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Access to Archives and National Memory in France. An Interview with Raphaëlle Branche

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In the interview, Raphaëlle Branche, a member of the Conseil supérieur des Archives and a specialist in the administrative mechanisms that control access to documents, will examine the attempts made by the French government in recent years to remove documentation from consultation. Archives and access to documentation are a 'classic' battlefield of historical research in all countries of the world. But it is in France that the most advanced reflections on the relationship between democracies and public documentation have arisen, and where state intervention in the defence of national memory has been the strongest.

KEYWORDS: ARCHIVES; NATIONAL MEMORY; FRANCE;
DEMOCRACY; PUBLIC DOCUMENTS

Raphaëlle Branche insegna storia contemporanea presso il *Département d'histoire* dell'Università di Paris Nanterre. Ad oggi è membro dell'*Institut des Sciences Sociales du Politique* ed è stata membro del *Conseil Supérieur des Archives* dal 2008 al 2019. Nel corso delle sue ricerche si è occupata di violenza nel contesto coloniale, del rapporto fra guerra e diritto, della guerra d'Algeria e di memoria familiare, nonché della gestione e dell'accessibilità degli Archivi di Stato francesi. Negli ultimi anni, dopo la promulgazione dell'IGI (ordinanza generale interministeriale) n. 1300 del 2011, lo Stato francese ha reso ancora più difficile l'accesso agli archivi pubblici contenenti documenti classificati come *secret défense*, citando motivi di sicurezza interna. In sintesi, l'IGI n. 1300 ha sostituito una legge del 2008 che stabiliva la completa accessibilità ai documenti classificati *secret défense* dopo cinquanta anni. Infatti, l'ordinanza non prevede più una scadenza temporale per la desecretazione di questa tipologia di documenti (la cui «communication porte atteinte au secret de la défense nationale, aux intérêts fondamentaux de l'État dans

la conduite de la politique extérieure, à la sûreté de l'État, à la sécurité publique»), prescrivendo piuttosto che ogni documento sia analizzato singolarmente dagli archivisti per essere giudicato declassificabile.

Branche, insieme a un gruppo di altri storici (fra cui Annette Wievior-ka, Gilles Morin, Thomas Vaisset e Robert O. Paxton), si è schierata contro questa ordinanza quando il presidente della Repubblica francese Macron ha iniziato ad applicarla sistematicamente al *Service Historique de la Défense*, ricordando la necessità di tutelare il diritto alla libertà di ricerca e di informazione, in assenza del quale il lavoro dello storico è gravemente compromesso. Sebbene questa ordinanza sia stata annullata, il governo francese ha poi deciso di approvare una legge riguardante l'antiterrorismo (*loi n° 2021-998 du 30 juillet 2021 relative à la prévention d'actes de terrorisme et au renseignement*) che ha di fatto predisposto che la declassificazione dei documenti *secret défense* avvenga in base alla sensibilità e alla rilevanza dei loro contenuti per la politica contemporanea francese (nonostante formalmente rimanga il limite dei 50 anni previsto dalla legge del 2008). Naturalmente, gli accademici francesi hanno segnalato il pericolo che anche questa nuova legge pone al loro operato, poiché tale metro di giudizio si presta a interpretazioni molto arbitrarie e strumentali, rischiando di precludere agli studiosi la possibilità di indagare approfonditamente su episodi controversi della storia contemporanea francese, oltre che importanti per la memoria collettiva in generale. Queste limitazioni colpiscono pesantemente anche gli studenti delle Lauree Magistrali (MA) e dei Dottorati (PhD), poiché un accesso ristretto agli archivi rischia di mettere fine a qualsiasi tesi di ricerca su determinati periodi storici. Un esempio tangibile riguarda le limitazioni imposte per legge all'accesso ai documenti d'archivio che potrebbero far luce sulle responsabilità del governo francese sulla strage di manifestanti musulmani favorevoli all'indipendenza dell'Algeria avvenuta a Parigi il 17 ottobre 1961, un episodio che può essere considerato un vero e proprio *lieu de mémoire* per il popolo francese.

In questa intervista, Branche affronta il rapporto fra la ricerca storica e le esigenze di sicurezza interna di un governo (di stampo liberaldemocratico, come quello francese), dato che il lavoro del ricercatore non può prescindere dalle leggi e dalle politiche governative, sebbene Branche sottolinei che le esigenze dello stato non possono porre veti alla ricerca storica. Successivamente, si discute la questione del passa-

to come “risorsa politica” e di come gli storici possano usarla in una maniera corretta per essere parte attiva della vita politica, senza però compromettere il loro rigore scientifico. Questa domanda è molto rilevante per l’attività degli storici che si sono opposti alle leggi e ordinanze sopracitate. Infine, pur riconoscendo l’importanza dell’accesso agli archivi, si è discusso dei limiti che presenta un approccio “neopositivista” (cioè incentrato troppo e unicamente sui documenti d’archivio). Questa preoccupazione deriva da una serie di preconcetti fallaci che abbiamo riguardo ai documenti, visti troppo spesso come portatori di una verità oggettiva e dunque non analizzati nel loro processo di costruzione, preconcetti che non rendono più facile la comprensione dei documenti a un pubblico di non specialisti.

