

Pieces of History: Jacques Le Goff on Historical Periodization

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In his last published essay, Jacques Le Goff, who recently passed away, examines the problem of historical periodization. He defends the idea of a “long Middle Ages” and refuses to see the Renaissance as a distinct period in its own right. His book is a reflection on our chronological frameworks.

Reviewed: Jacques Le Goff, *Faut-il vraiment découper l’histoire en tranches?* [Must History Really Be Cut into Slices?], Paris, Le Seuil, La Librairie du XXI^e siècle, 2014, 211 p., 18 €.

Jacques Le Goff needs no introduction: a medievalist, born in 1924, the author of numerous books which are widely read and have been translated throughout the world, he was one of the best known French historians of the twentieth century. Contrary to appearances, the title of his last book is not a rhetorical question. In this reflection on how we “slice up” time—which is more commonly known as the problem of “periodization,” i.e., the idea that new historical periods suddenly begin at major dates—Le Goff asserts from the outset that “cutting up time is necessary to history” (p. 15).

Periodization

This short book is not a theoretical work, offering detailed reflection on the use of such “slices” or their advantages and disadvantages for historical work. Rather, Le Goff examines two points at which historical time is typically “sliced.”

It is commonly assumed (particularly in the French university system) that new periods begin in 476 (the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the beginning of the Middle Ages), 1492 (the discovery of the Americas, the beginning of early modern history), and 1789 (the French Revolution, the beginning of modern history). We go first from “antiquity” to the “Middle Ages,” then to the “early modern” period, and finally to the “modern” period.” As it is, the medieval era is rather long (over a thousand years). Le Goff, however, proposes to make it even longer by abandoning the idea of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries as a separate period. The two ideas he defends in his essay, which is concerned with “the relationship between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance” (p. 60), are the “existence of a long Middle Ages” and the “untenability of the Renaissance as a specific period” (p. 42). He had already advanced the thesis of a “long Middle Ages” on several occasions.¹

¹ First, it would seem, in *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. It then appeared in various articles, one of which was published (under the title “For an Extended Middle Ages”) in *The Medieval Imagination*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 18-26. Finally and most importantly, a collection of articles that were originally

After discussing “old periodizations,” from the Bible (the Book of Daniel) to modern times by way of Saint Augustine, Le Goff emphasizes the fact that the idea of the “Middle Ages” did not appear until late. It owes much to Petrarch and began to develop in the fifteenth century, during the early modern period, when its connotations were negative. Intelligible chronological frameworks are necessary for teaching. However, the emergence of history as a discipline and as a course of study occurred only gradually and relatively late in Western history. Only once it was taught did periodization become a mainstream historical practice.

Next we turn to the “birth of the Renaissance” with Petrarch, who was the first to contrast the darkness of the present to the luminosity of the ancient world, and Michelet, in lectures delivered at the Collège de France in the 1840s. The idea of the Renaissance was further developed by Jacob Burckhardt and a number of major twentieth century writers (Paul Oskar Kristeller, Eugenio Garin, Erwin Panofsky, and so on), whom Le Goff discusses in a series of book reviews which deprive the book of some of its drama.

Since its first appearance, the idea of the Renaissance has gone hand in hand with a devalorization of the Middle Ages, which came to be seen as nothing more than an intermediate step (hence the “middle”) between antiquity and its rediscovery by the humanists. Yet the Middle Ages were well acquainted with antiquity; indeed, this period was steeped in ancient values, models, and literature. For instance, the “liberal arts” and the foundations of medical knowledge originated in antiquity, as did Latin, the queen of languages in medieval times².

Moreover, contrary to a widespread misconception, the Middle Ages highly valued reason—in scholastic thought, of course, but also in theology. It was a period that witnessed innovation and creativity. For all these reasons, Le Goff persuasively argues, the medieval period cannot be separated from the Renaissance—particularly since the latter, as well as the modern period as a whole, are replete with medieval influences.

The best illustration of this fact is the great “witch hunt,” which was much more of a Renaissance and early modern phenomenon than a medieval one (*The Hammer of Witches* is from 1486, and the Loudun Affair took place in 1632). The chronology of this point is complex. While it can be argued that the war on magic began in the early fourteenth century, the “invention of the witch” rather dates back from the first half of the fifteenth century, and the definition of and assault on witchcraft did not come to an end until the late fifteenth century, which made possible the great witch hunt, from around 1560 to 1630.

Situating Trends Chronologically

In short, “a long Middle Ages, extending beyond the sixteenth century, and an early Renaissance, which had begun to assert itself by the early fifteenth century, coexisted and occasionally confronted one another” (p. 135). Rather than a complete rift, it is more appropriate to speak of a break that was “more or less long” and “more or less profound” (p. 136). The change that occurred between the sixteenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries is not enough to mark the beginning of a new period: a “*longue durée* rural economy” persisted—

published in the magazine *L'Histoire* between 1980 and 2004 have been published as a book entitled *Un Long Moyen Âge*, [The Long Middle Ages], Paris, Tallandier, 2004.

² “[...] the Middle Ages,” Le Goff notes, “were much more ‘Latin’ than the Renaissance”, p. 180.

the term “*longue durée*” being, of course, a reference to Fernand Braudel, whose *Capitalism and Material Life* (1967) Le Goff cites abundantly.

