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Teaching “historical thinking” *Pierre Vilar’s legacy*

I would like to begin by recalling July 1988. I believe it was the last time that the historian Pierre Vilar visited Catalonia and it was quite possibly the last time he addressed a university audience. The place was the University of Girona. Pierre Vilar was then 82 years old and taught ten hours of the Girona General Studies summer course.

The organisers would have been happy enough if Vilar had merely repeated his best-known ideas but he provided a great deal more. The course gave young historians a wonderful opportunity to hear Vilar’s reflections (Girona’s gain here was Paris’ loss).

It was then that we first heard the expression “historical thinking”, which was a relatively new addition to Vilar’s ideas. I say “relatively” because it linked to one of the historian’s old arguments, namely, the need to use historical reasoning. It represented a shift from an appeal for historical justice to one of genuine historical thought in which it was important for the general public to grasp a broader concept of history. The expression “historical reasoning” stemmed from the practices and methodology adopted by a small group of people, namely historians. “Historical thinking”, by contrast, was something that all citizens ought to indulge in. It reflected a desire to reflect on the past in order to draw lessons for the present. Vilar said that “this approach should have an immediate impact on historians and their desire to clarify contemporary problems”.

Pierre Vilar’s interest in clarifying contemporary problems was not new. In a book compilation of some of classes at the Sorbonne in the 1970s, we read “What we expect of historical reasoning is to understand the past in order to understand the present”. This understanding, added Vilar, requires one to reflect on the way the media distort information. Pierre Vilar’s intellectual odyssey began in the 1920s and was inspired by this same desire to understand the present. It was during this decade that he discovered Catalonia —an event that I will refer to later.

However Vilar’s concern with the present did not extend to signing manifestos and newspaper articles like other intellectuals and indeed, he felt uncomfortable with the label “intellectual” itself. His notion of “historical thinking” went far beyond the intellectual’s role as intermediary between the world of ideas and the world in general. His concept involved historians assuming a more relevant role in society and shouldering a task that is well within their grasp, namely teaching history whether at universities or in schools.

What, though, does “historical thinking” really mean? For Pierre Vilar, it meant bearing in mind the diverse meanings that underlie certain words (for example the names of countries or abstractions) and placing them in historical and geographical context. The questions “Where?” and “When?” have to be answered if we are to date and contextualise events. This is a vital first step before examining the past and investigating how such events occurred.

Failure to think historically makes it all too easy to fall into the trap of seeing things *as if they were the same as in the distant past*. Use of formulations such as “Spain is one thing, France quite another” are symptomatic of this misperception. Those who look at events only in the light of what happened later also fail to think historically. As Vilar put it:

Thinking about an event only from the standpoint of what subsequently happened is fraught with perils. It is all too easy to come up with statements like “Germany was predisposed to Protestantism, and Spain to Catholicism”.

In this respect, Pierre Vilar did not claim to have stumbled upon the philosopher’s stone, for he added:

I do not believe that anyone would deny that the 16th Century was different from the 20th Century, or that Italy is different from England. The problem, warned Vilar, is that such things are not properly taken into account.

When Vilar insisted on the need for “historical thinking”, he was not speaking of the works of historians but rather of what was said of the historian’s craft and, in particular, of the kind of statements that crop up in newspapers, books, and on the radio and television. The habit of “historical thinking” could only be acquired through suitable education. This reflection led Pierre Vilar to state that “Historical thinking simply involves giving everyone the general schooling in history they deserve”. He added “but such essential training of the human spirit may prove too dangerous for the powers that be and entrenched ideologies”.

“Historical thinking” thus encapsulates not only the thought and concerns of historians but also of a thinking men like Pierre Vilar. That is why we have taken his expression as the title for this inaugural lesson. Furthermore, the subject of history teaching has been very much in the news for some time now. The members of the present Spanish government believe, like Vilar, that teaching history is important. If they did not think so, they would not spend so much time talking about reforming it. However, the proposals currently being made by the central government in Madrid have nothing in common with the ideas defended by Vilar. Indeed, the kind of history teacher envisaged by Minister Pilar del Castillo is the antithesis of the one exemplified by Pierre Vilar.





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Both concepts of history and historians have co-existed for years. In fact, these two concepts are not only applicable to history's role but also to that of the humanities in society. In 1988, the Italian historian Marina Cendronio asked Pierre Vilar about this point in an interview. Her question was: "Do you think that historians have played an important role in the development of the modern world? Do you think that we can perform this role in contemporary society?"