(AC)

It is not uncommon to hear about states, including liberal democracies, that restrict historical research and justify this modus operandi citing “internal and international security issues”. Since it seems to me that this same line of thought is being adopted by the French government, do you believe that historical research on France’s colonial past should be limited by the French state’s current security interests in internal and foreign affairs?

Definitively not! Let’s imagine for a second that it would be so. Colonial past does have resonance in France today and elsewhere in the world. Issues of State recognition for past crimes are very relevant in other former colonial metropolises such as London, Amsterdam or Brussels. In the last decade, Italy has not been a stranger to this trend either. Why should France be different? We need to know as much as possible about the colonial period. I assume (perhaps naively) that it is always better to have a fair and solid historical narrative before starting any political gesture. Symbolic gestures or judicial decisions need to be linked to scientific narratives even though their justification and the way they are formed are, of course, different. The need for a shared history or just a historical narrative based on archival materials should not be limited by security interests. I, at least, cannot see any interest in internal or foreign affairs that are important enough to warrant hiding the truth or preventing people from having access to archival material. Even if there are many unpleasant realities for the French State or French society that might be disclosed. One must add that formerly colonized societies

and independent States are not immune in that regard: the colonial past is not black and white and historical research can also shed light on some realities that today's regimes would not like to be known. The issue of getting access to the archives and allowing independent historical research is not only an issue for France.

We often hear that the work and publications of researchers are an effective weapon in the fight against historical oblivion, distortions of history and the alteration of memory; however, this facet of the historian's work is often relegated to academic circles and seldom influences the broader sphere of collective memory. What, in your opinion, is the historian's role in shaping public/collective memory?

The historian's role is not first and foremost of his or her own responsibility. Your question addresses more broadly the place of history, as an independent and scientific discourse in society, from school curriculums to TV shows. The past is a political resource and therefore historical narratives need to differentiate themselves from other narratives about the past. Historical discourse indeed needs to share the floor with many other speakers engaged in using the past as rhetoric, a means to an end, a reservoir of examples, etc. This is, to me, one of the biggest challenges: to make people understand what a historical discourse is, what it is made of. Therefore, as academic historians we need not only to talk about the past but also to make clear where our narratives come from. We must find the ways to address both: the content and the production of academic discourses. It is not an issue of talking or writing simple, leaving the complexity behind, etc. I do think that it is possible to communicate to a wider audience the results of academic research in history. But we, as academics, need to know more, to be more aware of the challenges posed by the media or the political sphere or any sphere outside academia that would be interested in our knowledge. The role of historians is not to shape public memory, however their works definitely play a role in shaping it and historians can decide to be part of their society in such an active role: writing school books, having YouTube channels, twitter accounts, participating in public debates...

Last but not least, even if the entirety of the material contained in French public archives were to be made available, it appears that historians would still

face some methodological problems. You have, in the past, stressed the need to avoid “archival fetishism”, mentioning that an excessively neopositivistic approach is compounded by the limits of archival sources. However, a layman or an aspiring historian, who does not have much familiarity with archives, might not know exactly what these limits are. This begs the question, what obstacles do archival sources present?

I am not sure whether I get your question right but, yes, we face this paradox as historians engaged in the public debate and willing to put to the fore the issue of the archives as a democratic issue. When we succeed in getting the media’s attention and the attention of politicians (either in the Parliament or in the Executive branch), we are confronted with their naivety when it comes to archives. Two types of naivety that are the two sides of the same coin. Either people are afraid of the secrets concealed in the archives, or they are willing to open the archives so that the truth will be known. In either option, the basic assumption is that the truth lies naked in the archives. Both attitudes assume that truth needs not to be constructed or elaborated, but only unveiled. This is a very strong belief. However, that truth is an intellectual operation needing specific skills. That historical truth, as any scientific truth, can be revised and should be open to contradiction, open to refutability in the Popperian sense. Although refutability is a strong basis for history as a science, it is something that always needs to be explained. To be able to revise a historical narrative does not weaken it but rather makes its components explicit. Archival materials are just one of these components.

To make the lay public understand what can be expected from the archives is crucial. It is true for individuals seeking a personal or familial truth in the archives as well as for citizens interested in the past. Ideally people interested in the archives need to be accompanied. Archivists cannot always do it but they do it when possible. Yet their knowledge and their ability to build a historical narrative are different from the historian’s skills. The best we can do, I suppose, is to show how we work, to get the people to know better the kitchens where historical narratives are cooked and not just offer them nice plates and ready-baked books. By being aware of the difficulties and loopholes of any scientific text written by an historian, people might find a middle ground between the absolute truth of the archives and total distrust.