Major trends (like the development of the modern state or the “civilization of manners” studied by Norbert Elias³) span either side of the split (between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for the former, and between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries for the latter). Central to Le Goff’s argument is his consideration of continuities between the two periods, notably “modern” characteristics that can be observed prior to 1492: where some would see pre-modern traits whose medieval character must be rejected and which are best described as precursors of modernity, Le Goff views them as demonstrating a continuity with the early modern period and thus as evidence of a “long Middle Ages.” In other words, one must wait for the Industrial and the French Revolutions before one can really speak of a new period.

But did not what these two revolutions brought to an end (the old economy and the monarchical system) exist prior to the Middle Ages? Without a firm starting point, is there not a danger that the “long Middle Ages” could extend as far back as high antiquity? 476 is still seen as a dramatic turning point, yet Le Goff reminds us that current thinking prefers to speak of a shift extending from the third to the fourth centuries (p. 41). What kind of shift? Presumably he means the establishment of Christianity and the disappearance of the “Greco-Roman” empire, though Le Goff mentions these factors less in this book than in his previous work.

Renaissances

This book will disappoint those who expect it to be what it is not, despite whatever its title might imply: it is not a theoretical work on periodization in general, as has been noted, but the defense of a thesis which posits continuity between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It will also disappoint those seeking truly original arguments: as Le Goff concedes on the first page, he is revisiting ideas that he has discussed previously.

The thesis of a long Middle Ages is, of course, debatable. It is impossible to assess phenomena that are as deep and complex as those on the basis of which one can argue in favor of a shift in period. Contrary to Le Goff’s book, it is possible to maintain that in the sixteenth century, feudalism was retreating before the rise of the state, the Reformation had split Christianity in two, the West had begun to abandon the Mediterranean for the Atlantic—and that for these reasons, the “Middle Ages” came to an end. Different people will see continuities and discontinuities on either side of these two divides. We should simply say, on this point, that Le Goff’s thesis strikes us as very persuasive.

Le Goff’s use of concepts relating to the way historians divide up time (“period” and “epoch,” of course, but also “era,” “age,” and even “civilization,” as Le Goff is the author of *Medieval Civilization 400-1500* [1964]) might also have been better handled. He uses “Renaissance” to refer to what, in current terminology, is called the early modern period, or at least most of this period. This leads to some ambiguity: was the Renaissance a cultural phenomenon or a period? If, despite the arguments of the “partisans of the Renaissance as a period” (p. 171), one views it “primarily as a cultural fact,” to use Eugenio Garin’s felicitous

³ Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, Bâle, Haus zum Falken, 1939, published in English as *The Civilizing Process, vol. I. The History of Manners*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1969, and *The Civilizing Process, vol. II. State Formation and Civilization*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982.

phrase, then its development can, like other cultural trends (the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and so on), be observed. Like a wave, it passes through, at different periods, spaces with their own historical rhythms.

The assertion that “the Renaissance, which traditional modern history considers to be a specific epoch, is in fact nothing more than the final sub-period of a long Middle Ages” (p. 87) is only half convincing. Insisting on the fact that the Renaissance was neither a period nor a sub-period, but a cultural phenomenon with a complex chronology which in no way excludes contrary cultural phenomena occurring at the same time, would make it clearer that it was invented well before the Middle Ages (with some forerunners, the first being Giotto, appearing in the early fourteenth century).

A Medieval Aroma

This annexation by the Middle Ages of centuries which lack its aroma, color, and taste (medieval outfits? castles? knights?) is likely to raise eyebrows. Yet it must be admitted that these factors are not entirely irrelevant to how we understand historical epochs, even if they do not belong to their underlying structures. To persuade the reader of the plausibility of a “long Middle Ages,” Le Goff places himself at a deeper level: while he is certainly right to do so, one wonders if this is not taking the concept of the Middle Ages too seriously. If even medievalists see the Middle Ages as shaped by such factors, does the “new Middle Ages” really stand a chance? Or is its function simply heuristic? And does this not require a different term, particularly since the “long” renders the “middle” meaningless?

Finally, the book fails to provide satisfying answers to those who would doubt Le Goff’s unconventional periodization, which is based on a period’s historical “content” rather than signposts inherited from the past, which by definition are debatable. Is a comprehensive periodization for all realms of history, and perhaps for every region of the world, necessary, despite all the errors to which it might lead? What constitutes a period? How should historians use this concept?

Anachronism, Jacques Rancière writes, refers not to a “confusion of dates, but of epochs.” If the point is to show that many commonalities can be found among people who lived during a particular period and to identify homogeneous eras that are very different from one another, could this not make grasping the new, the irruption of “new times”—in short, historical change itself—more difficult?⁴ As for globalization, Le Goff mentions the concept, but his uses of it are too indirect to fully satisfy our curiosity. Regrettably, he can no longer expand on these insights, which are less developed than his views on the “long Middle Ages.” In this book, Le Goff defends this idea with talent, making a new contribution—the last, presumably, from an historian who has proved so central to our understanding of the Middle Ages.

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⁴ See Jacques Rancière, “Le concept d’anachronisme et la vérité de l’historien,” *L’Inactuel. Psychanalyse et culture*, 6, 1996 (special issue: “Mensonges, vérités”), p. 53-68. See, too, my own article “De l’usage de l’anachronisme en histoire médiévale,” <http://www.menestrel.fr/spip.php?rubrique2025>, November 13, 2013.