to Thucydides to reposition the question of the individualisation of the historical.

Marshall Sahlins, an American anthropologist, is more concerned with situations of conflict in 19th century Polynesia than with the Peloponnesian Wars of more than 2400 years ago. He does however think there are parallels (in fact this has already been tested) which help to understand the significance of witnesses. Sahlins is looking for a key in the Athenian historian to revalue the relationship between differences of a cultural nature and those of political and military circumstances. And therefore, contrary to Raymond Aron, and following in the steps of Arnaldo Momigliano²⁹, he underlines the extent of variation in the way in which agents are chosen, an extent which oscillates between individuals, such as Pericles, Cleone or Brasidas, and collective entities, such as Athens or Sparta, in referring to subjects with will and power.

This double agency is present, albeit not valued, in Aron's text. But in Sahlins, more than a return to factual history, what we read is the interest in associating ancient discourses on human nature to the reports of concrete facts, which is an opening out towards the historical perspective by somebody whose background leads him to consider only recurrent and permanent facts³⁰.

François Hartog, schooled in the tradition of French historical anthropology, also returns to reports on the Peloponnesian war in a work on the evolution of the job of the historian³¹. Talking of the Greek historian, and comparing him with Herodotus and other reports on war in Ancient History, is also to return to one of the themes developed by Sahlins, that of the relation between narratives and discourses, between myth and history. It is not only the 'view' of Thucydides

²⁷ J. A. Maravall, *Teoría del saber histórico* (Madrid, 1958), 76.

²⁸ M. de Certeau, «L'opération historique», 35-36.

²⁹ Cf. A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Harvard, ed. rev. 1993), which Sahlins cites (original American edition 1971). I consulted the 1st Italian edition, *Lo sviluppo della biografia greca* (Torino, 1974), in particular 40 ff.

³⁰ M. Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides. Understanding History as Culture and vice-versa* (Chicago, 2004).

³¹ F. Hartog, *Évidence de l'Histoire* (Paris, 2005).

which is intended to be clarified, but a set of binomials which are associated with it and the contradictory way in which it has been read, in particular by positivist historiography which has adopted it as a model. These binomials include the distinction, which was important for Aristotle, between history as an expression of the singular and poetry as an expression of the general³². From this distinction it follows that poetry, as art, would also be more philosophical (and therefore also more science-like). Which makes us think about the later distinction between science and art and, with regard to the subject at hand, the distinction between narratives which deal with the set of men («That which might happen», to use Aristotle's expression), and discourses which deal with singular facts³³. That which 'could happen' will be science therefore, in the sense that recurrent facts are true, even if they actually may not occur.

We could, from Hartog's perspective, underline the oscillation which can be perceived to have existed throughout time, in the very notion of science, which has both been applied to knowledge which has gone beyond the particular fact to define general situations and, contradictorily, has as well then been applied to the apparently safe assertion of the particular, of the concrete fact, leaving generalisations to art and to poetry.

The isolation of the singular must take into consideration that we are dealing with narratives which are seeking truths. When Thucydides speaks of the nature of the Spartans, he speaks of a continuity, with facts which mould that nature. Classical historiography provides us with the perspective, underlined by Momigliano, but also present in Sahlins and Hartog, that the individualisation of subjects and intentions is not given at the outset but the result of a process which is only to be sketchily found in Xenophon, much later than Thucydides, and only to be developed by Aristotle's followers in the following century.

The question of the unity of human acts requires us to return to the distinction between fact and historical event which was proposed above. Alain Badiou uses the term *fact* to refer to event in natural or neutral situations, opposing it to the idea that happenings cannot be understood in the same way.

La distinction du fait et de l'événement renvoie en dernière instance à la distinction des situations naturelles, ou neutres, dont le critère est global, et des situations historiques, dont le critère [...] est local. [...] L'événement est attaché, dans sa définition même, au lieu, au point, qui concentre l'historicité de la situation³⁴.

As is manifest, this distinction between fact and event is different from that which I have previously proposed. The proposal of *L'être et l'événement* is associated with the distinction between nature and history, between life and action,

³² Aristotele, *Poetica*, saggio introduttivo, traduzione, note e sommari analitici di Domenico Pesce, revisione del testo, aggiornamento bibliografico, parole chiave e indici di G. Girgenti (Milano, 2000), § 1415b.

³³ Cf. F. Hartog, *Évidence de l'Histoire*, 82-85.

³⁴ A. Badiou, *L'être et l'événement* (Paris, 1988), 199.

between the multiple continuum (which exists in the sense in which it continues, it is stable) and the irreducible singular, unstable in terms of historical acts, in its radical alterity. If, for Badiou, all situations and all imaginable instances are historical or historically located, the present reasoning is based on the distinction between the ‘normality’ of the occurrence as fact and the ‘abnormality’ of the historical event, in the way in which this breaks with situations. While a natural happening is understood as a multiple element which belongs to other multiples, the historical happening will be that of an irreducible singularity in a mathematical ontology which organises the thought of this author³⁵.