In his reply, Vilar began by mentioning some 19th Century French historians. One of them —Michelet— had, according to Vilar: “condensed the memory of France by stating that the country was a person, and had thus taken part in constructing what is considered to be the French nation by stressing its unity and indivisibility”. The influence of such historians was undeniable but Vilar did not consider them to be *scientific historians*. With regard to the scientific approach to history (i.e. historical reasoning), Vilar stated that:

I believe that history could have a positive effect if the notion and vision of the discipline were properly conceived and commonly adopted. I do not believe in Valéry’s formulation of history as the worst of all possible worlds. But I have to say Valéry was right if we think of Germany at the end of Hitler’s Third Reich or France at the end of the Third Republic, and the perils those regimes represented. In other words, history has its dangers and has sometimes exercised a negative influence. The contrary idea is that historical reasoning might exercise a positive influence. For my part, I fear that history has never exercised any influence whatsoever.

Here, it is worth briefly noting what Valéry’s formulation was. Vilar was referring to the bitter words written by Valéry (a poet) on History at the beginning of the 1930s. Hence the allusion to Germany and France during the inter-war period. Paul Valéry wrote:

History is the worst poison ever dreamt up by the mind of Man. Consider its properties. It induces sleep, makes entire peoples drunk with its fumes, creates false memories, exaggerates one’s reactions, opens up old wounds, disturbs one’s peace of mind, drives the great mad with dreams of grandeur or fears of persecution, and generally embitters nations, making them vain, haughty and insufferable.

History, continued Valéry, justifies anything. It does not teach anything because it covers and provides examples of everything under the sun. How many books are published with titles on the lines of: “The Lessons of X” or “What Can Be Learnt from Y”. Nothing could be more absurd than reading about past events in these books, which make solemn predictions about the future. In the current state of the world, listening to History’s siren song is the greatest peril imaginable.

Valéry’s text, published in 1931, made a big impact on French intellectual circles, particularly on a generation of historians still aghast at the First World War and its aftermath. It is therefore hardly surprising that the young Pierre Vilar, then a secondary school teacher, spoke on this theme at his Prize Day speech at the Lycée de Sens, near Paris. The date was the 13th of July 1937. The Spanish Civil War was raging and promised to be a lengthy affair. Vilar felt that a World War was imminent. Speaking before a hall full of students and their parents, he alluded to Valéry’s accusations. He asked whether Valéry had looked at the right sources for defining history. In any case, argued Vilar, Valéry was obviously not referring to the history written by Pirenne, another innovator in the historiographical field at the time. Most contemporaries had not read Pirenne and, moreover, “true historians were seldom admitted to the Académie Française”. However, Vilar said that he was optimistic on this score, given that “such historians are the ones who inspire our textbooks and our courses”. In other words, the future would bear the fruit of these new ideas.

It was also an allusion to the importance of textbooks. Some parents’ associations had demanded that “all history exams be reduced to reciting a list of dates learnt by rote”. At the end of his speech, Pierre Vilar proposed another kind of history that taught people

to think. He argued that *taught history* was the only way of combatting the kind of history hawked by the media:

... the Press, cinemas and political speeches are vulgar show. Our newspapers fight tooth and nail for historical novels and Hollywood spends millions to recreate the atmosphere of the Roman Empire.

In many cases, historians confined themselves to providing dates and details for news stories. But on other occasions, warned Vilar,

Historians may be called upon to prove the purity and wisdom of a Master Race or be used to argue for the restoration of an empire. Let us be in no doubt here, history has not fed this exorbitant pride. Rather, such arrogance has distorted history.

The young Pierre Vilar's recipe for counteracting such a baleful influence was clear:

This peril can only be averted by fostering true history, modestly and patiently researched and written in universities and carefully taught in schools, which so far have either failed to live up to this role or have been deliberately hindered from doing so.

Vilar's speech ended with a piece of advice for those students who saw History as just something to be learnt by rote: "The aim of History is to make you think about some of the gravest problems afflicting the world".

This leap back half a century to 1937 reveals several things. First, the present problems regarding the teaching of history are nothing new. Second, Pierre Vilar was concerned with this problem even as a young man and his interests in history and education were closely interwoven. From this point of view, the concept of "historical thinking" is the best antidote to what Valéry termed the "worst poison dreamt up by the mind of Man".

