

Changed Meanings in the Practice of History

MARIA SERENA I. DIOKNO

ABSTRACT

Many changes have taken place in basic concepts of history that affect how historians approach and understand the past or, more accurately, read and interpret historical sources. From the most basic concepts of time and space to the meanings of archival sources and the nature of the historian's audience, the changes sometimes speak to the very purpose of history. Steeped as we historians are in the evidence we examine, we, however, tend to consider these concepts on the side rather than at the center of historical research and writing, in the process underestimating their effect on how we study history. A review of the conceptual changes is thus necessary, if only to become more self-conscious about the concepts that feed into our appreciation of the past.

CONCEPT OF TIME

Major changes have taken place in the conceptions of time and space, two concepts central to the discipline of history. Fernand Braudel's *long durée* in his *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949) introduces the notion of plurality of time: geographical time or "geo-history," social time, and individual time. The first, geographical time, Braudel describes as the "almost timeless" history of the relationship between humankind and the environment, "a history whose passage is almost imperceptible ... a history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles,"¹ covering natural forms, topographies, and climates in order to show that all these geographical features are a part of history, and that events cannot be understood without them. With rich and extensive detail, Braudel paints a picture of the Mediterranean sea and landscape but ties in each element of nature with its human inhabitants.

The second kind of time, social time, Braudel depicts as

the slow but perceptible rhythms ... studying in turn economic systems, states, societies, civilizations and finally, in order to convey more clearly my conception of history, attempting to show how all these deep-seated forces were at work in the complex arena of warfare.²

Social time moves faster than geographical time though not as quickly as individual time, which Braudel defines as the swift-moving history of events. Such events Braudel pictures as

surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs ... Resounding events are often only momentary outbursts; surface

manifestations of these larger movements are explicable only in terms of them.³

Braudel views event history as shallow, though “the richest in human interest.”⁴ He recounts:

I remember a night near Bahia when I was enveloped in a firework display of phosphorescent fireflies; their pale lights glowed, went out, shone again, all without piercing the night with any true illumination. So it is with events; beyond their glow, darkness prevails.⁵

In this manner, Braudel’s concept of time turns the meaning of event inside out: the most visible, the most dramatic, becomes least important, while the least perceptible and slow-moving takes on greater weight. He reminds us when we write our histories to probe beyond the detectable and not to get blinded by the strong but quickly vanishing glow of event-centered history. His nuanced view of time is equally instructive. Let me relate a practical concern to Braudel’s concept of geo-historical time.

One of the reasons, I think, why social studies students in elementary school do not bother much with geography is because the terms they are made to memorize are rarely connected to real-life places children can identify with. So while they are taught about land forms and bodies of water, students living in coastal or upland parts of the country are not invited to connect the sea they study with the sea that surrounds them or the mountain they cross daily to get to school. In contrast, part one of Braudel’s *Mediterranean* discusses the mountain not just as a feature of geography but also as a site with a distinctive culture and people vastly different from the lowlands from which the mountain is naturally separated. This intrinsic connection between habitat

and inhabitant, so obvious and logical, has amazingly eluded the minds of past curriculum and textbook writers. The subject, geography, in the new K-12 curriculum of Araling Panlipunan will hopefully do better.

TIME AND BACKWARDNESS

Another perspective of time frames the concept in relation to space—in particular, with the overprivileging of space by area studies at the expense of time. Harry Harootunian calls this the “end of temporality.”⁶ By conferring greater importance on regions or areas and treating them evenly across time, certain parts appear more developed than others within a given time spectrum. Harootunian explains that

transubstantiating multiple temporalities (with their different histories and modes of production) into a singular temporality ... marks the distance between developed and undeveloped. This spatial privileging converts a purely quantitative measure of time—chronology—into a qualitative yardstick, whereby a different temporality becomes a symptom of backwardness.⁷

Harootunian thus warns:

Ultimately, the uneven time lag that required societies on the colonial margin to catch up creates the division between the center and its periphery because uneven forms were always more visible in the periphery than in the center.⁸

My question is, does the uniform treatment of time across diverse and diversely developing areas also apply to a single nation, say, like ours? In other words, by applying a single, common time frame across local and regional histories in the country, are we not also, unconsciously perhaps, creating an uneven time lag that inevitably portrays certain parts of the country as backward and others, modern (these terms, of course, being relative)? Since, as Harootunian points out, unevenness is more apparent in the margins than at the core, would not the singularity of time then also serve, again unwittingly, as an intellectual tool that favors certain peoples and places at the expense of others?

