

RECEPTIONS AND THE SHAPING OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

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The term *Reception*² has been multiplied in recent times in the field of historical studies in general, and studies on Antiquity, in particular. It can be easily found in the titles of books, papers and presentations at academic events, and even in dissertations and PhD theses. This theme issue of *Herodotus* is also a sign of this phenomenon. But there is still much to be done before considering the term as a designator of a particular field of studies. Maybe it would be fanciful to expect the emergence of a uniform universe of studies. In the case of history, one of the reasons for this is the problematic relation between historiographical work, on the one hand, and historiographical theorizing, on the other. The existence of practically autonomous sectors of theory and methodology in the departments of history of the universities is indicative of the unnecessary relation between systematic theoretic reflection and the practice of historians. Such relation may be relevant, but it is not essential.³

Nevertheless, a certain level of reflection is always welcome, even when it does not provide tools or point to productive paths. As Norma Cortês has pointed out, in a particular reception of the ancient Greek term, *theoria*:

Theory is not aimed at establishing scientific methods (procedural models that regulate and guide historical research practices). And, at most, it includes a contemplative matrix that reached the excellence of its best finishing in the world

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² Unless otherwise specified, the emphasis through italics on specific words and expressions in this text were added by its author.

³ Sometimes, such dissociation can be presented as the sign of a negative judgement regarding the historiographical context. This is how I see the well-known disappointment of Carlos Ginzburg in the mid-1990s, published in the early 2000s: "The skeptical theses based on the reduction of historiography to its narrative or rhetoric dimension have been circulating for some decades – although their roots, as we will see, are older. As usual, the historiography-theoreticians who propose them are little concerned with the concrete work of historians. But historians, in turn – after their conventional praise of the *latest linguistic or rhetorical trend* [emphasis in original] are also little inclined to reflect on the theoretical implications of their craft. *The distance between methodological reflection and effective historiographical praxis was rarely as wide as it has been in recent decades*" (2002, p.13-14).

of *Sophia*. (...) In a few words, I'd say that it only serves to make us think – though this does not distinguish it, since all disciplinary fields also do it! All in all, a *Theory of History* calls us to contemplate and attentively observe ourselves [emphasis in original] (2009, p. 14).

I believe the accuracy of concepts, the explicit use of certain conceptions, and theoretical reflection itself may have additional practical implications, as long as they are not merely illustrative or based on an argument from authority.⁴ Likewise, the point is not one of an inner, silent learning that could not be conveyed to others.⁵ At once as a part of the *invention* of the historian's craft and constituting it, new objects of study can be created by simply giving distinct names to one and the same set of documents; by establishing principles, theoretical reflection can prompt us to ask questions we would not otherwise realize, thus leading us to new answers.

An *Aesthetics of Reception* dates back to the 1960s, but a *History of Reception* was born, I believe, in the late 1990s with the work of Charles Martindale (*Redeeming the text*, of 1993). In his own words, it is a "historicizing version" of the aesthetics inaugurated by Hans Robert Jauss⁶ still in the 1960s. It was allegedly conjugated with Jacques Derrida's *Deconstruction*, with New

⁴ This is what Norma Cortês seems to allude to in the section from which the citation above was extracted: "Therefore, it [theory] *neither conveys* generalist methodologic formulas, *nor has* it any primacy or precedence over the other disciplinary fields and forms of expertise. Theory of History *does not serve* to teach how to do research projects; *it does not validate* the methodological procedures adopted by other fields of historic interest; *nor does it ensure* any objectivity to the intellectual choices of historians (2009, p.14).

⁵ I am not fully disregarding more personal aspects linked to the meaning and impact of theoretical reflections. However, I affirm this is not a religious issue, such as indicated by Karen Armstrong in her analysis of the distinctions between Eastern and Western Christianity: "A distinction between esoteric and exoteric truth will be extremely important in the history of God. It was not to be confined to Greek Christians but Jews and Muslims would also develop an esoteric tradition. The idea of a 'secret' doctrine was not to shut people out. Basil was not talking about an early form of Freemasonry. He was simply calling attention to the fact that not all religious truth was capable of being expressed and defined clearly and logically. Some religious insights had an inner resonance that could only be apprehended by each individual in his own time during what Plato had called *theoria*, contemplation (...)" (1994, p. 122, 123, 126 and 127).

