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Boundaries and overlaps of disciplines in Bloch's methodology of historical knowledge

Abstract

Marc Bloch's famous methodological essay, *The Historian's Craft*, contains many relevant considerations on knowledge organization. These have been selected and grouped into four main themes: terminology problems in history; principles for the organization of historical knowledge, with special reference to the genetic principle; sources of historical information, to be found not only in archives but also in very different media and contexts; and the nature and boundaries of history as a discipline. Analysis of them shows that knowledge organization is an important part of historians' work, and suggests that it can be especially fruitful when a cross-medial, interdisciplinary approach is adopted.

1. Introduction

The occupation of Poland in 1939 triggered World War II. Renowned historian Marc Bloch, then 52, felt he had to serve the French army again. Captured in 1944, while in prison he wrote *The Historian's Craft*, an essay on the methodology of history as a research field (Bloch, 1952).

Bloch together with Lucien Febvre had founded the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. The *Annales* became the centre of a new school of French historians paying a broader consideration to social, agricultural, technological, and economical aspects, thus trying to reconstruct everyday life and even “mentality” of an époque, besides its political and military events. Along with his studies on France and other European regions in the Middle Ages, Bloch reflected on the very methodology of historical research on several occasions (e.g. Bloch, 1930; 1933; 1937). Particularly *The Historian's Craft*, although unfinished as the author was eventually shot, contains many relevant ideas concerning the organization of historical knowledge.

In this paper I will present selected passages from this work, and some from other works of the same author, that are especially meaningful in expressing his conception of how historical knowledge can be organized. Most passages can be grouped into four main themes, that will be discussed respectively in the next sections. The first three themes concern terminological problems in the work of historians, general principles that can be used in the organization of historical knowledge, and the sources of historical information. They are meant to provide an example of how knowledge organization (though not necessarily referred to by this term) plays an important role in the actual work of researchers themselves.

Furthermore, the source-related problems identified by Bloch make it evident, as a fourth theme, how interdisciplinary approaches can be fruitful or even necessary in historical research. This will provide an instructive case of the problems involved in identifying a discipline by locating its boundaries, while also acknowledging its overlaps with other disciplines.

2. Terminology problems in history

A first set of Bloch's relevant considerations concerns acknowledgment of terminological issues in the historian's work. Indeed, terms used to describe and analyse a given country in a given period are often specific of the language of that

country and period; therefore, translating them into the historian's contemporary language, sometimes passing through several steps, may be problematic. This is especially true in the case of social and legal institutions:

The big cadastre of England established for William the Conqueror, the famous Domesday Book, was the work of Normandy or Maine clerks. Not only they described in Latin specifically English institutions; they also had thought them again in French. When the historian faces these nomenclatures based on replacing terms, his only resource is to do the work back again. (*Historian's Craft*, 4.3)

If one also considers the diachronical dimension, it becomes clear that the history of term meanings is asymmetrical. That is, terms can be properly applied again only after the period in which they arose, but not the other way around:

When we speak about patricians, a contemporary of old Caton would have understood us; while how could the author who evokes the role of "bourgeoisie" in Roman Empire crises translate the name or the idea into Latin? (*Craft*, 4.3)

Another terminological problem is the change in meaning undergone by terms used across long time periods, that may mislead the historians who only rely on terms themselves for their conceptualizations. Here Bloch acknowledges a basic problem of knowledge organization:

"Origins of the feudal system", they say. Where to look for them? Some have answered "in Rome". Others "in Germany". [...] On both sides, words have been used – *benefice* (beneficium) among Latins, *feud* among Germans – that these generations will keep adopting, while giving them, gradually and unconsciously, an almost completely new content. As, to the great desperation of historians, humans are not used to change their vocabulary each time they change their customs. (*Craft*, 1.4)

Terminological ambiguity is also a debated issue in contemporary literature on knowledge organization (Hjørland and Nissen Pedersen, 2005; Szostak, 2008). Bloch suggests that researchers must be aware of it, as facing it is part of their work, which does not seem to make him exceedingly pessimistic concerning the possibility of solving it by doing "the work back again".

Special terminology is a feature of any discipline. In the case of history, terminology is especially relevant as the object of study are phenomena of a cultural nature, that have generated their own specific terms in time. Historians thus adopt these terms and try to understand and analyse their meaning, rather than coining terms "from outside" by some theoretical convention as happens in quantum physics or biochemistry. While this approach makes the special terms of history closer to what they denote, it demands an additional effort to understand their original meaning and to reuse them in appropriate ways.

3. Principles for the organization of historical knowledge

In other pages of *The Historian's Craft*, Bloch explicitly acknowledges the importance of knowledge organization as a basic tool in the work of historians. Indeed, he observes, historical sources come in many and mixed forms, and have to be ordered before producing a more consistent and systematic framework.