Both Braudel and Harootunian examine the perils of uni-temporal history, though from entirely different perspectives. By uni-temporal I do not mean traditional battles of chronology over periodization, with which we are familiar, but with the power (or agency) of singular time to create concepts and sites of polarity, such as civilized and backward, center and periphery, and so on. I think as historians we must be conscious of the specificity and limitations of time periods we set for a given time and place so that we do not fall into the trap that Braudel and Harootunian describe.

NEW MEANING OF SPACE

The other basic concept of history that has undergone change is space. The terms “area,” “border,” and “region” have all acquired new meanings, and not just because of contemporary globalization. Willem van Schendel explains that an area can be defined in three ways: as physical space, its most obvious attribute; as a symbolic space, or the site of theoretical knowledge production rather than area-specialized knowledge; and as an institutional space, which a transnational community

of scholars occupies, including the “scholarly lineage” or network of scholarly affiliations⁹ (e.g., who mentored, influenced, collaborated with, or even debated against whom).

Most historians would look upon an area using the first definition almost exclusively; even when we teach history we urge our students to delineate the physical scope of the area they intend to write about. The second and third meanings more properly fall within the ambit of historiography, which seeks to examine the stated and unstated theoretical or conceptual underpinnings of historical writing. The challenge is for historians, when writing the history of a place, to also theorize about the way changes were effected over time and not just to relate them, explain their ramifications, causes and effects—the stuff we normally do. I realize this is not an easy task because historians are not generally trained to think theoretically; our grounding is almost always empirical or evidence-based. Yet the two are not antithetical to one another; a conceptual framework can and ought to stand on evidence, so that its proper application is circumscribed by the particularities that accompany the nature of historical events.

NEW REGIONS

Closer to home, the area of Asia has been reconfigured to include new regions. There is the Greater Mekong Subregion, a creation of the Asian Development Bank, which includes Thailand, Burma, Laos, Vietnam, and Yunnan in China, with the Mekong River as the common lifeline; and numerous development corridors and sub-corridors within Southeast Asia: the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area, Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle, Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle, and the interstate areas along the West-East Corridor of the Mekong

Basin in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and northeast Thailand within the ASEAN Mekong Basin Development Cooperation.¹⁰ All these corridors are built on massive infrastructure plans aiming to connect one part to the other. They are artificially created areas by states—in this case, the ASEAN—with a concrete agenda. But in some so-called interstate areas, national borders are fluid, if not meaningless, as border communities identify not with the distant capital of the nation but with their next-door neighbor who happens to belong to a different nation (owing to colonially invented and nationally inherited boundaries) but speaks the same language, eats the same food, dresses the same way, and is likely a member of the same clan.¹¹

Furthermore, within larger Asia is a part that historians James Scott and Willem van Schendel have called Zomia. The term, van Schendel explains, is derived from *zomi*, meaning highlander in some Chin-Mizo-Kuki languages spoken in Burma, India, and Bangladesh, which more broadly belong to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages spoken all over Kashmir, North India, Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Northeast India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh), Burma, Yunnan and Sichuan (China), Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam—the areas that comprise Zomia.¹² Zomia is considered an area in the conventional sense because of linguistic and cultural affinities, including religions, kinship systems, and trade networks. Once a center of states (in Yunnan, Tibet, and Assam), Zomia today is, in James Scott's words, "a world of peripheries,"¹³ virtually stateless communities subjected to all sorts of "development" projects by central governments. Scott collectively labels such projects "the last great enclosure movement in Southeast Asia," whose purpose is "to bring nonstate spaces and people to heel."¹⁴ Whether by colonial governments as in the past or by foreign or national governments as in the present, "this enclosure movement is, in part, an effort to integrate and monetize the people, lands, and resources of the periphery so that they become

... auditable contributors to the gross national product and to foreign exchange.”¹⁵ But is Zomia a symbolic space? Not yet, argues van Schendel, for despite its richness as an intellectual gold mine, Zomia is not being theorized in the way academically accepted areas like Southeast Asia are.¹⁶

THEORETICALLY INFORMED NARRATIVE

The redefinition of space and the creation of new zones that defy state borders cause us to rethink long-established concepts on which historical inquiry has been anchored. The view of space as merely physical, for one, is—like the conventional view of time—no longer sufficient to explain diverse events, conditions, cultures, and peoples. Much of history, moreover, and Philippine history being no exception, has focused on politics, in the past because of the drive for national independence, and in the postcolonial period because of the impetus to establish identity and sovereignty, especially amid the threatening aspects of globalization. Political history has, by tradition, focused on the nation-state and challenges to it. But the realization that spaces and peoples exist outside the framework of the nation-state, and do so vibrantly, compels us to consider other less nation- or non-nation-centered types of history. In recent decades, Philippine historical writing has indeed spread its wings to cover other types of history, and the revised undergraduate curriculum of BA History at the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman reflects, albeit belatedly, some of these types.