⁶ In 1979, Luiz Costa Lima published a collection of texts on Reception Aesthetics, reissued in 2002 in a context in which historians (such as me) could read with an interest in knowing their contribution to the internal analysis of texts. The prefaces to both editions are useful in many ways, including in the sense of knowing the other names of specific schools, their propositions and divergences. The collection includes texts by Wolfgang Iser, Kahrtheinz Stierle, Harald Weinrich and an author well-known by Brazilian students, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht.

Criticism and Mikhail Bakhtin's Dialogism, as well as with Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Hermeneutics* (1993, p. XIII, 01). As it also occurs in other situations, the professional practitioners of the history-field must deal with the task of appropriating a theory that was imagined for another area – in this case, Literature. This is not a simple enterprise, and it does not seem to be finished. For instance, one of the theses of *Redeeming the text* is that there is virtue in recognizing the transient nature of our analytic procedures (1993, p. XIV).

But there are other schools linked to history of reception, in such way that its genesis may also be pinpointed in this century. This was done by Anastasia Bakogianni (2016, p. 5) in regard to the seminal text of Lorna Hardwick (2003). We found some considerable distinctions and variations. Despite the deference to the School of Constance, Hardwick – who is particularly concerned with the appropriations of Classicism –, points to the existing diversity of theory and investigation methods to approach a wide variety of objects, themes and spheres of reception.⁷ Such diversity can be found, as James Tatum (2014, p. 90) has done, by reading the preface to the *Classics Reception Journal*, which was created in 2009 to serve as a specialized outlet for a field of studies that is still in stage of consolidation:

Classical Receptions Journal covers all aspects of the reception of the texts and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome from antiquity to the present day. It aims to explore the relationships between transmission, interpretation, translation, transplantation, rewriting, redesigning and rethinking of Greek and Roman material in other contexts and cultures. It addresses the implications both for the receiving contexts and for the ancient, and compares different types of linguistic, textual and ideological interactions.

The journal promotes cross-disciplinary exchange and debates at the interface between subjects. It therefore welcomes submissions from researchers in Archaeology, Architecture, Art History, Comparative Literature, Film, Intellectual History, History of Scholarship, Political Science, Theatre Studies and Translation Studies as well as from those in Classics and Ancient History".⁸

We cannot, therefore, expect to find a uniformly agreed topic and approach in the texts of this theme edition. Yet, we can read them with a consideration for which alternatives they reveal to us *vis-à-vis* studies of a similar genre (for instance, regarding the "Uses of History"), thus contributing to the emergence of a subfield of historical studies, namely

⁷ Instead of a theory or method, Hardwick presents *key assumptions* (2003, p. 16-17).

⁸ Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/crj/pages/About>. Access on Feb. 25, 2020.

Reception of Antiquity.

Despite the astonishing variety pointed by Tatum and confirmed by the articles of this issue, I believe there are still some assumptions that must be highlighted. First, *reception* means an active appropriation, which highlights the central role of a text's reader or interpreter. In other words, this is an acknowledgment of the fact that the meanings of a particular work are not definitively established at the moment when it is produced, i.e., they do not exist in themselves. It is a central principle of the Aesthetics of Reception – accepted by Martindale and Hardwick – that seems to be expressed by Alberto Manguel in his appreciation of reading:

It is, however, in each case the reader who sees the meaning while reading; the reader ascribes a possible legibility to an object, place or event, or recognizes it in them: it is the reader who must ascribe meaning to a system of signs and, then, decipher it (1997, p. 19).

Of course, it is necessary to take into consideration the existence of at least one additional side in every act of reception: the work, either in the form of a newspaper article, a novel, a film, a sculpture... Do these two sides exist independently, and may the appropriation be considered in terms of correspondence or adjustment, or would a reception consist in the interaction of both sides? Since it has been asserted against the idea that a work simply reflects its time (its society, economy, class...) or has an immanent truth, the Aesthetics of Reception (and many histories that derive from it) purported that meaning is a reality constructed by the interaction of the two sides.⁹ In this dialogue, the observer's imagination organizes, filters and selects its features, thus creating them (LIMA, 2002, p. 16).

