

Research paper

Preparation - Studies in the New History: On the Need for the Concept of Mentalities *

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the importance of the concept of "mentalities" in historical studies, particularly within the context of the Annales School and the broader movement of New History (Nouvelle Histoire). It argues that history should not only focus on political events and dominant figures but also examine the collective mental structures that shape how societies perceive and respond to events.

Mentalities refer to the shared beliefs, perceptions, emotions, and representations embedded in a society's collective memory. These influence behaviors, attitudes, and the ways individuals relate to existence, culture, rituals, myths, disease, and other phenomena. The history of mentalities aims to uncover these underlying frameworks, thus providing a deeper understanding of human agency beyond material or empirical factors.

The authors trace the development of the concept through the works of key Annales historians like Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, Jacques Le Goff, and Philippe Ariès, emphasizing their efforts to desacralize traditional historiography and open history to interdisciplinary approaches involving psychology, sociology, and cultural studies.

A key argument is that mentalities function as dynamic forces, deeply rooted in collective representations rather than isolated individual thoughts. These representations manifest in political ideologies, social beliefs, and cultural practices. By studying these, historians can understand how societies construct their identities, react to phenomena, and preserve memories across time.

Furthermore, the article highlights the methodological challenges of studying mentalities, advocating for a holistic approach that avoids reducing historical analysis to isolated causal factors. Instead, it calls for reconstructing the "mental landscape" of a period in its coherence and internal logic, acknowledging both rational and irrational dimensions of human thought.

In conclusion, the authors stress that incorporating the concept of mentalities into historical research enriches historiography, enabling a deeper comprehension of human behavior, agency, and collective memory. It shifts historical inquiry towards understanding the cultural and psychological underpinnings of societies, offering a more nuanced interpretation of historical events.

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Introduction:

As a field of knowledge, the history of mentalities seeks to uncover the ways in which a society's mentality was formed during a specific historical period, shaping how individuals related to existence, beings, events, and occurrences. This field bears an ontological dimension that questions phenomena and their influence on shaping the mental frameworks of societies, as well as the collective representations, attitudes, and behaviors embedded within them.

Since the history of mentalities operates on the assumption that there is a mental structure governing all aspects of human agency, it has become a rich domain where the history of cultural systems intersects with social, psychological, and economic history. It examines people's perceptions, emotions, and representations of beliefs¹, rituals, traditions, culture, superstition, myths, miracles, disease, epidemics, famines... adopting the notion of temporal interweaving and valuing all that falls within collective memory and the human unconscious. This has opened new horizons for historical studies that now recognize the significance of the unwritten in revealing the formation and manifestations of mentalities in their various dimensions.

This shift in the subject of history—from a political history to one that considers all relevant contextual data to achieve understanding and interpretation without privileging the central over the marginal—has moved history from being merely narrative to becoming a history of mentalities. Thus, it becomes essential to explore the stages of this transformation and the factors that nourished it.

1. The Concept of Mentality as a Research Necessity

The Annales School has, at various stages, presented itself as a vehicle for shifting history from classical writing to an approach focused on underlying mental structures behind social, economic, and demographic topics.

The return of mentalities within the transformations of historical studies, especially in the Annales framework, raises questions worthy of inquiry. These questions remain justified and understandable when we revisit the formation of the concept of "mentalities" itself, which appeared in various shades, meanings, and uses amid intellectual debates—particularly between Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. Despite their differences, both employed the concept at the core of their works: Bloch in *The Royal Touch*, and Febvre in *The Destiny of Martin Luther*.

Despite the centrality of the concept within the Annales project, it did not become a dominant or widely used term in other major journals of the human and social sciences. For instance², Émile Durkheim's journal *L'Année Sociologique* used the concept of "representations", which lies at the heart of the history of mentalities. Similarly, the journal *Historical Synthesis*, founded by Henri Berr, adopted the concept of "historical psychology" without explicitly invoking "mentalities." Thus, the usage of the concept remained mostly confined to historians specializing in this field. This epistemological status invites us to trace its formation within the discipline of history to uncover its characteristics and levels of expression.