I am not concerning myself with the distinction between *be* and *being* (or a *more temporary being*), or between essence and existence, and I am not following the distinction proposed between nature and history, where Badiou has clearly not distanced himself from Heidegger. However, there are two motives of interest for myself in this work. The first is in the very notion of the event which we can ‘pirate’, to use an expression from Badiou himself³⁶, and which leads to the following statement:

C'est l'événement qui relève d'une construction de concept, au double sens où on ne peut le *penser* qu'en anticipant sa forme abstraite, et où on ne peut l'*avérer* que dans la rétroaction d'une pratique intervenante elle-même entièrement réfléchie³⁷.

The Badiou's double sense of anticipation of an abstract form as possibility of considering the fact and retroactive intervention (entirely reflected) as possibility of creating (or accounting for) the occurrence, corresponds to the terms in which we have been situating the problem regarding the boundaries of what is factual.

The second reason for interest is in seeing an ontology based on a traditional conception of history which seeks to be revolutionary, associated to a theory of the subject which refutes the worthlessness of action. In the example concerning the French Revolution, criteria of formal non-belonging impede the consideration of inclusive sets, albeit assumedly conceptual, such as ‘Revolution’ or ‘Nation’³⁸ limiting in those cases the historical level of discourse to the singular irreducible one.

Besides the apparent paradox, we are interested in considering the relationship between what has been memorable and changeable, since Greek historiography, and what memory has dispensed with given that, apparently, nothing changes. The two aspects are connected and define the relevance of the ‘fact’ to be present. A historical act is lost if it is not celebrated. An act of labour, perhaps less ‘worthy’, is repeated, such that its memory would be redundant. This would thus confirm the separation between humanity and nature. It is the case that, even when considering the relevance of the historical from criteria of difference, we must continue to

³⁵ A. Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, 205.

³⁶ A. Badiou, «Un corsaire du concept», in M. Belhaj Hacem, *Événement et répétition* (Auch, 2004), 11.

³⁷ A. Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, 199.

³⁸ A. Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, 201-204.

consider discontinuities which previously seemed perpetual or unchangeable. To not consider the facts which embodied these more stable manifestations means the exclusion of aspects of humanity which are nowadays difficult to dispose of, such as work and power, family relations or manifestations of faith.

II.2. COMPOSITE FACTS

We have thus begun considering singular acts which repeat themselves. No longer the daring decision taken during the battle, but what makes up the person who took the decision and the one who carried it out. The character of the Spartans, their 'normalcy', is seen in their everyday acts, in what we now wish to call 'facts', such as the act of dressing, eating, taking exercise, devoting oneself to a spiritual life, following a discipline which was required of all.

In explaining what is meant by *événement*, Arlette Farge includes different incomplete (almost imperceptible) singularities which the legal archives have conserved, singularities lined to the possibility of picking up coherent elements which are social representations. For this notion fragments of discourse are counted which are present in questioning precisely because they refer to 'organised worlds'. Here attempts to have some influence on the running of a case are revealed, starting from what one imagines of oneself and others, of the distinction between the familiar and the unknown, between the tolerable and the intolerable. A fragment is not just a fragment. It summarises behaviour, is a testimony to regular practices, and refers to common forms of communication and interaction. What is said, and the way it is said, creates an event. It goes beyond the simple act in which it had been recorded, even if contradictory or beyond that which at a given moment is considered 'normal'. Nothing speaks 'for itself'. It speaks 'of itself'³⁹.

The work of Carlo Ginzburg has been developed, not in a coincidental but close manner, and is dedicated to recovering the (political, social, cultural and legal) singular as opposed to the exclusions which at the time carried force, above all in France. Can singular facts show «deep historical trends»⁴⁰? The question thus resides in the definition of criteria for representativity which may not imply quantity, but scarcity. The exception enables us to talk of silent normalities which repeat themselves.

Repetition gives relevance to the fact or may even engender it. This is what happens with knowledge concerning nature and the universe, in such a manner that Henri Poincaré, looking from his scientist's platform towards historical facts, commented on a remark by Carlyle, according to which «only the fact is of interest. John Lackland passed by here». This is stated opposing this reality to 'all the theories of the world'. On the contrary, Poincaré stated that for a physicist the

³⁹ A. Farge, *Le goût de l'Archive* (Paris, 1989), 98-105.

⁴⁰ *Il filo e le tracce. Vero falso finto* (Milano, 2006), 296-297 (article from 1984 «Prove e possibilità»).

passage by a given place, by John Lackland, was indifferent given that he would never do it again⁴¹. Despite the difference between scientific fact and historical fact, the very notion of historical fact is once again at stake.

The point of view which I am arguing here is not that human and historical facts are similar to natural facts and should obey the same criteria. However, I think that scientific facts nowadays integrate contingency elements within them which traditionally were associated with history, in their outline and their relation with the singular, raising questions which help to understand human facts.

We should remember that Raymond Aron, in order to justify interest in the singular, stated that he could only consider an alternative if we were to determine «que n'importe qui à leur place aurait agi de même». There is thus a statement of the irreducible singularity of the fact (it is not certain that another would have acted in the same manner) with the determination of the absolute irrelevancy of the singular. Independently of the obvious distinction of relevance criteria between the natural sciences and history, which is irreducible, in the case of the singular, it is not that nobody else could have done the same but that if others had done the same, or something similar, nobody else would be that concrete singularity⁴².