I wonder, however, whether or to what extent these exciting forays into new ground are accompanied by theoretical sorties and new methods. Unless one writes ethnographic-type history, it is hardly possible to write women's or environmental history, for instance, without some understanding of feminist or environmental theory, respectively. Specialized types of history

increasingly require more explicit theoretical frameworks, whether borrowed or homegrown, in order to make sense of the past in particular ways. Again this requirement poses a challenge to historians, given the strong empirical bent of our discipline and the consequent aversion to nomothetic social sciences. As Mary Ryan puts it:

Excursions into other disciplines are particularly healthy, if not essential, exercises for historians, because our academic specialization lacks an explicit foundation in theory or method, is a cluster of scholarly projects originating in particular times and disparate places, and is now divided into multifarious topical fields as well.¹⁷

One effect of more theoretically informed historical writing is the change in the historical narrative. I speak here not of the postmodern assault on the historical narrative (which reduces history to fiction) but of the centrality, with or without theory, of the historical argument. Descriptive, expository history has its place but is no longer adequate to answer the complex questions we ask and are asked of us. To address some of these questions, methodological approaches have been devised, such as decolonizing history, writing history from below, and subaltern history. At bottom, these approaches speak to a fundamental concern in historiography: the inevitability of silencing.

HISTORICAL SILENCES

In his historiography of Haiti, Michel Trouillot explains the process of silencing in historical production, from the creation of a source, which Trouillot calls “fact creation,” to its assembly in the archive, its retrieval from the archive by historians and researchers as expressed in the historical narrative, and the commemoration of the past. Silencing, Trouillot explains, is an

active and transitive process: one “silences” a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun. One engages in the practice of silencing. Mentions and silences are thus active dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis.¹⁸

Thus the presences and absences embodied in sources ... or archives ... are neither neutral or natural. They are created. As such, they are not mere presences and absences, but mentions or silences of various kinds and degrees.¹⁹

As an example of silencing, Trouillot mentions that facts are not treated equally in terms of the frequency of their use and the weight of importance accorded them. Some are cited more often than others, while certain facts are dismissed or disregarded entirely. Other facts are heavily described while some are briefly noted.²⁰ Some silences also spring from the nature of the source—not all facts are observed or remembered—while certain silences are deliberate as in colonial sources, for example. Furthermore, as standard practice, archives select and rank the sources they will keep, in the process excluding others that nonetheless hold some value, depending on the researcher’s interest.

Commemorations, too, are selective by nature. The declaration of national historical markers and landmarks is a function of the National Historical Commission of the Philippines, where interesting discussions in the Board have taken place over how we name historical actors (“mandirigmang Moro” in place of the traditional “piratang Moro,” for example) and the texts of markers. A few years ago, the commission was asked by the Senate Committee on Local Government for its position on the bill to declare June 15 a special nonworking holiday in Pampanga in memory of the eruption of Mount

Pinatubo. The Board declined the proposal, seeing that disasters (natural and human) have become frequent happenings of late. If unchecked, Ondoy, Sendong, and all other disasters would also have their days marked in their respective areas of destruction. (Nonetheless I understand the Senate approved the bill declaring the public holiday.)

We historians are thus expected to be self-conscious in the practice of our craft, able to defend our position when we choose to silence something, and equally able to revise our work when we silence a fact out of error, neglect, or grossly indefensible bias.

NEW GENRES OF COLONIAL SOURCES

Subaltern history calls our attention to the ways in which sources, particularly colonial sources, silence the past by denying the agency of historical actors. Ranajit Guha's "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency" is a well-argued illustration. Guha shows how colonial historiography denies the agency of Indian peasants by, among others, applying metaphors of natural phenomena to describe peasant rebellions, such as "they break out like thunderstorms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics."²¹ As we know from our own experience, such historiographical practices are also true of colonial sources on our country.

More significantly, and allow me to spend a bit of time here, Guha introduces new ways of understanding historical sources. We are reared in the established hierarchy of sources, primary and secondary, each differentiated by their proximity to the event in time and place. Guha treats colonial sources on Indian peasant rebellions rather differently, and introduces new categories of colonial discourses—primary, secondary, and tertiary—that are differentiated by their identification with the official viewpoint, their distance in time from the event written

about, and the internal structure of the language the author uses to describe the event.