As a branch of historical inquiry, the history of mentalities is concerned with the beliefs, thoughts, and collective perceptions that form a society's way of thinking and its culture over time. These mentalities shape how people see the world and are in turn reshaped by cultural, social, religious, and political factors. Therefore, historical research into the formation of a society's mentality with regard to a given

¹ Simone Weil reminds us in her book *The Great Beast* that human beings find comfort in degenerate collective truths and stubborn myths, treating them as beliefs that together constitute opinion. This mysterious force is elusive and difficult to interpret at all times. The historian, more so than the sociologist, struggles to determine the share of emotion and reason in the formation of opinion, the role of the marginalized in its development, and the place of the supernatural. Alfred Sauvy, *L'opinion publique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1958.

² It is true that the Annales journal succeeded in disrupting the established norms of historical writing and exerted a significant influence on the discipline of history. However, it did not manage to secure widespread dissemination of the concept of mentalities in other academic fields, nor did it achieve a strong presence in foreign academic traditions.

human issue requires a grasp of the concept and its development, using it as a lens for analysis and interpretation.

This demands engagement with several theoretical issues and research requirements before tracing the formation of the mentality under study, including:

- The manifestations of the concept of mentality in its earliest form as developed by the founders of the Annales School.
- The theoretical factors that enabled historians to treat mentalities as meaningful and significant objects of study.
- The changes and novelties that affected the concept and marked historical writing with a renewed conceptual load.

Exploring these aspects will illuminate how the evolution of the concept contributed to breaking history away from its narrow, traditional confines—those fixated on dominant figures of the past—toward a history concerned with the modes of life and the content of collective memory. The goal: to understand mental formations through the lens of the past.

Historical research has demonstrated a desire to endow history with a comprehensive, totalizing character, as seen in Lucien Febvre's *Combats pour une histoire nouvelle* (Struggles for a New History), which summarizes the battles fought by new historians against classical political history and simplistic historiography, aiming to desacralize old writings.

This epistemological awareness finds expression in the work of historians of mentalities who called for openness to various fields of knowledge and science in order to explore history in its totality and to redirect historical inquiry toward the human being and their relationship with phenomena. This type of history moves beyond disciplinary boundaries to interpret events in connection with the social groups that preserve collective memory and all that it contains of representations, beliefs, and behaviors.

The Annales historians revolutionized the field of history by paying unprecedented attention to the "history-less"—marginalized groups. Strasbourg historians, for instance, replaced traditional history with social history, studying the cultural, social, and psychological structures of these groups. They employed new tools with scientific rigor to study their mentality, formed by both conscious and unconscious ideas—providing rich material for historical study, functional analysis, and contextual recovery, including their historical ruptures.

2. Mentality as Collective Memory

Mentality finds expression in the set of emotional attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that define the shape of human existence and shape one's understanding of self and of the world. It takes the form of images shared among individuals or groups, deeply rooted in collective memory, which allows them to emerge in group relations and in attitudes and behaviors toward events and phenomena. These phenomena function as symbols with strong foundations that give them the power to influence various aspects of the social and psychological life of individuals and communities. Mentality thus goes beyond pure theoretical abstraction and manifests itself in both collective and individual actions.

This is evident, for example, in the formation of political ideologies, which—unlike economic, philosophical, or religious concepts—are composites of ideas. A historian seeking to probe the collective mind must not limit himself to analyzing the political doctrines developed by a small number of thinkers, but must situate these theories within their context, seeking to uncover their motivations and what they represented to people at the time. They are not merely principles, but rather frameworks shaped by context. All political theories are responses to the tragedies of their time, deeply embedded in the souls of those living in specific historical conditions. As ideologies possess a lasting vitality, we may date their birth, but once they are launched, they never truly vanish. They acquire a social weight, a temporal expression, and a concrete practice—in other words, their symbols take on a popular dimension.