In many cases the question of the precedence of the act or its discovery is not even relevant, when various individuals could have and did make the same 'discovery', following similar paths, or making use of similar data along the paths they followed. The identification of the singularity which nowadays appears to be important from the legal or economic point of view, with regard to patents, is irrelevant in understanding how the pharmaceutical or electronic sector has developed, for example, in the last hundred years.

This notion of fact as observable reality, consistent beyond the individual and the singular, leads us to think not only of acts, but of states made up of acts which apparently merge into their unity. Which facts are we talking about when we discuss (and not just in the theoretical world of Marxism) the concept of class? Questioning the nature of 'social facts' we could ask whether 'classes' exist. It is true that societal changes which have occurred in the world in the last 150 years imply the need for re-evaluation. But the question concerning the existence of classes aspires to a level of abstraction which still today involves the concept. E.P. Thompson was one of the writers who reflected on its operability.

There is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing. This was not Marx's meaning, in his own historical writing, yet the error vitiates much latter-day 'Marxist' writing. 'It', the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically – so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which 'it' ought to have (but seldom does have) if 'it' was properly aware of its own position and real interests⁴³.

⁴¹ H. Poincaré, *La Science et l'hypothèse* (Paris, 1943), 168 (1st ed. 1902).

⁴² Cf. from F. Gil, «note IX» in *Provas* (Lisboa, 1986), 127-141 and the short exchange of arguments: F. Belo, «As ciências e o singular» [The sciences and the singular], *Análise*, 5 (1986): 135-139 and F. Gil, «O estatuto do singular», [The statute of the singular], *Análise*, 5 (1986): 141-149.

⁴³ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 10.

Thinking of the problem we have been posing, various questions arise. One is the critique of the correspondence between a concept and a fact *qua* 'thing'. Another is the critique of the (also) factual consequences of the clear divorce between concept and 'thing' and, finally, a third is the search for more suitable conceptual alternatives. When one asks if a fact belongs to a class there are, amongst others, two possible answers. The first states that a concept such as 'class' is never a fact, but is supported by factual elements in order to construct an abstraction. The second states that it depends on how the very concept is defined. That is, in this second hypothesis, a greater abstraction would correspond to a lesser 'reality' while opting for more flexible and complex definitions, if it would be possible to safeguard not only the operationability of the concept, but its factual correspondence.

In E. P. Thompson's concern with discussing the concept of class we have two controversial paths. One is that which opposes the regular Marxist tradition of the reification of the concept, taken as the thing itself. There the argument would appear to be that the concept will never be equivalent to what happened, and it will be operational or not in accordance with its degree of complexity. But, when arguing along with Althusser, there appears to be an attitude which is more sensitive to the empirical, arguing that one should be attentive to how, 'in fact', social relations are constructed, organized and expressed.

Returning now to our initial problem concerning the 'fact', here considered within its sense of normal reality, or singular reality which repeats, we can see within this debate the reproduction of the ancient question of the operability of abstract taxonomies when faced with the greater 'reality' of more complex models which describe the real. The life sciences passed through this dilemma in the 18th century, having triumphed over the proposals which at the time were taken as 'artificial'. Returning to dealing with the problem of the factual correspondence of categories, we cannot ignore the fact that this correspondence is dependent on notions of representativity, since it seeks to incorporate a fact which is either collective or which does not exist. This effort at synthesis requires projections to be made and the assessment of these projections, to conclude whether the group, as so defined, is representative and if, precisely in these terms, it is a (factual) historical agent.

The notion of labour, and above all labour force, in Marx, which implies its historicity and, thus, its relativisation, requires the presence of theory and the assumption of categories which are constitutive of the factual data. Unless the mere description itself were enough to transmit the difference between the times, without having to change the values of the terms used to examine what is being described. We would then find ourselves before the eyes of God and not a model to analyse the real.

E. P. Thompson would accept the legitimacy of defining, following on from Marx, an abstract concept which would allow us to interpret a complex reality. He would dispute the ability of this concept to deal with the diversity of the real, of the documentable 'factual', without attributing to the classic proposal the operability which is sought.

Another question is to know whether, even when modifying the concept, and adding factors which result from aspects such as conscience or group representation, cultural practices, relations with powers and of powers, we are talking of a 'class' as something which 'in fact happens', or if we are not remaining at the level of possible representations of the occurrence. Thompson, assumedly diligent and attentive to the 'concrete real', withdrew from spatial metaphors such as base and superstructure and the determination of the economic, to maintain the centrality of the notion of class and the class struggle. But to do so he transformed his observational terms. He modified the concept by making it more complex and closer to the concrete, and modified what had been factual by attributing a greater weighting of reality to the concept.

Today, several decades after this discussion, the problem remains even when the vocabulary has changed and we now talk of social groups. Women, youth, football fans, the illiterate, the members of a church, professionals of one area, besides being a recognisable category, are indeed more 'fact' than were the 'classes' of Marx and Thompson. We are, finally, on the pathway which the British historian proposed, in demanding more reality, and assuming that its outline is factual in so far as it is constructed in a suitable manner.

