

# **Annales School of History: Its Origins, Development and contributions**

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## **Abstract:**

This article discusses the Annales school of history. It deals with the background, central figures in the movement, and their influences on the historical writing. It is argued that the Annales school fought against the established form of French historical writing dominated by political history. It made efforts to develop a new, more human historical writing. In their movement, the Annales scholars called for close collaboration between historical discipline and the other social sciences. This collaboration has brought the Annales to achieve great success in expanding the realm of history by introducing new topics, new sources, and new questions.

**Key Word: Annales School of History, new historiography, influences, non-political history**

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## **I. Introduction**

History as a study of the past has undergone a long development since classical times when Herodotus, the father of history, made serious efforts to free historical writing from the domination of mythical elements (Gay and Cavanaugh, 1972a:2-3). This effort was continued by Thucydides who developed a critical method for achieving more accurate historical writing. Thucydides, often referred to as the father of political history, is famous for his efforts to examine critical historical sources gathered from eyewitnesses. This effort is carried out by applying the cross-check technique which is very important to build reliable evidence (Gay and Cavanaugh, 1972a: 56). The two pioneering historians laid the foundation for the scientific study of history.

In the modern period, a number of people have also made significant contributions to the study of history. With regard to the historical method, it is important to mention figures such as Lorenzo Valla and Jean Mabillon who emphasized a critical attitude in treating historical sources. The importance of textual criticism, which is a key element in critical history, was greatly contributed by Valla who succeeded in revealing historical myths in church documents (Gay and Cavanaugh, 1972b:1-2). Meanwhile, Mabillon restores the historical method by introducing diplomatic, a science to determine the authenticity of documents. According to Mabillon, historical writing must be based on original sources that have passed a series of critical tests (Gay and Cavanaugh, 1972b:161-162; Kartodirdjo, 1992: 16, 128).

With the historical revolution, an assumption can easily arise that there is no need for historical renewal. This assumption is not quite right as is shown, for example, with the development of the Annales school of history which was originally developed as a critical response to established historiography. Calling the Annales a 'school' is actually also problematic because it presupposes a uniformity of voice within this group. In fact among members of the Annales school there are heterogeneous emphases and interests and also several generations have been involved with this group. In other words, the Annales school is not a homogeneous group, but internally more diverse

This article attempts to describe the conditions that underlie the emergence of the Annales school. To understand the Annales as a reform in the field of historical studies, it is important to examine the pre-existing state of historical writing and thought that the Annales opposed to. Only in this way can a better understanding of the Annales school be gained as the antithesis to established historiographical views and forms. Furthermore, it is also important to discuss the theoretical problems raised by the Annales school. A general assessment of the extent to which the Annales school is successful in dealing with the theoretical issues is also given.

## **II. Material And Methods**

This article was composed by using the historical method which generally includes four main stages, namely heuristics, source criticism, interpretation and historiography (Storey, 2011; Sasmita and Nawiyanto, 2012). The sources of writing collected in the heuristic stage include secondary sources in the form of existing publications and were mainly carried out at the Menzies Library, The Australian National University and the

University of Jember library. The information presented in the collected sources is studied and addressed critically to obtain facts that are considered credible. The various facts obtained are then interpreted and compiled into an argument to explain and answer the main problems that have been formulated.

### III. Result

#### Origins: Reaction to Political History

The historical reforms led by Ranke have contributed not only to the formation of history as a modern profession, but also to placing political history at the center of the writing of history (Powell 1990:xv). While Ranke's interest is not limited to political history, his campaign to reconstruct history for what really happened (*wie est eigentlich gewesen ist*) is more in keeping with this kind of history. In the hands of its supporters who are grouped as Rankean schools, historical writing is synonymous with state-oriented historiography (Mommsen, 1990: 124,139). The emphasis on archival material as a historical source, not only accounts for the ignorance of social and cultural history, but also places it in a peripheral position. Consequently, in a movement to make history more professional, non-political histories tend to be excluded from academic circles. Attention is mainly paid to political history related to major events, diplomatic relations and the state (Burke, 1990:7)

This trend also occurred in France where the dominance of conventional political history was felt by Febvre and Bloch. Both Febvre and Bloch saw that historical studies in France, which were dominated by the Sorbonnistes, stagnated which was indicated by a lack of innovation compared to historical studies in England and the United States (Hexter, 1979:64-65). Although the number of historians and history books published quantitatively is still increasing, the main attention is paid narrowly to the political dimension. Faced with this situation, they tried to restore historical writing in France and realize this obsession and in 1929 they founded a journal called *Annales d'histoire economique et sociale* (Ricoeur, 1980:8).