Primary discourse, explains Guha, is “historiography in the raw,”²² consisting mostly of official accounts by soldiers, government officials, and other eyewitnesses soon after the rebellion took place. The perspective is nearly always official. Secondary discourse, on the other hand, “is the processed product, however crude the processing, a duly constituted if infant discourse,”²³ consisting of memoirs and similarly retrospective accounts of events including those by administrators writing about subjects outside their purview. Secondary discourse, cautions Guha, bears a deceptive patina of impartiality that has “allowed ‘comment’ to worm its way through the plate armour of ‘fact’.”²⁴ Tertiary discourse is farthest in time from the event and ranges in perspective from right to left, often adopting the voice of a third person. What is interesting is Guha’s assertion that even tertiary discourse of the “radical variety” denies “a will to the mass of the rebels themselves ... representing them merely as instruments of some other will,”²⁵ usually their leaders.

I cite Guha not only to show how, like time, space, event, and historical narrative, sources have been given new meaning but also as an excellent example of historical writing that is both empirical and theoretical and intellectually provocative.

HISTORIANS’ CLIENTELE

Guha’s study of Indian colonial discourse illustrates the reasons why the past is recorded. For our part, as historians we write and rewrite history for many different reasons, the validity of which comes into question when our scholarly apparatus is frail or confused. Whatever our reasons for writing history, these intertwine with another fundamental question: for whom do

we write history? David Hollinger speaks of two communities historians address: the small “community of warrant” consisting of professional historians, trained in the discipline, and familiar with the predilections of academic practitioners; and the larger “community of readers” or the public, whose interests, purposes, and ways of communicating are not necessarily consonant with those of the profession.²⁶ Historians generally choose their audience: most of us prefer to speak to our students and fellow historians, while a few (not enough, some would argue) cater to the public. Robert Kelley explains that in the academic community, historians respond to the needs and interests of those desiring to understand the past in a formal, rigorous way. The attraction for historians is that here intellectual interests govern: historians decide what to write about and how to conduct their investigation. With or without funding, the choice of topic rests with the historian. In ministering to the public, however, whether as a consultant to government, a museum, or some private entity, Kelley stresses that the opposite happens. Historians answer questions posed by the public and summon their knowledge and expertise to answer others’ questions rather than their own.²⁷

To be honest, academic historians can be a rather snobbish lot. We tend to look down on less trained, “informal” historians who write in local magazines or appear in media, a far cry from the classrooms and journals that comprise the academic world, our zone of comfort. Yet there is a real need to engage with the Filipino public in matters of our history, both national and local, not only to raise consciousness, open hitherto unknown parts of our past, include groups and sectors usually barred from our national history, and, in the process, help develop a sense of self and of being Filipino; but also, especially in light of our recent past, as a matter of justice. There is a very real danger of revisionist history in the future that will whitewash the decades of martial law or portray authoritarian rule as an unpleasant

necessity or a lesser evil than, say, the corruption scandals that attended the Arroyo administration. Given that today's youth are largely unfamiliar with even our recent past, the public would be fertile ground for such revisionism. In this sense, then, the Filipino historian's engagement with our people becomes imperative.

ENGAGING WITH THE PUBLIC

There is a whole new subfield of public history that is being offered as a strand of graduate-level specialization abroad in the discipline of history. Defined simply as the "employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia,"²⁸ public history involves the ways academic historians present history to the public through the deployment of various media such as films, docudramas, advertising, newspaper columns, blog articles, mass textbooks, and commemorative markers.²⁹ Another definition looks upon public history as the site where historians and the public meet and work together to make the past intelligible and useful to the public.³⁰

The arena of public history is thus vast and offers opportunities for trained historians outside the world of academia. This is the upside of public history. But public history can also be escorted by danger. Consider Barbara Franco's definition of public history as

history for the public, of the public, by the public, and with the public. Each preposition changes the relationship of history and public and affects the nature of the historical practice.³¹

The definition alludes to various mutations in the practice of public history depending on, as Franco puts it, which

preposition is highlighted. Here is where the differences between academic and public history emerge. One, which Franco herself points out, is that

Public history is history in action and sometimes reenacted. It is history in usable, tangible, and visible forms that evoke personal and often highly emotional responses. The historiography of public history is not found in journal articles but can be read in outdoor museums, historic districts, collections of artifacts, and festivals.³²

Another has to do with methodology, what John Kuo Wei Tchen calls “overlapping but different set of tools”³³ from those of academic history. The history we publish in academic journals is no doubt different from the history written in museum brochures or commemorative markers, the difference being more than just language. It is often asserted that to be a public historian, one must first be an academic historian, requiring knowledge and mastery, if you will, of the substance and tools of the trade. Yet as Tchen points out, the problem here is “the unexamined assumption that the form of historical practice that best serves the public is the kind of trickle-down, all-authoritative academic history that students are trained in.”³⁴ Tchen maintains that academic knowledge of history does not automatically translate into writing for the larger community of readers.