Let us now return to the late 1980s, when Pierre Vilar decided to use the concept of "historical thinking" to summarize some of his interests and concerns. It was in 1987 that journalists (i.e. non-historians) had lighted on the story of the trial of Klaus Barbie, an SS officer guilty of war crimes in occupied Lyons. *Le Monde* newspaper published a dossier titled "A Historic Trial". Barbie was then 75 and his crimes had been committed in 1942, when he was 30. He was to be tried by jury under French Civil Law. Barbie was a notorious Nazi torturer. Pierre Vilar did not protest against the trial but rather against the lurid headlines. After all, why was the trial so historic? Vilar was forthright—it was not trials that clarified history but rather history which would help clarify this particular trial. Stating that Barbie was a Nazi shed no new light on the nature of Nazism. History consisted in discovering why men like Barbie had wielded power or were grist to Hitler's war machine.

Vilar argued that comparing the Barbie trial to history simply made people think that "History is about establishing facts and judging individuals". In his view, it made the "man in the street take a sentimental, moralistic view of History". Pierre Vilar believed that historical knowledge was different in nature and consisted of "trying to understand social phenomena and how they affect the way events unfold".

In making these reflections, Vilar linked his proposals for historical reasoning, which he had developed in the 1970s during his courses at the Sorbonne. He urged his students

to spurn everyday phrases on the lines of “History teaches us that...” or “History will judge...”. Vilar argued that the first kind of formulation either invokes tradition or is based on the false premise that History is self-evident. Such bald statements, according to Vilar, confuse collective moral judgement with the prevailing historiographical discourse.

All of these reflections made Pierre Vilar a man of his times who pondered on the contemporary world. This was a hallmark of his intellectual development from the outset. His keen interest in geography was also evident. Indeed, in the 1920s, he said that geographical research was the best way of approaching the great contemporary problems regarding *economy, colonisation, and distant civilizations*. In 1927, Vilar began studying geography at the Barcelona Industrial school. In the process, Pierre Vilar became an observant historian of Catalonia. He recounted the story many times, notably when he received the Catalan Government’s Ramon Llull Prize:

It is said here, with fond exaggeration, that Catalonia owes me something. I would never be so presumptuous. For my part, I am fully aware of what I owe to Catalonia.

First, I owe my vocation as a historian. It is not that I have any disdain for my first career as a geographer —far from it. But Geography is either eternal or contemporary. I quickly realised that the 20th century could be explained by the events of the 19th century, and by the 18th century, and so on, right back to the Romans and pre-history. That is why I became a historian.

Second, I am indebted to Catalonia because it was she that first made me aware of a historical problem that has persisted over the centuries, namely the dialectic between territorial groups and social classes.

Vilar explained that when he arrived in Catalonia for the first time in 1927, like all young Frenchmen of his intellectual generation —Satre, Nizan, Lévi-Strauss— he was profoundly anti-militarist, anti-nationalist, and even a little unpatriotic. It was, he said, “a reaction against the patriotic hysteria of the 1914-18 war and the evident failure of the Treaty of Versailles. However, Catalan patriotism and nationalism during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship represented the defence of freedom and progressive thought and could thus be seen in a very different light”.

Many of Vilar’s fellow-countrymen from the same generation also left France. The most famous ones, Aron and Sartre, travelled to Germany, which was then in turmoil. That journey influenced their intellectual development in a way that was quite different from the impact Catalonia had on Vilar. The French historian confessed that his relationship with Catalonia was “a love affair”. The comment underlined how deeply Vilar was influenced by the country and the ties of friendship that Vilar and his wife established in Catalonia.

Even so, Vilar lived only a short time in Catalonia. His various stays in the country only added up to six years. Part of the reason for this was his expulsion from Spain in 1948. This evidently hampered his research on Catalonia and the reason Vilar persisted after 1948 was that Catalonia’s complex history raised new historiographical issues that he was eager to pursue in greater depth. In this respect, Catalonia’s history proved an attractive and absorbing subject for research.

That is why Vilar wrote so extensively on Catalonia, presenting many papers on it at international congresses. His contact with Catalonia had raised his historical awareness,

which led him to begin the first volume of his four-volume thesis with the following words:

(Because the historian forms part of history) it is important that he begins by revealing both his approach to research and the circumstances surrounding it.

It was thus that he began his work *Cataluny dins l'Espanya moderna* (Catalonia Within Modern Spain), which contains lengthy reflections on his own intellectual development. That reflection provides the key to the methodology employed in the book: "I know that this work would have been different had I not been interested in revealing the anatomy of societies and spurning facile theoretical approaches and the ideas in vogue".