Therefore, the development of the Annales school must first be seen as a rebellion against the domination of political history that focuses mainly on major events (Burke, 1990: 2). This kind of conventional historical writing is seen as unsatisfactory because of its failure to provide an adequate understanding of the complexities of historical reality. The reality of the past not only contains war, diplomatic relations, great people, political policies, and the state, but also embraces economic aspects such as land ownership, agriculture, trade; social aspects such as noble social categories, peasants, and workers, class relations between them; and cultural aspects such as awareness, religiosity, mentality. In short, historical reality is much more complicated than just political issues.

The Annales movement was committed to diverting historians' attention and interests and taking them away from narrow political history towards 'a broader and more human history' (Bloch 1976:v). In other words, the Annales school wants to change the focus of history in order to better represent the complexities of human reality in the past. Although such criticism is fundamentally unoriginal to the Annales school --- as was found in the earlier ideas of Sainte-Beuve and Michelet, to whom Febvre and Bloch are indebted --- the criticisms put forward by the Annales are powerful and form a collective movement, lasts for a relatively long time and spans at least three generations.

Their criticism is particularly directed at Langlois and Seignobos who are often identified as symbols of an established form of French historiography (Burke, 1990:10). Both Febvre and Bloch reacted to established historical views as reflected in Langlois and Seignobos' *introduction aux etudes historiques*, published in English as an Introduction to the Study of History. Febvre published his reactions in *Combats pour l'histoire*, while Bloch's critiques were published in *Apologie pour l'histoire ou metier*. In general, their criticism is directed at what they call 'historical history' or 'positivist history' (Ricoeur, 1980:80; Gay and Cavanaugh, 1975:107).

According to Ricoeur, the term 'positivist' used in this context does not refer to Comte's positivist philosophy, but to a series of connotations. This is mainly related to historical objectivity, neutral observation, criticism of documents, ready-made historical facts, narrative-chronological forms of history, history of great people, and methodological individualism (Ricoeur, 1980:80). The Annales battled what Simian called the 'idols of the historian's tribe'. According to Simian, the three main idols that chronically infect historians are the political idols that overestimate the importance of political events, the individual idols that emphasize only great people, and the chronological idols that lead to the trappings of narrativism (Burke, 1990:2). These weaknesses constitute an intermediate target that the Ecole des Annales sets itself as a dismantling task. The next goal is basically to develop a new kind of history.

The Annales group criticized the established view for overemphasizing the importance of documents and thereby ignoring the important role of historians. Langlois and Seignobos argue that history is only the use of documents (Langlois and Seignobos, 1966:316). In contrast to this view, Bloch emphasizes the central role of the historian in historical practice, not just subject matter and documents (Bloch, 1976:144). Bloch argues that history is not just a matter of collecting, criticizing and using documents, and that the facts gathered will speak

for themselves. According to Bloch, historical facts are not automatically available in documents and history has not been written in documents. Historians must take the initiative to ask serious questions to the document,

That is the reason why Bloch disagrees with the view that defines history as a science of the past (Bloch, 1976:22-27). History, according to Bloch, is the science of man in time. Historians have an important position as reflected in his statement that there is no history, but historians. In the same spirit, Febvre defines history as the science of the past and the present (Riceour, 1980:8-9). Observations of the past, according to Febvre, are always influenced by continuous interference between the past and the present. Current events and patterns of action can be used to explain past experiences and vice versa. This also aligns with Bloch's view that history is knowledge of the tracks left by all past activity, and knowledge of the past is always refined and altered by trace interpretation (Bloch, 1976:52-57; Du Boulay, 1967:x). Neutral observation, according to Bloch, although possible, was never productive for the development of science (Bloch, 1976:65).

The Annales also react to the spirit of specialization in history. This passion has divided history into topics and periods that are often separated from one another. In contrast to the established view that encourages significant specialization in history (Langlois and Seignobos, 1966:317-318), the Annales School criticizes this view as unrealistic because it creates obstacles to achieving a better understanding of human society. Human society can only be fully understood through holistic treatment given the interrelationships of one period with another and one aspect with another. Therefore, Bloch argues that history should be viewed as a whole (Strayer, 1976:ix). The Annales group predicts that past scientific studies have attempted to comprehensively reveal the multi-dimensionality of human society.