For Gordon Wood, the 'discovery' of categories such as gender, race or class (more the latter than the two others) by various historians would be amongst the factors responsible for a history 'as the historian wished it had been', thus removing him/herself from history 'as it really was'. These categories were at the same level as conservative and patriotic manipulations, and as such the chorus of criticism was enormous, in keeping this reduction, recurrent in historiography, of the factual to the singular which the researcher empirically arrives at⁴⁴.

Having said that, it is clear that one is also talking of 'fact' by reporting not only an individual who has a work schedule, professional qualifications and a given standard of living, but also making reference to a significant set of individuals, who, through empirical observation, it can be concluded share a given set of characteristics. But it must also be assumed that speaking of 'standard of living', for example, requires reference points which give meaning to the 'fact'.

This opening leads to the third possibility of meaning of what is factual, given that the consideration of reference points does not only have consequences for what is real, regular and repetitive, but also for what is only identified through representation. The consideration of trends implies difference, comparison, the association of elements which have never existed in a single object. The fact which is thus considered does not only result from repetition, but also from difference.

We are speaking of data which are not directly observable, in objects which are not joined except through the observer who collects them. As such they completely depend on the criteria of association, while maintaining a concern for factuality.

⁴⁴ G. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past. Reflexions on the Uses of History* (Harmondsworth, 2008), 277-293.

The paradox resides in a criterion regarding the verifiability of facts which empirical observation cannot distinguish but which matter to the historian. Once again, the problem is not if they are 'real' or 'constructed' but, being unquestionably constructed, what they tell us about the event and how they are supported by a factual apparatus, which has been conceptually accepted.

One may then ask if the fall of a stockholder from the window of a building in New York in 1929 or the fall in the stock market in the same year is more factual. If we accept that the fall in the stock market is (or was) a historical fact, and even an event, we are thus calling a phenomenon 'fact' and event which is only verifiable through the association and formalisation of chosen data. We can see consequences, but it is not possible to observe this fact without a table.

António M. Hespanha made this explicit when he referred to the wide range of possibilities for the word fact, from battles to series of prices and to prosopographic data, and declaring problematic the fact that today we assume that historical facts are objective and that the way of linking and accounting for them obeys natural and indisputable patterns⁴⁵.

That it is possible to verify a result does not resolve its relationship with the real and, as a result, its statute as 'factual data'. There is an immediate possible non-correspondence between a summary, which is translated into a general verifiable framework (a quantitative one, for example), and any of the individual data items which make up this summary. The birth rate may be 1.5 children per couple, but no couple can have one child and a half. Next, we should acknowledge the possible lack of relevance of the selected framework, as well as, albeit verifiable, the individual data. And if the first problem is a classic in the discourse of defending the particular and microanalysis, not questioning the relevance of the study of trends, but questioning the factual reality of the result, the second problem leads to not considering what, whilst being real, is not pertinent to the establishing of the fact.

The mere association of empirical data is arbitrary and does not lead to the consideration of historical facts. What results may be curious, above all from apparently absurd correlation experiments in contemporary Economics (the so-called freakonomics), but it shows to what level the identification of the fact is a construction, and that is not enough to investigate and link empirical data. Finally, if we speak of relevance, this can only be determined collectively, and not by a language pertaining to facts possibly speaking for itself.

II.3. RETROACTIVE FACTS

The issue of the questions to be put and of the relevance of what has been recorded raises various problems. When thinking of the reality of what is not known, the way in which the questions define each fact is important. In police

⁴⁵ A. M. Hespanha, «A emergência da História» [The emergence of History], *Penélope*, 5 (1991): 11.

investigations, for example. But even not knowing what and who, the investigation carries out a prior dissection of the occurrence to be identified. The facts, which continue unknown, take shape before the conclusions of the questioning which will confirm or correct them. Facts thus anticipate instantiated knowledge, more through the questioning than through hypotheses.

Another question, which the questions touch on, is the change in the relevance and extraction criteria, and with them the very notion of the subject and the event. What implications do these changes have on the reports concerning what happened and what ‘could have happened’? Let us take an example.

That women have been assigned differentiated roles throughout time bears witness to a collective existence, though kept in the shadow. But the shadow is retrospectively questioned from the places that this collective existence has in the meantime assumed. The same has happened with ‘history as seen from below’ and with all these histories which seek to emancipate those who have remained unaccounted for, the losers, the oppressed, only exceptionally the winners, such as the nomadic tribes of the late Middle Ages. The question lies in the possibility of talking of histories without facts clearly documented, or with facts which ‘did not take place’, in the sense in which they were either cancelled, or never conceived of as such. Today it is a fact that the notion of universal suffrage does not include these. But this ‘non happening’ was not a fact in the 19th century, because the question had not been put. Only with the advent of the suffragettes was the universe extended, thus retroactively adding facts so as to re-evaluate practices and notions from the past.

It is legitimate to use external criteria for a period to look for what is not visible. It is however important not to factually project those criteria. This leads us to imagine what could have happened, and which we consider plausible and probable. The possible facts do not have value because of their individuality, but because of their repeated plausible occurrence, which is now imagined. That is, we can imagine the event organising them into facts. Within this act of imagining we can introduce concrete persons, assuming them to be non-factual, as a fiction upon a truthful history, or, as an alternative, we can describe generic facts which plausibly took place, despite scanty documentation, which were excluded from sources and archival material.