MEDIATION, PARTISANSHIP, AND HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

In response, the National Council on Public History in the United States has defined public history as “a movement, methodology, and approach that promotes the collaborative

study and practice of history”³⁵ by academic and nonprofessional historians alike in order to bring history to the public. It must be noted, however, that even within this body, members have differed over the definition, with some arguing that public history does not require its own methodology since it has gained formal acceptance in the discipline, that for the same reason it is not a movement, and so on.³⁶

If all public historians are called upon to do is play the role of mediator between academic history and the public, this, to me, does not pose a cause for concern. It would require a new set of skills and attitudes that can be learned. But historians are sometimes commissioned to provide their expertise in the making of policy by government, or the writing of company history or of official biography. In these cases, Kelley asks, “how do staff historians keep their integrity, when under pressure to produce desired results rather than a history which is true to the facts?”³⁷

One could argue that this question might well apply to funded academic research, especially if the funding agency has a particular platform or political or ideological agenda. Indeed it is a question that confronts any funded social science research that has some bearing on public policy or whose outcome could affect the reputation of the donor or subject. My advice is to be true to our craft and the values it embodies; rather than get embroiled in this dilemma, it is best that from the outset, one steer clear of funded projects that bear, even implicitly, some editorial direction by the donor agency. The same applies to history with clear ideological intent: scholarship must not be sacrificed at the altar of politics. Good history is one that takes contrary evidence into serious account just as in life, self-worth increases a hundredfold not from praise by family and like-minded friends but from the respect of those who think differently.

NOTES

- 1 Fernand Braudel, preface to the first edition, May 1946, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 1: 20.
- 2 Ibid., 20–21.
- 3 Ibid., 21.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Braudel, “The Situation of History in 1950,” inaugural lecture given to the Collège de France, 1 December 1950, in Fernand Braudel, *On History*, trans. by Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 10–11
- 6 Harry Harootunian, “‘Memories of Underdevelopment’ after Area Studies,” *Positions* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 6.
- 7 Ibid., 7.
- 8 Ibid., 27.
- 9 Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 649–50.
- 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations, “Development of Growth Areas,” 2009, accessed 22 April 2012, <http://www.aseansec.org/6356.htm>.
- 11 See, for example, Maria Serena I. Diokno and Nguyen Van Chinh, eds., *The Mekong Arranged & Rearranged* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2006).
- 12 Van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance,” 653.
- 13 James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.
- 14 Ibid., 4.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance,” 654.
- 17 Mary Ryan quoted in Drew Faust, Hendrik Hartog, David A. Hollinger, Akira Iriye, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Nell Irvin Painter, David Roediger, Mary Ryan, and Alan Taylor, “Interchange: The Practice of History,” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003): 600.

- 18 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 48.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Subaltern Studies II*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 2.
- 22 Ibid., 6.
- 23 Ibid., 7.
- 24 Ibid., 13.
- 25 Ibid., 38.
- 26 David A. Hollinger in "Interchange: The Practice of History," *Journal of American History* 90, 2 (September 2003): 593–94.
- 27 Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects," in *Public History Readings*, ed. Phyllis K. Leffler and Joseph Brent (Florida: Krieger Publishing Co., 1992), 112–13.
- 28 Ibid., 111.
- 29 Michael Gordon, "Introduction to Public History," History 700 Syllabus, Fall 2002, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, accessed 15 November 2008, <http://www.uwm.edu/Course/448-700/syllabus.html>.
- 30 National Council on Public History (NCPH), "What Is Public History?," accessed 5 March 2012, <http://ncph.org/cms/what-is-public-history/>.
- 31 Barbara Franco, "Public History and Memory: A Museum Perspective," *The Public Historian* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 65.
- 32 Ibid., 66.
- 33 John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Back to the Basics: Who Is Researching and Interpreting for Whom?" *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (December 1994): 1009.
- 34 Ibid., 1006.
- 35 NCPH, "What Is Public History?"
- 36 Cathy Stanton, "'What Is Public History?' Redux," *Public History News* 27, no. 4 (September 2007), <http://ncph.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/September-2007-NCPH-Newsletter-Compressed.pdf>.
- 37 Kelley, "Public History," 117.

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