The same approach extends to economic and social thought by gathering and interpreting symbols of all kinds, often scattered and unpredictable. A historian aiming to reconstruct the climate of a specific generation may, for instance, choose a political concept as the subject of investigation¹.

The way individuals, groups, or societies think is rooted in beliefs, ideas, and customs that distinguish them from others. This mode of thinking is emphasized in the works of Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Jacques Le Goff, Philippe Ariès, and many other historians—including Georges Lefebvre, who argues that “a gathering is not simply an addition of individuals whose ideas or emotions have been awakened independently and with full awareness within each one of them. If they come together to act, it is because there is an interaction between individual minds and the formation of a collective mentality. In a crowd, people do not think of themselves or act in the same way as if they were isolated.”²

This dynamic is not merely a continuation of the past; rather, the imagination of the past becomes the foundation for what is to come. Thus, the modern historian regards the past as the essential material—or rather, the raw material—for the study of collective mentalities, highlighting attitudes and behaviors through the exploration of collective memory³.

This memory is characterized by the diversity of its forms and contents, built upon a dialectic of remembrance and forgetfulness. It is also marked by its capacity for appropriation and legitimation. In this sense, the philosophical dimension of historical inquiry lies in studying mentalities to uncover the history of this dialectic—between remembering and forgetting—that runs through human consciousness, both individual and collective, across time.

Human memory constantly absorbs attitudes and conceptions through lived experience, which is filled with political, economic, natural, and intellectual events. From these experiences, implicit ideas are formed, leading individuals into confrontation, conflict, or varied responses to phenomena. Over time, these representations and positions manifest in human behavior, giving rise to beliefs, cultures, and perceptions that become taken-for-granted assumptions guiding one’s relationship with existence and reality.

Georges Lefebvre, in particular, has emphasized the impact of ideologies, myths, and images. He believed that we distort history if we forget the emotional power of such representations⁴. Psychological motives are essential in identifying explanatory causes of events, and the individual—though a mere particle in a mass—is always the decisive factor. Toward the end of his life, one of Lefebvre’s favored ideas was to investigate the role of the “human machine.” What matters most for the individual in a given event is not how it actually happened, nor how a commentator or historian might reconstruct it afterward with the benefit of hindsight and access to a sequence of reactions, but how the actors and contemporaries experienced the event, how they understood it, what distorted image reached them, and what image they transmitted to those who came after them⁵.

¹ Trénard Louis. *L'Histoire des mentalités collectives : les pensées et les hommes. Bilan et perspectives*. In: *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, tome 16 N°4, Octobre-décembre 1969. p. 653.

² Trénard Louis ‘Georges Lefebvre, précurseur de l'histoire des mentalités. *Op.cit.*, p. 417.

³ Jacques Le Goff’s book *History and Memory* is one of the works in which he explored the complex relationship between history and memory. In this work, he focused on the evolution of religious and economic life and examined the extent to which these developments influenced the mentalities of Christian communities.

⁴ « La révolution et le rationalisme », *Ann. Révol/ fr.*, Janv. –Mars 1946, pp. 4-34 ; «Place de la Révolution dans l’histoire du monde », *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 1948, n° 3, pp. 257-266. In : Trénard Louis ‘Georges Lefebvre ‘précurseur de l'histoire des mentalités. *Op.cit.*, p. 424

⁵ Trénard Louis ‘Georges Lefebvre ‘précurseur de l'histoire des mentalités. *Op.cit.*, p. 424.

3. Human Agency as a Representation of Mentality

This kind of historical inquiry has opened new pathways for enriching historical studies. Historiography is no longer confined to political, military, or diplomatic events. The historian's role is to analyze human agency and the mental images that shaped how people perceived and reacted to historical events.