In other words, the Annales school advises historians to write a total history that studies society as a whole and removes existing boundaries between academic disciplines to create a 'one human science' (Hobsbawm, 1972:3-5; Green, 1993:170). A narrow attention to what Febvre underestimates as an event-oriented history, *histoire evenementielle* (Gilderhus, 1996:123-124) will only jeopardize the position of history among the sciences that study human society. Realizing this danger, Annales explored and developed a new kind of history supported by social science. The results are total history, problem-oriented history, comparative history, psychology history, geo-history, long-term history, serial history, historical anthropology (Burke, 1990: 110;

Therefore, the historical form of narrative must be abandoned. This form is mainly based on chronological lines (Langlois and Seignobos, 1966:310), considered by the Annales group to be inadequate because of its failure to represent historical reality as a whole. This model only provides a superficial understanding of the descriptive aspect, not the causal dimension. A better understanding of past societies requires a form of analytical history writing. The Annales group argues that this cannot be achieved by an individual approach, but only by an interdisciplinary approach. In this context, historians need to borrow theoretical frameworks from other disciplines in analyzing their subjects. Therefore, it is logical that the Annales have always encouraged close collaboration between history and other social sciences such as geography, sociology, economics, anthropology (Burke, 1990: 2, 110-111). This collaboration is seen as a vital instrument to equip historians with appropriate analytical tools.

The Annales school marked a new era in the development of French historiography. Under the influence of the Annales, French historiography has shown a striking contrast to the earlier period. The influence of the Annales school is not only spread in France, but also in various foreign countries. This fact became the reason for Burke to call the Annales movement the French historiographical revolution. A similar statement has also been given by an Indonesian historian who points out that the application of an interdisciplinary approach in history has marked the start of the second revolution in historical methodology after the first revolution began with the diplomatic application introduced by Mabillon (Kartodirdjo, 1992: 128).

### **Development and Contributions**

The development of the Annales School can generally be divided into three phases, as suggested by Burke. The first stage between 1920 and 1945 was marked by a struggle led by Bloch and Febvre against the orthodoxy of historical writing dominated by political history, diplomatic history and the history of great men. The second stage covering the period 1945-1968 was mainly colored by Braudel who promoted the distinctive concept of structure and conjuncture in the long-term history of change (Burke, 1990: 2). The third period beginning in 1969 is shown by the dominant influence of the Annales. However, in this phase, the fragment that is of interest to the Annales group takes place. Apart from those who still continue the same attention as the previous phase, some members have turned their attention from socio-economic history to socio-cultural history. In fact, some members have found a new enthusiasm for studying political history (Burke, 1990:2-3).

Three prominent figures associated with the Annales School of history are Lucien Febvre, March Bloch and Fernand Braudel. These figures have made a remarkable contribution to the intellectual prestige enjoyed by the Annales group. Certain contributions are sometimes associated differently with each due to differences in their interests and main interests, despite the fact that they are in close cooperation as a collective movement to

reform this research. History and place it as a scientific discipline. has a parallel position and status with other academic disciplines.

Febvre enjoys higher education at the Ecole Normale Superieure whose lectures are conducted using the seminar method. His thoughts were influenced by several figures such as Bergson, Levy-Bruhl in philosophy, Mailliet in linguistics, Bremon on literature and Emie Male in the history of art (Burke, 1973:ix-x). However, Paul Vidal de la Blache was the greatest figure who greatly influenced Febvre and drew his attention to geography. This influence is reflected in his study, *Philippe II et la Franche-Comte* (1911) on primarily with historical geography. and the socio-economic environment. His deep interest in geography led him to explore the relationship between geography and history and as a result, Febvre (1925) published a book, *A Geographical Introduction to History*.

The work creates the foundation upon which the Annales school has its roots in a deep interest and concern for considering the physical environment in the study of history. Although Febvre pointed out the importance of the geographic dimension and encouraged historians to actively write geo-histories, Febvre himself was not a proponent of geographic determinism. The importance of the geographical dimension was also underlined by Braudel, and today, it is more popularly attributed to him because of the publication of his monumental work on the World of the Mediterranean.