This assertion has many relevant implications. There is not a "tradition" in itself, affecting or shaping posterity. Thus, there is no such thing as a "legacy" either, unless it is considered as a heteroclite set of interpretations - which are always, in turn, subject to changes and even ruptures, for instance, when the majority's attention is turned from one topic to another, or undergoes a revolutionary shift in the understanding of a particular aspect of the past. The elimination of the idea of a solid point of reference for interpreting the vestiges of history confers a new meaning and new relevance to the judgments regarding its distinct appropriations, because

⁹ According to Luiz Costa Lima, at least initially, Jauss maintained the separation between object and observer and had not yet learned the "Gadamerian lesson" (2002, p. 18-19).

we are always evaluating (however much in distinct degrees and forms) what is said about the past and what is done based on its receptions. On the other hand, we miss the blinkers that prevent us from exploring appropriations at first sight unacceptable, since they seem to be either wrong or ridiculous. Because we are not interested in the truthfulness of a reception; instead, we are interested in the reception itself. And we may still ask ourselves about how it reshaped the view of the past to establish a new reality.

While leaving aside our eventual agreements or disagreements, we may now dedicate ourselves to understanding and exploring the meanings of heterodox views on Ancient Egypt, such as the ones of *Egyptomania*, which stand behind the Louvre-pyramid and the movie series *The Mummy*. This is available in the article of Portuguese colleagues José das Candeias Sales and Susana Mota – the former, a professor at the Open University in Lisbon, and the latter, a researcher of the Centre for the Humanities (CHAM) at NOVA University Lisbon and member of research group *Antiquity and its Reception*. The main goal of these two colleagues is to evaluate the set of notions and terms used in the reception of Ancient Egypt. “Tutankhamun in Portugal. Narratives of the Portuguese press (1922-1939)” is a “Contribution to studies on the reception of Ancient Egypt” indeed, since it carries out an admirable conceptual discussion and presents a set of conclusions that may be surprising to many, as they were to me. The article exposes its research *corpus* and presents the Portuguese newspapers of the early 20th century as artificers of the reception of Ancient Egypt. An additional aspect to be highlighted is that this is a study on the appropriation of Eastern Antiquity, a topic that has not yet been object of the general attention of experts on this field.

The individual article of Susana Mota also approaches the Ancient East based on an analogous theoretical and methodological concern. Its title, as well as the other titles of this theme issue, is indicative of the diversity of study objects enabled by the studies on reception. “The reception of Ancient Mesopotamia in the cinema” examines silent films, which have been largely unknown (by me and, assumingly, most readers of this edition). Its subhead indicates its complexity: “A journey through the universe of writing at motion and its artistic and literary predecessors”. Besides considering a current notion of context, Mota reaches out for other written and imagistic narratives that include film appropriations of Ancient Mesopotamia, from the Biblical narratives and other ancient sources to the philosophical receptions of modernity. Along this path, she

evidently reveals what can be found in most other articles of this theme issue: it is important to be an expert in Ancient History to carry out a quality study of the appropriation of Antiquity. This is a relevant attribute for identifying the invocations of that past, which may slip by unnoticed by other experts, and also for selecting the ancient sources and making a good use of the bibliography on the theme. These features increase the chances of satisfactorily exploring the potential of analysis - which will never be exhausted, considering the infinity of possible paths.

Camilla Ferreira Paulino da Silva holds a PhD degree in History of Ancient Rome from the Federal University of Espírito Santo. This training background is essential for her article “Analysis of Octavian’s *ethos* in the *Rome*-series (HBO)”, since she sets out to show that Octavian’s image conveyed by the TV series is tributary to an ancient “literary tradition” - which points to the importance of knowing the Latin texts that constitute a specific representation of his character. The term *ethos* points to a rhetoric analytic path, and da Silva correctly conciliates the Aristotelian notion - linked to oral discourses - with Dominique Maingueneau’s notion of *discursive ethos* as she analyzes the TV series. An attentive reader will observe the contradiction that exists between my own criticism to the idea of “tradition” and its use in this article. He or she will also remember what I wrote about the field of History of Reception: this field is considerably uneven due to the amplitude of its investigations and to the variety of its constitutive conceptions.