These collective representations form deep forces. Even if flawed or emotionally charged, they may be more important than objective reality. Walter Lippmann noted that most people do not judge events based on facts, but on their mental image of those facts⁸. Historical research today has many tools for studying such representations. Georges Lefebvre⁹ emphasized methodological rigor, arguing that beyond economic, social, or political conditions, historians must analyze the mentalities that shaped people's actions. He argued that: "Between cause and effect lies the formation of collective mentalities; this is what establishes the real causal relationship and allows us to understand an impact that may seem disproportionate to its cause." This perspective stands in contrast with¹⁰ classical historiography, which focused more on narrative and chronology.

4. Dimensions of Mentality Formation

Mentality constitutes a fundamental pillar in defining the identity of any group, being a voluntary assembly of individuals driven by a shared emotion or common mode of thinking¹¹, aiming to undertake a coordinated action or to celebrate a collective event. Each group, thus, possesses its own mentality, from which it draws the elements, foundations, and characteristics of its identity.

The intrinsic relationship between identity and mentality renders the latter a concept that resists precise and definitive definition. The content of a society's mentality, across its historical extension, is subject to transformation and variation according to the evolution and plurality of social phenomena, and the diversity of historical periods. In modern historical studies, mentality refers to the set of spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional traits that distinguish a particular society or social group. It encompasses representations and modes of life, as well as systems, values, traditions, beliefs, ideas, judgments, interpretations, and worldviews.

Mentality enables the individual to reflect upon the self, providing a distinct outlook on the world and the capacity to transform one's modes of existence and behavior in accordance with values and choices that ultimately express the interplay between consciousness and the unconscious.

In this sense, mentality becomes a cognitive formation through which the self is expressed, recognized as an open-ended project, re-evaluates its achievements, seeks new meanings, and creates works that transcend its own limitations. The concept of mentality thus assists in understanding human behavior as an external expression through which we may trace the historical schemes of human agency—whether implicit or explicit, rational or irrational. These patterns are always present as guiding forces for individual or collective behavior in moments of need.

This concept highlights the diversity of human behavior. When the history of mentalities takes events and occurrences as its subject, its aim is to uncover the dominant mental structures that made certain events likely and prevented others from taking place. In this way, the work of the historian is no longer a merely technical endeavor confined to specific methodologies for answering narrowly defined questions. Rather, it becomes an inquiry into the human being—with all their strength and fragility, beliefs and convictions, rational and irrational thought, and the ideologies¹² that dominate them—as a true agent of history.

⁸ Trénard Louis. *L'Histoire des mentalités collectives : les pensées et les hommes. Bilan et perspectives* Op.cit., p. 654.

⁹ Louis Trenard believes that in the works of Georges Lefebvre, society does not overshadow individuals. He assigns significant importance to those who played a leading or pioneering role. For him, the Revolution is not a sequence of inevitable events, but a struggle undertaken by individuals, groups, "popular fronts," or popular assemblies. These people are not necessarily driven by selfish class interests; rather, they are animated by ideals and a shared sense of enthusiasm.

¹⁰ « Foules révolutionnaires ». *Annales hist. Fr.* 1934, repris dans *Etudes...* 1963, pp. 381-392.

¹¹ Trénard Louis «Georges Lefebvre «précurseur de l'histoire des mentalités. Op.cit., p. 416.

¹² Lucien Trénard emphasizes the value of ideologies in revealing two essential aspects:

This perspective refrains from fragmenting the mental landscape into isolated elements or attributing explanatory power to one force over others. Instead, the historian, when faced with such manifestations—including those that appear irrational¹³—must “isolate them, describe them, and move toward analysis, which is perhaps the most objective process of historical knowledge¹⁴. One must avoid dismantling the mental scene or building external causal links with what is economic or social for the sake of extracting a single explanatory factor. Rather, we must reconstitute this mental landscape in its overall coherence, its internal solidity, or at least its slow evolution.”¹⁵

Conclusion:

By employing the concept of mentality in studying different forms of human agency, we can gain insight into the psychological, cultural, and social dimensions that shaped people’s responses to historical phenomena. It allows us to move beyond material or empirical explanations, offering a deeper understanding of collective reactions and the reasons for their persistence.