Reports from legal sources do not authorise us to speak of ‘non-existent’ facts, given that the legal process has identified and established them. But the freedom of the historian to search in the twilight areas is not lost. Natalie Zemon Davis has taken on the fictional dimension of legal witnesses in the 16th century in France, whilst at the same time looking for effects of reality and probability which enable the historian to approach concrete acts and images, characters with fears and hopes, close to those which Arlette Farge speaks of in her above mentioned book. Davis starts from statements containing requests for pardon, requests which enclose a fictional dimension in which those involved represent themselves. But they also represent close and meaningful expectations and threats. From these states one can take a mosaic of cases which would show, for example, what was admissible or

possible, for a woman, based on her daily situation, her behaviour, weaknesses and virtues, in her pain or honour, when she had murdered her husband or child⁴⁶.

Years later the scene changes to the 17th century to follow, using other sources, the lives of three women, people who are usually in the twilight, and furthermore, in this case a Jewess and the other two non-aristocrats, hidden in the margins of the past. If, initially, the facts were made up from the documents themselves, in the second case, the imagination extracts the facts from these few sources. But what is most interesting in this search for retroactive facts where the imagination has a fundamental role, is to assume its limits, with the explicit conscience of those actors which are not familiar to us, and which should not be acritically projected into our present in the search for the unknown. In an imagined dialogue between the female historian and the characters, Davis is confronted with the 'lack of understanding' of what 'genre hierarchies' are and shows the resistance of the 17th century women to 20th Century concepts. And explains to 'them' (to the reader) the procedure:

NZD: [...] I didn't portray you three as merely long-suffering. I also showed how women in your position made the best of it. I asked what advantages you had by being on the margins.

Glickl Bas Judah Leib: Margins are where I read comments in my Yiddish books.

Marie de l'Incarnation: In my Christian books.

Maria Sibylla Merian: River margins are the dwelling place of frogs.

NZD (desperately): You *found* things on margins: You were all adventurous. You each tried to do something no one had ever done before. [...]

Marie de l'Incarnation: The Lord did not summon me to 'adventures'.

Maria Sibylla Meriam: It sound to me, historian Davis, as though *you're* the one who wanted adventures⁴⁷.

III. DID YOU SAY 'JUST FACTS'? (ADDED VALUE)

I casi che mi sono capitati, debbo ancora capirli, e non ho
 smesso di rifletterci sopra. [...]
 Così dicendo sono più tranquillo, e da parte mia non dico più
 niente; se non i fatti come mi sono sembrati.
 Ermanno Cavazzoni, *Il poema dei lunatici*

Let us consider that a fact in its empirical singularity is not necessarily more natural or more real than when recurrent or plausible. In any event, if empirical investigation is important, this does not require a homogeneous relationship with the occurrence, which could only be accepted if one were to think of a crystallised objective. The conceptual framework and the questions which give sense to the observation become the bases on which the determination of what is factual is most fruitfully placed. And fact will as such be an updating of what was (or is, as it is

⁴⁶ N. Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France* (Stanford, 1987), in particular Chap. 3.

⁴⁷ N. Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: three Seventeenth Century Lives* (Cambridge Ma., London, 1995), 3-4.

still possible to happen), in recognition of the retroactive movement necessary for its existence as mentioned by Alain Badiou⁴⁸.

We are continuing in the field of controlled projections and, as a result, potentially true or verifiable. With it being clear that, in this exposition, fact is not considered exterior to choices and fragments and, therefore fact is not considered without discourse, which does not mean that the event is on various levels indifferent. First, since it does not change the event, albeit formless or scattered. It should be added, to this first aspect, that in the case of the historical fact, contrary to natural facts, there exists meaning and form in the acts which make up the event and which posterity selects through interpretation. Then, since choices are socially constructed, as a function of criteria and values which, implying tension and even conflict, require the control of intersubjectivity and a research ethic.

Even if the definition and verification of facts is individual, their value must be allowed to be collectively ascertained. And their value has a double meaning which recalls two of the four questions put by Roger Chartier and Hayden White in 1993: firstly, what is the use of diligence in archival work, and secondly, if the ascertainment of the event is ethically indifferent⁴⁹. The first question relates to the ethics of research and to the possibility of sharing based on knowledge of communities. The second question relates to the value and sense of narratives and, consequently, to the sense of the questions which the historian, or society, put. The ethical dimension of the fact is located between its validation and its uses. Which also implies admitting that facts take on sense within a given set of observations.

Will permanent control of documentation presented by published studies then be required? And, if so, does the absence of control make Hayden White correct when he argues that the documentary apparatus only exists as a function of the rules of historiographic rhetoric, supporting a report which is comparable to fiction? If the imagined fact approximates fiction, it does not copy it, hence the critique. And the critique resorts, besides the imagination, to shared data and rules to ascertain a narrative, a model or a fact. On the other hand, the ethics of research presupposes that, in submitting a narrative to criticism, what is being discussed is not only what is said (and where this is supported) but also what is omitted or denied.