Among the possible principles of arrangement - of the kind of the eight *principles for helpful sequence* listed by Ranganathan (1967) - the one that can be applied to history most immediately is the chronological principle; or, more precisely, the genetic principle (Gnoli, 2006) connecting a phenomenon to previous phenomena that appear to have produced it:

If one would neglect to sort in a rational way a subject delivered to us in raw form, after all he would only attain to denying time; and as a result, history itself. Would we be able to understand such given stage of Latin, if we detached it from previous language development? Such ownership structure, such beliefs were not, for sure, absolute beginnings. As far as their determination is done from the oldest to the latest, human phenomena can be arranged first of all by chains of similar phenomena. Classing them by genus, then, is to unveil force lines of basic effectiveness. (*Craft*, 4.2)

As one arranges phenomena in a temporal/genetic sequence, however, a further problem often emerges: that of identifying the exact boundary between one class and the next one in the array. While some historical phenomena prove to have discrete, clearcut borders, others show more continuous transitions, which makes the definition of categories more difficult:

Oppositions between civilizations appear clearly as, within space, the contrast gets rid of exoticism: will anybody object that today there is not any Chinese civilization? And that it does not largely differs from the European? – But, even in the same places, the main accent of the social complex can change more or less slowly or bluntly. When the transformation has occurred, we say that a civilization succeeds the other. Sometimes there is a shock come from outside, usually accompanied by insertion of new human elements: this is the case occurring between the Roman Empire and early Middle Ages societies. Sometimes, on the contrary, it is just an internal change: anybody will agree that, for example, Renaissance civilization, from which we have largely inherited, still is not our one anymore. No doubt, such different tonalities are difficult to be expressed. They could not be so by too summary labels. The convenience of *-ism* words (*Typismus*, *Konventionalismus*) has spoiled the essay of an evolutionary description recently attempted by Karl Lamprecht, in his History of Germany. This already was Taine's mistake [...]. It is a task of research to introduce an increasing precision and refinement in its distinctions. (*Craft*, 4.3)

The problem of identifying exact delimitations between classes also leads Bloch to more general, epistemological considerations: are the classes established by historians only conventional, or can they hope to reflect units that actually existed in the objects of study? This is another classical, basic question of knowledge organization theory. While admitting that the complexity of historical phenomena often requires approximations, Bloch also claims that the ideal purpose of history, as well as of any science, is to be as faithful as possible to the ontology of its objects. That is, citing Bergson (and reminding of Plato's good butcher), to reflect “the lines of reality” in the organization of historical knowledge:

In summary, human time will also keep resistant to implacable uniformity, as well as to the strict time partition of a clock. It needs metrics fitting the variability of its own rhythm, often accepting as boundaries to know only marginal zones, because reality wants this too. It is only at the price of this plasticity that history can hope to adapt, according to Bergson's words, his classifications to “the lines

of reality themselves”: which is precisely the ultimate aim of any science. (*Craft*, 4.3)

4. Sources of information and interdisciplinarity

A third set of interesting methodological considerations is about the primary sources of historians. These often consist in old archive documents, making historians play the role of users of archives. However, in an article on the appearance and spread of water mills (Bloch, 1935), the author complains that such archives, while usually indexed by proper names, are rarely indexed by subject - a facility most needed by historians, as they look for information on various subjects scattered in official documents originally written for different purposes:

an enquiry by definition much incomplete and, also, of return much diminished by the effect of one of the most unpleasant gaps in our own technique. I mean the regrettable and – let us tell it – stupid custom permitting the editors of documents to deprive their readers of any subject index: like if such collections only existed in order to help, by the tables of proper names, the plays of genealogists. (*Water Mill*, 3)

This is in contradiction with the mainstream doctrine adopted still today by many archivists, according to which archive documents should only be catalogued by their institutional origins and purposes. As institutions in the past centuries were hardly interested in producing documentation focused on water mills themselves, this approach tend to miss information precious to historians of technology: in which archives and individual documents should they look for it? A greater investment in subject indexing, especially by synthetic systems allowing to cite several phenomena referred to in a single document, would clearly help researchers.