As an operational concept, mentality enables the historian to analyze the interplay between culture, science, religion, myth, and belief in historical inquiry. It opens new avenues for reading history in a way that bridges the past and present.

Bibliography

[1] Alfred Sauvy, *L'opinion publique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1958.

[2] Alphonse Dupront, « Problèmes et méthodes d'une histoire de la psychologie collective », in Ann. E.S.C., janv.-fév. 1961.

[3] E. Amado Levy-Valensi, « Histoire et psychologie », Ann. ESC, sept. 1965.

[4] Jacques Le Goff's book *History and Memory* is one of the works in which he explored the complex relationship between history and memory. In this work, he focused on the evolution of religious and economic life and examined the extent to which these developments influenced the mentalities of Christian communities.

[5] **Julien Benda**, « Mon premier testament », Cahiers de la Quinzaine, XII, 3, 1910.

[6] Louis Trénard believes that in the works of Georges Lefebvre, society does not overshadow individuals. He assigns significant importance to those who played a leading or pioneering role. For him, the Revolution is not a sequence of inevitable events, but a struggle undertaken by individuals, groups, "popular fronts," or popular assemblies. These people are not necessarily driven by selfish class interests; rather, they are animated by ideals and a shared sense of enthusiasm.

[7] Trénard Louis. *L'Histoire des mentalités collectives : les pensées et les hommes. Bilan et perspectives*. In: Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine, tome 16 N°4, Octobre-décembre 1969.

[8] « La révolution et le rationalisme », Ann. Révol/ fr., Janv. –Mars 1946, pp. 4-34 ; «Place de la Révolution dans l'histoire du monde », Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations, 1948, n° 3, pp. 257-266.

[9] « Foules révolutionnaires ». Annales hist. Fr. 1934, repris dans Etudes... 1963.

The first is their explicit expression in the language of systematic philosophical thought, while the second remains hidden, functioning as a logical justification for what is essentially popular in nature—an expression of the spirit of the age and its demands. He writes: "Political ideologies, which differ in one way or another from economic, philosophical, or religious concepts, are compounds of ideas. The historian who wishes to delve into the collective mind must not limit himself to analyzing the political doctrines developed by a few intellectuals. Instead, he must place these theories in their context, seeking to uncover their motives and what they represented to people at the time. They are not merely abstract principles, but configurations shaped by historical circumstances. All political theories are responses to the tragedies of their era, deeply embedded in the psyche of those experiencing them. Ideologies, once born, enjoy a lasting life: we can trace their moment of origin, but once they emerge, they never truly die. They carry social weight, temporal presence, and practical application—in other words, they become symbols endowed with a popular dimension. This same method of analysis extends to economic and social thought, requiring the collection of symbols of all kinds scattered across various definitions." Trénard Louis. *L'Histoire des mentalités collectives : les pensées et les hommes. Bilan et perspectives* Op.cit., p. 658.

¹³ Julien Benda speaks of the negative role played by systematic and logical ideologies in marginalizing emotions, distorting them, and severing them from the contexts of their emergence: "The doctrines of philosophers are adopted by the public only insofar as they satisfy public opinion. Emotions are constantly distorted to better accommodate it... It is these distorted doctrines that constitute the democratic history of ideas." **Julien Benda**, « Mon premier testament », Cahiers de la Quinzaine, XII, 3, 1910, 76 p. (P. 14).

¹⁴ Alphonse Dupront, « Problèmes et méthodes d'une histoire de la psychologie collective », in Ann. E.S.C., janv.-fév. 1961, p. 3-11.

¹⁵ E. Amado Levy-Valensi, « Histoire et psychologie », Ann. ESC, sept. 1965, p. 923-938.