As with the scientific fact, work on the historical fact or its integration into a narrative does not depend on the empirical collection of data, but the choices of the historian who imagines a plausible report, which will be confirmed in time. This search for plausible histories and models means that the return to narrative, which has been so discussed since the end of the 1970s, and thus seen as an expression of conservatism, should nowadays in no way signify a regression. The facts which make up the historical narratives of our days do not have to be understood as they were a century ago, either in taking on their fictional character, or in seeking to

⁴⁸ See, above, note 34.

⁴⁹ R. Chartier, «Quatre questions à Hayden White», *Storia della storiografia*, 24 (1993): 133-142. Reply: H. White, «A response to Professor Chartier's Four Questions», *Storia della storiografia*, 27 (1995): 63-70, reaffirming what had repeatedly been argued in other books regarding the position of the negationists.

integrate them into more objectivated or technically more consistent discourses. The provisory, precarious or complex character of the fact (scientific or historical) does not take away security, efficacy or even explanatory capacity.

When António M. Hespanha states that one has to go 'beyond the facts' he does not deny the need to ascertain facts. He contests the dependency of the plausibility or interest of a given narrow positivistic narrative for each singular fact. To sustain his point of view, he refers critics to the book by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou village occitan*. Clearly such a book could never have been produced without the exceptional existing sources. But the book does not limit itself to reproducing sources and individual facts. As with other historians, such as Magalhães Godinho, his interest is in the integration of documentation and imagination within a plausibly articulated framework⁵⁰.

His *auctoritas* is not arbitrary. It is linked to a path which recognises safety and perspective. These two elements join together to form a good description, in the words of Fernando Gil «of that which is best inscribed in the framework of our expectations»⁵¹, to enable it to pass tests of credibility. The honesty which is associated with research ethics, procedural rigour, does not require the verification of each step, but presupposes the possibility of this verification. The plausibility of a narrative lies in the compatibility between what has already been shared (or has been partially shared), what is excepted or contested, and the ability to attain new satisfactory answers. But such plausibility is not exempt from a controlling narrative, the rules of which are shared.

Le Roy Ladurie survived criticisms made concerning his facts, but in other circumstances this was not the case with David Abraham. The case, which took place in the United States of American between 1981 and 1985, illustrates the same type of problem, though with confrontations at another level and actors with more power⁵². The book *The Collapse of the Weimar Republic: Political Economy and Crisis*, published by the University of Princeton, in 1981, was, amongst much praise, immediately criticised for maintaining the complicity of the major economic groups during the rise of Nazism. The alleged Marxist schemata which was present in that thesis was not considered acceptable.

As it was about to be re-edited, however, ideological arguments found support in the criticism of a number of imprecisions in archival references, a number which, as the controversy went on, kept enlarging. Critics denounced Abraham's disrespect for the facts and the incompatibility between the rigour required by the historian and the adoption of the theories which guided the research. They proudly took on the status of defenders of facts against the pernicious role of theories.

On the side of those who publicly defended Abraham, the matter was placed in other terms given that, while not denying the errors, they denied the idea that they

⁵⁰ A. M. Hespanha, «A emergência da História» [The emergence of History], *Penélope*, 5 (1991): 11-12.

⁵¹ F. Gil, «La bonne description», *Enquête*, 6 (1998): 151.

⁵² The episode is recounted by Peter Novick (his former professor and friend) in the cited work, 612-621.

minimally placed at stake the theses within the book. In any event, they did not authorise the factual inversion which sought to have proved the lack of a link between the major German companies and the fall of the Weimar Republic. Those of this opinion, besides Peter Novick, who narrated the episode, were historians such as Laurence Stone and Carl Schorske.

I am not, clearly, in a position to judge the gravity of David Abraham's errors. I do however refer to this example for two reasons.

In the first place, for the clear role that theory played amongst those expressing horror which allowed them, based on the stated errors, to state facts which clearly had no more documentary foundation than the contested facts.

In the second place, independently of the political limits and dimensions of the discussion, the fragility of the historian and his/her practice (due to the revelation of the failed 'honesty') which had compromised the trust in the facts and relationships which he had proposed. The problem does not lie in the pre-fabricated nature of the replies, a characteristic which in the end all hypotheses have which enable knowledge to progress. The facts can even be proposed once more without major differences after the due corrections have been made. If we pay attention to the argument of the facts, we can conclude that it was not the annulled data which spoke against the hypotheses on which the narrative was based. It was the loss of the authority of the historian which compromised the proposed facts. As a result of this case, David Abraham was forbidden from giving classes in the United States, and also in Germany and Israel, and had to resign from giving law classes in Miami.

The control of the fact makes us return to the question of being unable to separate what is known and the value of the described acts. We are moving from the ethics of research to the ethics of narratives. The former will continue to be present since this is not concerned with adapting narratives to what is morally acceptable or just, but to not accepting as objectively indifferent facts which are stamped with a moral tension. The truth of the *holocaust* would be an extreme but clear example of this. If the very notion of the 'holocaust' is a choice, even when denying the facts gathered concerning the conception or forms of genocide, it opposes the basic values associated with these for more than half a century. The two reasons for this attitude are, on the side of the formulation of the fact, the denial of the very event, through the disrespecting or the delegitimising of the collected evidence and, on the side of the value of the event, a reversal of one's perspective, through the recovery of the elements of tension present in that particular moment. What this means is that it is the question of the value, and not that of the proof, which puts the event in question. The negation of the proof of the fact is a consequence, and not a reason for the inversion of its value.