Currently a postdoctoral student at UNIFESP with a research on the “reception of ancient statues in the Islamic world and Al-Andalus, and current connections with the destruction of antiquities in Syria and Iraq by DAESH”,¹⁰ Jorge Elices Ocón wrote “Memories from Africa: the superiority of blacks over whites (*Kitāb Fakhr al-Sūdān ‘alā al-Bīḍān*)”. In this theme issue, Ocón analyzes a work by Abū Ūthman ‘Amr ibn Bahr al-Jāḥiẓ (c. 781-868), an Arab intellectual of the first centuries of the Muslim domination of the Mediterranean. Having lived in a time when many Greek and Latin works were translated, al-Jāḥiẓ wrote over two hundred works on a diversity of topics that include philosophy, theology, rhetoric and zoology. The central aim of Jorge Ocón’ study shows its considerable relevance in the present, as he sets out to show black protagonism in the history of that society via a work that heretofore had been seen as a satirical piece only. Readers who are ignorant of Arab history (as I am) will be

¹⁰ According to the information available at: encurtador.com.br/mpJ35. Access on March 19, 2020.

surprised to know that blacks were considered “dumb, ugly, horrible” and without distinctive virtues or feats; and that al-Jāhīz, a black man from modest origin, opposed such views and produced a re-elaboration of a particular Antiquity, close to the expansion of Islam, and including African and Arab kingdoms, as well as the Sassanid Empire in the 6th and 7th centuries.

The article “From Athens to Pataliputra: a historiography of the contacts among Greeks and Indians during the Hellenistic Period” may be also characterized as unique, on account of its object of study: the historiography about the relations among Greeks and Indians, starting from the Macedonian invasion. Without mentioning the idea of reception, Professor Ezequiel Martín Parra, from the National University of Córdoba, comparatively examines the visions of a British author, (Sir) William Woodthorpe Tarn (1869-1957), of Indian historian Awadh Kishore Narain (1925-2003) and of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) – the well-known politician of the early days of independent India. We find, therefore, a comparative analysis of a colonial historian and two post-colonial Indians in their works about the contacts among Greeks and Indians in Antiquity. It will not be a surprise to learn that these studies on a period in the remote past also dealt with the times of British conquest and domination over the Indian subcontinent. But the proposition put forward by Ezequiel Parra will certainly surprise our readers.

The other articles of this issue also contain their unique surprises.

The opening lines of “A Latin poet and a *Paulista* lyre: a forgotten translation of an epigram by Martial”, written by Fábio Paifer Cairolí (Professor of Latin Language and Literature at the Fluminense Federal University) points to how the reception of Antiquity hinges on the intention of the researcher while identifying the nature of its appropriation. It is likely that many scholars investigated the São Paulo newspaper *O Pirralho* without noticing the – to our current eyes – unexpected translation of Issue 11, published on October 21, 1911. There is no reason for reproach, for if there were other investigating readers at all, their aims were certainly distinct and, for this reason, their issues must have prompted another sort of appropriation of the text.

History scholars know one of the maxims of the *Annales* School, which states that the past depends on the issues of those with an interest in it (FEBVRE, 1971, p. 70). The reception-intention is even somewhat more daring: a reciprocal constitution of the present and past. Martindale (2007,

p. 298) maintains this idea based on a small text by T.S. Elliot (*Tradition and the individual talent*, of 1919); the same notion is expressed by the concept of *Allelopoieise* proposed by the members of project *Imperial Interpretations: The Imperium Romanum as a Category of Political Reflection*. *Allelopoieise* is a junction of the Greek terms *allelon* (reciprocal) and *poiesis* (creation) (HAUSTEINER; HUHNSHOLZ; WALTER, 2010, p.15).¹¹ The idea seems to be present along the section in which Marc Bloch criticizes the “privilege of self-intelligibility” of the present in his work *The apology of history*. Considering the context in which the text was written,¹² I highlight the following excerpt:

[...] For here,¹³ in the present, is immediately perceptible that vibrance of human life which only a great effort of the imagination can restore to the old texts. I have many times read, and I have often narrated, accounts of wars and battles. Did I truly know, in the full sense of that word, did I know from within, before I myself had suffered the terrible, sickening reality, what it meant for an army to be encircled, what it meant for a people to meet defeat? In the last analysis, whether conscious or not, it is always by borrowing from our daily experiences and by shading them, where necessary, with new tints that we derive the elements which help us to restore the past. The very names we use to describe ancient ideas or vanished forms of social organisations would be quite meaningless if we had not known living men. The value of these merely instinctive impressions will be increased a hundredfold if they are replaced by ready and critical observation. A great mathematician would nor, I suppose, be less great because blind to the world in which he lives. But the scholar who had no inclination to observe the men, the things, or the events around him will perhaps deserve the title, as Pirenne put it, of a useful antiquarian. He would be wise to renounce all claims to that of a historian (2001, p.66).