Febvre's contributions are often attributed to his interest in social psychology. He consistently emphasized the importance of psychological explanation in history (Manuel, 1972:215-217). In his study of reformation, he shows that the history of religion is not about religious institutions, but the history of people's religious ideas and emotions that are closely linked to economic and social change. Therefore, Febvre challenged the idea of a reformation that was only related to Luther and the various transgressions that occurred in the life of the church. According to Febvre, reform was basically an attempt to meet the new spiritual needs of the rising social group, the bourgeoisie. In this regard, Febvre has successfully demonstrated his ability to make use of the available works of French art and literature. Using this resource,

His emphasis on psychological history can be found in various works. Among his works, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, is seen as a monumental work (Febvre, 1975:110-142). His works on psychological history, showing the influence of Levy Bruhl, reflect his approach by which Febvre understands his historical reality. This approach, according to Febvre, promises historians the best way to understand the world of sensibility in human life. This world embraces beliefs, hopes, fears, and love that can only be reconstructed by tools of psychology, linguistics, anthropology, philosophy and using the method of empathy (Gay and Cavanaugh, 1975:107). Febvre had a significant influence on Foucault's developmental ideas. This can be found at least in Foucault's attention to genealogy which shows similarities to the history of mentalities and long-term trends (Burke, 1990:102).

Like Bloch, Febvre also gives an example of a shift in the focus of historical analysis from the individual to the collective entity (Iggers, 1975:45-51), which strongly reflects Durkheim's influence which underscores the superiority of society over the individual. With this shift, the Annales school has treated various social groups that were previously ignored in historical writings, fairly and respects their position proportionally as historical actors who take part in historical changes. The forgotten group began to be considered as an important factor in historical events and processes. The course of history is determined not only by great people but also by ordinary people. This awareness has given access to recognize the emergence of collective historical heroes such as farmers and workers (Ricoeur, 1980:10). In other words, ordinary people are also historical change makers and agents.

Similar to Febvre, Bloch was very interested in history and geography when he entered the Ecole Normal Superieure. However, Bloch was also interested in Durkheim's sociology, unlike Febvre who had a great interest in psychology. Influenced by Durkheim, Bloch realized the great value of an interdisciplinary approach to studying past experiences. He consistently emphasizes and draws on disciplines such as geography, sociology, archaeology, literature, anthropology, and collective psychology. He provides an interesting example of how to use folklore and myth in his study of the magical powers of kings. Bloch has shown his ability to expand the range of historical evidence and utilize it in his work (Gay and Cavanaugh, 1975:131-132).

Bloch's study of feudal society is an analysis of structural relationships in the feudal world. In his studies, Bloch comprehensively analyzes the interactions between the physical environment, material conditions, collective consciousness and mentality, and social institutions, class relations, and political organization that prevailed in feudal society. Based on various historical materials complemented by new types of sources that have never been used before, this research represents itself as an original work that provides new perspectives and approaches to historical research. In addition, Bloch's obsession with holistic history of seeing human society as a unit is also manifested in this work. In contrast to Marx who defined feudal society as a mode of production, Bloch saw it as a form of society.

Two significant contributions associated with Bloch are the development of rural history and comparative history. Bloch's intense attention to agrarian techniques and technologies - plows, milling, crop

rotation, grain, agricultural practices, field patterns - combined with his achievements in applying regressive methods to decipher rural conditions in the medieval period have made him a pioneering scientist in rural history about rural history is *Les caracteres originaux de l'histoire rurale francaise*, which was published in the English version in 1966 (Bloch, 1966). Furthermore, with his comparative work on the magical power of kings, movement of cattle prices, feudal relations, Bloch can also be positioned as a pioneer of comparative history (Gay and Cavanaugh, 1975: 132-133).

The Annales' achievement of writing total history, however, is closely related to Braudel's (1972-1973), *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Braudel divides history into three layers that have different characteristics. The first layer deals with the *longue duree*, embracing the physical environment such as climate, mountains, rivers, seas, vegetation, and human interactions with them. This layer checking structure is characterized by an almost motionless rate of change. This layer change takes a very long time to observe. The second layer focuses on the *moyenne duree* associated with the conjuncture which discusses trends, cycles and rhythms of medium duration. In this section Braudel examines economic systems, demography, and modes of warfare. The third layer - *courte duree* - deals with events - *l'histoire evenementielle* - characterized by rapid and dramatic changes that occur in a very short duration.

This study was widely and enthusiastically appreciated not only by historians, but also by a number of other social scientists. Braudel's work is the result of active collaboration between history and other disciplines. Like Bloch and Febvre, Braudel opposed individual methods and advocated a form of collective research that included scientists from all human sciences (Braudel, 1980:25,34,52). Based on complete historical sources, the work is a monumental and inimitable study that clearly demonstrates the influence of the physical environment on human activities. This idea is sometimes misinterpreted as geographical determinism, for example by Marxist historians (Iggers, 1975:70).