The aforementioned inversion means that it would be possible to state that Hayden White is correct when he argues that the notion of fact for the denialists is not relativist⁵³. The existence of the gas chambers of the 'final solution' does not

⁵³ H. White, «A response to Professor Chartier's Four Questions», 66.

become subjective. The occurrence is denied. The witnesses, whilst abundant, are not declared as being relative, but false. In any event, the denialists cultivate an attitude which is only apparently paradoxical, adding scepticism and dogmatism within a conservative view of the world.

As the same time, against White, the dissolution of the objective narrative referent, besides the rhetorical capacity of the narrator, is not relativisable. Can we consider or not a referent which does not depend on the rhetorical qualities of who is talking? This unsurpassable alternative makes it difficult to sustain the positions of the followers of the *Linguistic turn*. The book *The Content of the Form*, dating from 1987, approximately fifteen years after *Metahistory*, when the negationist question was already present in his arguments, has a phrase by Roland Barthes as its epigraph, «Le fait n'a jamais qu'une existence linguistique». In choosing this phrase, Hayden White opens the door to not only the consideration of the fact as an act of language but to the indifference to the real that this act of language sought to attract. The dissolution of the reference leads one to read in the epigraph the negation of the existence of the real beyond the efficacy of rhetoric. It cannot be seen how a report can contain more truth than another, even if there is documentary support for it. Is the truth of man's Moon landing in 1969 different from when one speaks of practices of genocide?

Symmetrically, as a result of this, there is the singular value of the occurrence which requires those who have for forty years argued for narrativist and relativist positions within the field of history, such as Hayden White or Dominick LaCapra, to set themselves apart from the positions of individuals such as Robert Faurisson. The problem, for LaCapra or White, should not just be the disturbance in the neighbourhood, but whether it is consistent to distinguish discourses through mere efficacy without opening history to a principle of reality, and conceding the standardisation of facts which are not indifferent.

This leads to the individualisation of another type of fact. Besides what has been said about recurrent or provable, retroactive or imagined facts, traumatic facts have to be considered facts which completely condition the existence of a community, and affect the way in which that community views itself and others. This type of facts has something in common with retroactive facts, since in many cases they are located in an area where words do not appear to appropriately account for the event, specifically at the level of suffering or violence. Witnesses, whilst they still exist, do not seem to match the shock caused by the facts. If rhetoric is shown to be insufficient, the witnesses remain, in their materiality, as bodies which cannot be ignored.

It thus becomes difficult to view facts as merely a question of language, literary pleasure or curiosity. The acceptance or negation of the truth of the occurrence, and thus the fact, requires us to review certain concepts or, at the least, to clarify their reference to the real.

LaCapra, for example, when discussing the question of 'traumatic facts', when recognising objectivity as the goal, rephrases the question:

Objectivity is indeed a goal of professional historiography, related to the attempt to represent the past as accurately as possible. One may reformulate and defend this goal in postpositivistic terms by *both* questioning the idea of a fully transparent, unproblematic, neutral representation of the way things in the past 'really were' *and* recognizing the need to come to terms with one's transference and affect-laden implication in the object of study by critically mediating perhaps inevitable projective or incorporative identifications, undertaking meticulous research, and being open to the way one's findings may bring into question or even contradict one's initial hypotheses⁵⁴.

The reality of the traumatic facts imposes itself, both when down-trodden, thus maintaining the problem, and when exacerbated. As has been understood, the occurrence to which they are attributed is not simple. Precisely because of their traumatic character, many facts are difficult to universally accept, even if considered separately. Even more complex is the acceptance of the relationships which these facts establish among themselves. Who threw the first stone? How unique and exceptional are the facts at stake? How determinant was the way in which the community behaved and what this says about its eventual 'nature'?

In this manner, we are faced with three types of problems. We face a methodological question when the result which has been shared through decades of research is refused, suggesting alternative narratives which the community cannot control, given that they are based on the original refusal. We face a political problem because the narratives encounter each other on the field of contemporary values, and this is not resolved through the specification of an illegal memory. In the end it is not the errant memory whose possible criminalisation is what has been discussed or legalised in various countries nowadays, but the values which are being protected in the pretext of this memory. We face a moral challenge when we raise the question of being indifferent to the positions, versions and circumstances of victims and executors.

Because of this we must possess the most stringent rigour in our affirmations concerning what has occurred and understanding the value (perhaps exceptional) of the acts and names associated with this. Submitting narratives to confrontation and verification, by sharing minimal criteria of objectivity, does not imply cancelling the subjective dimension. Let us call this cancelling 'whitening', an expression which covers the two aspects with which we have been concerned: that of the violence issued upon an event which is not respected (at the objective level) and that of the absolution of its socially attributed responsibilities through emptying it of the meaning of the ascertained acts. The expression is understood when faced with facts which imply conflict and takes on a further dimension when faced with traumatic facts.