Therefore, the project is not new, but it seems not to have been effectively carried out, considering the permanence of the vocabulary linked to the objectivistic conception of historical knowledge and the coeval rejection of subjectivity and relativism.¹⁴

¹¹ I am thankful to my colleague Fábio Faversoni for bringing this notion to my attention a few years ago.

¹² For readers unacquainted with historiography, the work was written between the defeat of France and 1941. Marc Bloch was shot by the Germans in 1944.

¹³ These are accretions to a previous version, which is included in the Brazilian edition.

¹⁴ As a result of its theoretical assumptions, the Aesthetics of Reception – even when imagined for *Literary Theory* – is evidently important for *Historical Theory*. Luiz Costa Lima affirms, in this regard: “not on account of a circumstantial failure, but of a consequence of its own objectivistic method, History has been unable to escape the cobwebs that tie it to its temporal ambience. The failure of objectivism is the historian’s failure inasmuch as it belongs to all human creatures: the impossibility to become

I suggest that readers consider the articles of this theme issue in terms of a joint constitution of the present and past, including the article of Luís Carlos Passos Martins – “*Historia Magistra Vitae: Rome as a topic of Universal History in the interpretation of contemporary Brazil*”, which resulted from a project on the Brazilian re-appropriation of topics of Roman politics in the didactic and pedagogical discourse, and in contemporary politics. Martins is a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUC-RS), and his article reveals the existence of a moralist and conservative version of the Brazilian present and of Roman past in Internet postings of the turbulent times in which we are living. The main element of his set of documents is the “unauthorized expressions”, that is, non-scholarly postings – which increase the relevance of his work. In such postings, decadence continues to be the key notion of the reciprocal constitution of the present and past: Martins briefly recapitulates the appropriation of the theme in the “intellectual history of the West”. The text defines its concepts and presents the documents and methodological procedures involved in its analysis, which will be quite useful for those interested in similar investigations. The difficulties of such an enterprise are not small, starting from the definition of Google’s research settings.

Fábio Vergara Cerqueira and Isabel Halfen da Costa Torino, on their turn, point to the placement of a statue of Mercury on top of the tower of the Central Market of the city of Pelotas in the second decade of the 20th century as a “phenomenon of the Reception of Antiquity”. In “The statues of ‘Flying Mercury’ in Pelotas and Brazil”, the colleague from the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEL) and the doctoral student of the Graduate Program on Social Memory and Cultural Heritage at the same institution approach the troubled history of the statue, in addition to other representations of Mercury in Pelotas and other Brazilian cities. The article reflects on such appropriation and affirms that it evinces a purported identity between the once prosperous city in the Brazilian south and a particular conception of Antiquity. It is even more relevant inasmuch as it inserts what could seem to be a secondary event into the history of the civilizational pretense that exuded in Brazil in the early 20th century. It was not a case of “imitation”, but of an act linked to the urban identity of particular sectors of the Brazilian society. The entire text is illustrated by images and reproductions of other Mercury statues installed in the same

conscious and then to extricate oneself from the *effects* [emphasis in original] of the way in which the historical circumstances, including their values, uses, customs and traditions, are constituted” (2002, p. 23).

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period by other urban elites of the country.

The article by Fernando Mattioli Vieira, professor at the Federal University of Pernambuco, is the final contribution of this issue of *Heródoto*. It contains a relevant evaluation of the conflict between Archaeology and History in regard to the relations between the manuscripts and settlement(s) from Qumran. "History and Archaeology, and the debates on the Qumran Manuscripts" is not a piece in the field of Reception, but it is an admirable addition to this issue, due to its quality and relevance as a text that shows the inaccuracies of historical analyses, which are often comprehensible on account of the impossibility of breaking free from our significant participation in the times in which we live. This work-genre is also important so we may – in the words of Norma Cortês – "attentively observe ourselves". Such *theorization* can only be effective if we abandon the illusion of being blessed with an epistemic privilege that could exempt us from what makes us human, and also historians.

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