His desire to reveal a society's anatomy is consistent with the notion of an all-embracing History. This was the concept advocated by many historians the 1930s. The so-called "Annals School" of thought admitted various approaches. For Vilar, above all it meant reflecting on the historical development of a society, the elements making it up, its social inequalities and contradictions, and avoiding unilateral explanations. His observation of Catalonia's complex society (in which class divisions combined with national rifts) only served to strengthen Vilar's historical orientation. It took him a long time to write his history, involving many hours of archive research and lonely meditation. That is why his work was incompatible with "facile theoretical approaches and the ideas in vogue". In Vilar's words, such ideas often conceal "the desire for a single, facile explanation" and "historians' frequently resort to unhistorical ways of thinking".

Pierre Vilar was strongly aware of the intellectual fashions of the 20th century, and saw them as a sign of the times. "All historiographical approaches make sense", he wrote. It is therefore not surprising that he successively argued the case against Malthusianism, Monetarism, the naive quantitative approaches taken by many Economic Historians, Althusser's pseudo-Marxism, and Political History à la Raymond Aron. As he himself admitted, this won him many foes.

Pierre Vilar's dogged perseverance in seeking dialogue was frustrated by the indifference or hostility of others. It was surprising for a Catalan historian to see Vilar's isolation at many academic congresses in France.

His voice could be likened to that of a prophet in the wilderness. The deafening silence that greeted his words was largely due to the increasing specialization of historical knowledge in academe, which thus tended to reject Vilar's aspiration for an all-embracing history. Vilar not only pursued this "dream" (a term he himself used on one occasion) to the end, he was also swift to acknowledge his debt to Marx. In Vilar's words, "Marx was the first scholar to propose a general theory of societies in motion". That is why he considered a Marxist approach as one that facilitated historical analysis and without which it was difficult to appreciate the weaknesses and anti-scientific foundations of many of the Social Science postulates considered "neutral" in academic circles.

“For Vilar, Catalonia’s history proved an attractive and absorbing subject for research”

Such an approach was anathema in French intellectual circles in the 80s and 90s. In 1989 (coinciding with the bicentenary of the French Revolution), Pierre Vilar sought to explain

why Ernest Labrousse’s contribution to the history of the French Revolution was being so studiously ignored. Vilar wrote: “This wall of silence is intended to misinform the public”. Faced by the rift with many of his disciples, Vilar wondered whether historians of his generation had really done such a bad job. He also asked himself whether the new academic establishment really believed that the work of the historians of his generation had been merely a fad.

This silence in French academe contrasts sharply with the recognition accorded Vilar in Catalonia and Spain. It is not as if the crises of Marxism and of the paradigm of an all-embracing vision of history had not affected intellectual and historiographical circles here. Yet it is precisely Vilar’s works and those of his disciples which make it difficult to write off the whole Marxist legacy. *Catalunya dins l’Espanya Moderna* is, forty years after its first publication, still the most cited book in History PhD theses at Catalan universities.

In order to understand Pierre Vilar’s works, we should not separate his books on theory and his teachings from his historical research. To do so would be to fail to capitalize on the body of his work. Vilar’s need to describe with passion and in detail how he came to write *Catalunya dins l’Espanya Moderna* reveals a historian whose methodology inextricably links empirical research and theoretical reflection. Quite simply, we cannot prize his empirical work without also setting great store by the theoretical effort underlying every line and statistic. The opposite is also true. For Pierre Vilar, “History constantly involves linking the case to the theory, and theory to the case”.

There is a path to follow: reasoned history. The distinction (so often made by Vilar) between a *conviction historian* and a *thinking historian* is a fascinating one. It is not a question of thinking in class or national terms but rather of thinking about such subjects. The reasoned history proposed by Vilar is a fruitful exchange between *observation* and *reasoning*.

This history has to be reconstructed through thought and conveyed through words. On countless occasions, Vilar noted the pitfalls posed by terminology. Few authors made such liberal use of inverted commas and italics. It was his way of avoiding the traps set by fixed ideas and the dominant ideology, or of having the wrong meanings read into one’s words, or of falling prey to fashion, routine, and intellectual laziness.