Braudel's influence can be observed, for example, in the development of regional history. Among historians, Braudel's influence can best be found on Reid (1988-1993) in his work on the total history of Southeast Asia. In Braudel's study as a model, the physical environment is presented on the first page, followed by an explanation of material conditions, material culture, social organization and cultural activities. The second volume of his work contains an explanation of trading activities, religious revolution and political life in Southeast Asia. In addition, similar work that also applies the Braudelian model has also been carried out by Gilberto Freyre in a trilogy on Brazilian social history that develops with family and material culture (Burke, 1990: 100-101).

Outside the history department, Braudel's influence can be found among environmental scientists. His assertion that the physical environment greatly influences human activities has provided a stimulus for the development of environmental history (Green, 1993:170-171; Gilderhus, 1996:124) Meanwhile, Braudel's ideas about *longue duree* and conjunctions have high relevance to the theory of social change. For example, Philip Abrams highly values Braudel's work on the Mediterranean world and describes it as the best example of historical analytical sociology (Burke, 1990:103-104).

In the third generation, one of the main interests of the Annales is quantitative history. It is strongly oriented towards population studies. Substantially contributed by Labrousse in previous generations (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979:20-21). Achievements in this area are mainly attributed to Goubert and Le Roy Ladurie. Their studies of Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 a 1730 and *The Peasant of Languedoc* have respectively made significant contributions to the theory of economic development and the description of the everyday life of the masses (Iggers, 1975:63). As well as reflecting the conjunctive dimension of Braudel's historical division, this study is also an important example of local history (for a theoretical discussion of local history see eg Goubert, 1977). Both Goubert and Le Roy Ladurie have removed the historical scope from the regional level of Braudel in the Mediterranean world to the local level in certain districts of France.

Despite his achievements in expanding the territory of history, the Annales made little contribution to the theory of history. Except for one of Bloch's works, *The Historian's Craft*, almost no historical theory work has been published by the Annales historians. This parallels Clark's assertion that the history of the Annales is based primarily on a philosophy of action rather than epistemology (Clark, 1985: 180). Moreover, although the Annales encourage close collaboration between history and other social sciences, these social theorists have not made substantial use of social theory in their work. Tilly argues that efforts to use a quantitative approach have not been followed by the application of economic models in analyzing statistical data. As well as, Foster stated that the Annales school had not made any revolutionary historical methodological innovations. According to Foster, there is no significant difference in the writing of economic history by Annales and its conventional form (Ankersmit, 1985: 180).

Annales's obsession with writing a more human history was not entirely successful. Cipolla stated that some members of the Annales paid too much attention to the dynamics of the human structure which was inhumane (Cipolla, 1991:61). Some of the Annales historians even reflect 'history without a focus on climate, rain, weather. There is no doubt that these are new themes, but on the other hand they run counter to the ideal

for writing a more human history. Furthermore, the goal of writing a total history also leads to an imbalance by considering only the economic aspects of the past. This is strongly reflected in the fact that the main interest of the Annales historian is material life. Meanwhile the political aspect has been taken down seriously. The success of the Annales in removing political themes actually has a negative side that goes against the Annales ideal of getting a better understanding of human society. However, the political aspect is also important. It is impossible to fully understand human society without considering the political dimension.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The emergence of the Annales school was a reaction against the orthodoxy of French historiography which was characterized predominantly by political and diplomatic history focusing on great events and people, a narrative form of historical explanation. There is no doubt that the Annales school of history achieved great success in expanding the realm of history. As a collective movement, this school not only opens up various historical studies that were previously ignored by traditional historians, but also shows new ways to use historical material and to formulate new questions about the past. The growing interest in rural history, social and economic history, comparative history, history of mentality, total history, and quantitative history is credited primarily by the Annales school. This development is in line with Annales' promotion of establishing close collaborations with other social sciences that will equip historians with better tools and theoretical frameworks to analyze their problems. Unfortunately, there have been no serious attempts among Annales scientists to systematically apply social theory in their work.

Annales is also very successful in dismantling political issues from historical focus. This is accompanied by the achievement of the substitution of historical descriptive narrative form with a more analytical historical form. The historiographical history of Annales is a great success in explaining the long- and medium-term changes that took place in the physical and economic environment. However, this success was not achieved without cost. The overreaction to the political dimension leads to a lack of political insight in the historiographical history of Annales. This cost is quite expensive because in reality, separating the political aspect from the complexities of human activity is almost impossible. At this point, it can be judged that the Annales have not fully succeeded in realizing more human history. In achieving his goal of a more human history, Annales has fallen into another weakness. Some of the Annales group's work has even shown a historical trend without humans.

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