Which does not mean that the historian can seek to judge and punish retrospectively, by establishing the good and the bad in what has happened. This means that the very understanding of facts is a process where values attributed to these are introduced, the meaning that they had for those who experienced them,

⁵⁴ D. LaCapra, *History in Transit, Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca and London, 2004), 133-134.

including conflicting meanings, and the meaning that they form for those who see them at a distance, in the preserved memory.

Is it possible to present a fact by taking away its meaning? For the historian, the control (or even the refusal) of value judgements is based on the principle of the rejection of anachronisms and the treatment of distant tensions as being familiar. But, from the point of view of the definition of the fact, its depth, its meanings are necessarily associated with its values. So as not to introduce unnecessary background noise, I will not discuss the alleged absence of a rational basis for the fact/value dichotomy, in accordance with Hilary Putnam⁵⁵. I will just recall that the values of facts, considered at a distance, are also factual.

Having set out the problems I stated above, I have sought to understand the various dimensions of facts.

The problems of those who confuse relativisation, relativity and indifference are clear. It is as if the need to not lose sight of values implies the taking of positions which, in the case of historians, only with difficulty avoid anachronism. It also shows a crusading spirit which, besides its incongruity, impedes the understanding of the event and the actual instruments of knowledge.

But a speculative posture which refuses documents or declares itself indifferent to them lacks critical sense. It is important to give value to witnesses, by not denying their existence, not reading backwards or making them say what they clearly cannot, an impossibility or inconsistency which is only ascertained through criticism. On the contrary, that which is refused is the inevitability of unilateral readings (empirical or sceptical) which seek to impose themselves through expedient rhetoric, even if, sometimes, and at the same time, an alleged horror of rhetoric is proclaimed.

Just as not every defence of objectivisation is arid empiricism or realism, it is also unproductive and blind to join together much of the reflection of recent decades concerning knowledge within the ever more imprecise term of post-modern, as well as associate it with relativism or post-modernity. Attention to the values of the event may be carried out within the heart of a relativised perspective, attentive to the historicity and the precariousness of facts and their meanings without this signifying indifference or equivalence. This perspective should be able to situate, without deprecating, the values of acts, and consider their necessarily conflicting dimension.

Notions at stake are those such as description and interpretation, observation and theory, verifiability and explication. We are seeking to represent what was, what could have been or what still could be. In the attempt to do so, describing is not radically different from explaining. If an intention is a fact and if the reasons for conscious acts are deposited in it, the very description introduces the explanation of the acts. The same occurs, whilst not identifying intentions, in defining factual sequences where one can recognise a nexus. The reality of the

⁵⁵ H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge, 1981), 127-128 and *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and other Essays* (Cambridge Ma., 2002).

relationship is not at stake, but the explanatory dimension which results from isolating the sequence. As with other choices, other more complex nexuses or explanations could possibly appear. This is a fulcral question for legal facts, in so far as it is not enough for the investigator or judge to establish a direct or material responsibility, in the universe of facts⁵⁶. The matter of explaining would require a much greater development of the problems raised. Let us stay with this association, where each choice is an attempt (whether or not assumed) of finding explanations.

The discussion concerning what is understood by fact places us on two levels: that of the outline of the real to which we give meaning and the recognition of the suitability of this outline and of its result. Fragmentation, singularisation, identification, are not natural recognition operations for the empirical. They are choices. As for documents, the existence of which is separate from the will of the historian, they are also selected, forgotten, and the information which they produce is fragmented and associated to that of other documents. There is nothing natural or fanciful here. This understanding of the fact implies a necessary dual dependency: dependency between the facts and the concepts which give them meaning; and dependency between the facts and the event which gives them substance.

In these operations, the ascertained facts do not only result from the accumulation or correction of data and documents. They result from continuous work on the borders of the event and the meanings which we attribute to them. As such we think that the distinction between *Res fictae* and *Res factae* is not a problem, not only for history, but for knowledge in general. For what is assumed as fiction may be indifferent to the level of reality which it incorporates. But to recognise the place of imagination in knowledge and the path it takes in identifying a fact does not dilute the reality of the fact or diminish it as a means of attaining the real. It locates it within a process.

L'enquête est inachevable, les descriptions sont ses points d'arrêt provisoires, elles fixent un fait qui apparaît au regard comme ostensiblement intéressant, suivant une certaine orientation théorique. [...] c'est une illusion réaliste de prétendre qu'il peut y avoir, cognitivement, des faits «sous-jacents», antérieurs à leurs descriptions⁵⁷.

Facts, as units of meaning of what happened, are not the so-called past 'just as' it happened. As units of meaning, they are movable and updateable elements, in contrast to past acts, which have been carried out and which are irreversible. This fact creates discomfort and this discomfort is also a fact. However, if the imagination does not invent the occurrence, which gets along well without it, it is the very condition of its knowledge.

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⁵⁶ J. H. Fetzer, «On the historical explanation of unique events», *Theory and Decision*, 6 (1975): 87-97 and R. Simili ed., *La spiegazione storica. Prospettive recenti nella filosofia analitica* (Parma, 1984).

⁵⁷ F. Gil, «La bonne description», 151.