Once again, it was a trait he exhibited throughout his career. In 1937, during his speech at the Lycée de Sens, he warned:

Today we are at the mercy of words. Races, States, nations, countries, tyrannies, monarchies, democracies —in fact, a whole host of words ending in *-ions*, *-ies*, *-isms*, *-cracies*, and so on. We grow up using the words honestly enough, and later smiling at the mistakes made by others or frowning at their deliberate misuse by the powers that be for their own nefarious ends. However, it is only through History that these words acquire real meaning, which probably changes over time. Such changes introduce nuances and define things and words that go to the root of historical research.

Vilar never abandoned this kind of research. In 1991, he lost his sight. This prevented him from completing a book that was going to be published in five languages. The provocative working title he gave the work was: *País, poble, pàtria, nació, estat, imperi, potència... quin vocabulari per a una Europa?* (Country, People, Nation, State, Empire,

Power... What kind of terminology should we choose for Europe?). Vilar had mused on these words for decades. The title reveals both the scholar's research interest in Catalonia and his concern for Europe's present.

Insisting on the importance of terminology, Vilar argued the need for History without visions, without dogmas, and free of pitfalls. In other words, he advocated unremitting effort. But then such is the labour of the scientific historian. It cannot be otherwise given that *the historian forms part of History*. He strove through the same unremitting labour to understand daily life. His conversations, readings and reflections constantly nurtured his thinking as a historian. It was part of his vision, of which he said "We have not invented the concept of an all-embracing History, we experience it through our lives".

To understand Vilar, we need to understand his observational methods and his way of reasoning. His best disciples are not those who most cite his words or those who see his texts as easy-to-use recipes. What Vilar taught us above all is just how difficult it is to be a good historian, and the need to question documents constantly and discuss matters thoroughly.

We still have a great deal to learn from Vilar. Who today can possibly harbour any doubts regarding the important role he played in Catalan society? Recall Vilar's words in 1988, cited earlier: "I believe that history could have a positive effect if the notion and vision of the discipline were properly conceived and commonly adopted". After faulting Valéry's formulation, he added: "The contrary idea is that historical reasoning might exercise a positive influence. For my part, I fear that history has never exercised any influence whatsoever".

Despite his scepticism, Vilar himself offers a case worthy of analysis. His influence in Spain, and above all in Catalonia, was enormous. I have already said that he is the most cited author by historians here. In this context, one should recall that Vilar's work linked the historical tradition of Rafael Altamira with the printing press of Jaume Vicens Vives in the early days of the Franco dictatorship. But his work went far beyond the academic sphere. His book *Història d'Espanya* (The History of Spain) was the history book that became a best-seller. It is easy to recognize Vilar's influence in the majority of primary and secondary school textbooks. Traces can also be found in many works on local history, some of which fall into the hands of the general public in the most unlikely ways (for example, at village fêtes).

“Country, People, Nation, State, Empire, Power... What kind of terminology for Europe?”



The ease with which politicians cite his works is also remarkable. For many years, the former Mayor of Girona, the historian Joaquim Nadal, presented all four volumes of *Catalunya dins l’Espanya moderna* in Catalan to Felipe de Borbón during a visit made by the Prince to the city. The message on the flyleaf was “Read this if you want to get a better understanding of Catalonia”. Jordi Pujol, President of the Catalan Government, held Vilar in great esteem. This culminated in Vilar being awarded the Catalan Government Gold Medal in May 2000.

I particularly remember a homage to Vilar, held in Paris in 1992. Two of his most renowned disciples —Josep Fontana and Ernest Lluch— attended the event. The historian Josep Fontana remarked on the impact Pierre Vilar’s works had had in Catalonia, noting that their contribution to fostering the country’s national awareness. The publication of Vilar’s works, argued Fontana, soon meant that the slogan “Catalonia is a Nation” could be uttered without carrying racial connotations. Ernest Lluch noted that Catalans and Spaniards had learnt a great deal about Spain from reading Vilar’s *Historia d’Espanya*, which was banned by the regime. Lluch’s and Fontana’s speeches carried the same message: Vilar’s work showed that the scholarly rigour of a historian could exercise a positive, long-lasting influence on society as a whole.

It is also a tribute to Vilar’s influence that the University of Girona dedicated the inaugural lesson for the 2003-2004 academic year to him. In today’s intellectual context of what some have called “monolithic thought”, and of the so-called “crisis in the humanities” in the university world, historical thought runs the risk of being pushed to the sidelines. Such developments make Valéry’s indictment more relevant than ever. Hence the importance and validity of Pierre Vilar’s legacy and the struggle in which he was engaged ||