Bloch's interest in the elements of society, economy and everyday life leads him to look very broadly for potential sources of information. Historical surveys should include a wide range of sources, he claims in another article on agricultural landscape (Bloch, 1936, 1). A similar view he expresses again in his methodological book, providing examples of many types of sources including painted or archaeological materials - document kinds that one would expect to find in a church or a museum rather than an archive:

Which historian of religions would be contented with checking theology treatises or collections of hymns? He knows well: images painted or carved on the walls of sanctuaries, and the arrangement and furniture of graves have at least as much to tell him about dead beliefs and feelings as many writings. Our knowledge of Germanic invasions depends on funerary archaeology and the study of toponyms as much as on the perusal of chronicles and archive documents. (*Craft*, 2.2)

This approach emphasizes the potential role of knowledge organization as transcending the institutional nature of information services (archives, or museums, or libraries, or monuments themselves) to focus on their very information content. It is the latter that really matters for the researchers, and should be given priority (Gnoli, 2010). For similar reasons, knowledge relevant to historical research also transcends the canonical boundaries between disciplines, such as economics and religion: indeed, this is clearly suggested by Bloch's personal experience as a researcher, also related to

classification of personal working notes:

It is a definite fact that, from the 12th century until Reform at least, weaver communities were a favoured ground of heresies. Here surely is a good subject for a file of religious history. Let us then accurately file this card board in its drawer. In the cabinet nearby, this time labeled *Economic History*, let us throw another host of notes. At that point, will we believe to have done all the job on those little unsettled shuttle communities? We will still have to explain them, as one of their fundamental characters was not just making the religious coexist with the economical, but interlacing them. (*Craft*, 4.2)

Bloch's examples of mixed research methodology provide strong cases in support of an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge organization, as this helps the actual work of many researchers more effectively, in agreement with Szostak's (2008) thesis.

5. The nature and boundaries of history as a discipline

Discussion of interdisciplinarity in history leads one to wonder how history itself can be delimited as a discipline. How does the traditional segmentation of knowledge into disciplines correspond to “the lines of reality themselves”?

In general, a discipline can be described as a form of knowledge that applies certain categories to its objects. These categories can have either an ontological or an epistemological origin.

Such disciplines as botany or musicology can be defined as focusing on the study of specific classes of phenomena (plants, music): that is, their categories mainly have an ontological nature. Can history be defined in an analogous way as, say, the study of the past? Bloch is skeptical about this:

It has been said sometimes: “history is the science of the past”. To me this is bad wording. First, the very idea that past, as such, can be the object of science is absurd. How could we made the subject of any rational knowledge, without any previous decantation, phenomena that share nothing but not being contemporary with us? Do we imagine, as an equivalent, a general science of the Universe in its present state? [...] Admittedly language, being basically traditionalist, keeps easily calling history any study of change within duration... This use has no risk, as it does not deceive anybody. In this sense, there is a history of the Solar system, as the stars forming it have not always been like we see them. It belongs to astronomy. There is a history of volcanic eruptions that, I am sure, is of greatest interest to Earth physics. It does not belong to historians' history. Or at least, it belongs to it only as its observations, by some facet, happen to match the specific concerns of our own history. So how can the partition of tasks be established in practice? (*Craft*, 1.2)

An alternative way to define disciplines is epistemic: a discipline would then consist of a particular approach to a wide range of different phenomena, or even to any phenomenon. This fits well such disciplines as philosophy, literature or education, that can deal with anything as their subject, standing with it in a relation of aboutness.

For Mills and Broughton (1977) and Langridge (1992), only the latter are true disciplines, while those defined by their objects are just their sub-disciplines: chemistry would thus be the scientific study (discipline) of material substances (phenomena), while alchemy would be a different disciplinary approach to the same phenomena.

This distinction may partially correspond to Nicolai Hartmann's one between “building-above” - the formal relationship to something in a different stratum of reality, like that between education on plants and plants themselves - and “overforming” - the relationship to a lower layer providing material elements for the existence of the higher one, like that between plants and their molecules (Poli, 2001).

History appears to be mainly an epistemic discipline, as it can address many different phenomena in order to connect them in a diachronical view. On the other hand, as is noticed by Bloch, it usually applies only to recorded human phenomena (the history of the Solar system quoted above not being meant to be true history), so that it also has ontological delimitations:

The good historian looks like the ogre of the legend. Where he scents human meat, he knows that his prey is there. (*Craft*, 1.2)

Human phenomena, that are the object of history, are known to be complex and include several integrative levels: social, political, legal, economical, technological, cultural. These levels may need to be organized in “tangled” frameworks rather than in a linear series (Poli, 2006). Indeed, historical information has been described as complex and diverse, hence requiring appropriate strategies for its representation and organization (García Marco, 1994).

6. Conclusion

The quotes selected from Bloch's works offer insightful ideas on the role of knowledge organization in the actual research work of historians. In particular, historians interested in social and economical issues, like those of the *Annales* school, need to look at a wide variety of information sources, transcending the boundaries of media and of traditional disciplines. The very delimitation of a discipline like history involves complex problems. All this should encourage experts of knowledge organization to adopt a cross-medial, interdisciplinary approach, if they really desire to be of help to researchers.

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