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Medieval society

You have entrusted me not merely with the teaching of history of the middle ages, though such an act would have accorded perfectly with the traditions of this institution, but more specifically with the teaching of the history of medieval society.¹ I assume you have done so because it has seemed likely to you that a study of social relations might cast a fresh light on all the various elements that go to make up civilization as a whole. In addition I must also presume that, as the main purpose of the Collège de France is to teach science in the very process of being made, you have decided that the most urgent notions—those one can expect to yield the most up-to-date results—must be placed against the least perfectly defined perspectives of medieval history, in other words those of social history.

My audience may be surprised to hear me speak in this way about social history, standing as I do on the very spot where Lucien Febvre taught for so long and campaigned so vigorously for a new kind of history. We have all followed his battles with excitement and fascination and we may recall how much has already been accomplished, is being done at the present moment, and will be done in the future. For myself, I must also salute with gratitude and respect the memory of March Bloch, for it is to him I owe the discovery that we must always be looking beneath the dust of our documents and listening in the silence of our museums for man as he really was. However, we cannot ignore the fact—borne out, alas, by the arrangements and titles of countless pieces of research—that often social history still seems to be no more than an annexe, an appendage, dare I even say, the poor relation of economic history. For more than half a century the latter has indeed forged ahead to give a large body of prolific research life and content; it has conquered the wide open spaces and is at present, buttressed by recent developments in the archaeology of material culture, blazing fresh trails. It is all-triumphant, and by its very success it sweeps the history of society along in its train. For it is obvious that the study of social stratification and the relationships binding individuals or groups cannot be undertaken without first clearly understanding the organization

¹ An inaugural lecture at the Collège de France.

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of production and the distribution of profits at any given moment.

However, we must be particularly on our guard in two respects. In the first place, historians of the medieval economy have not always avoided applying to their observation of the past economic concepts based on modern conditions, and these may be revealed in practice as both anachronistic and distorted. Thus, they have for long unconsciously accorded pride of place in their studies to commerce and the circulation of money without having precisely defined the role of money or the nature of exchange in a civilization which was as totally rural as the medieval west. (Some of the conclusions reached in ethnographical studies would surely have helped them here.) In the second place, and this is an even more important point, it would be wrong to think that we have taken the analysis of a society to its limits when, by examining censuses, surveys and the registers of *estimes*, we have been able to rank the heads of households in a hierarchy of wealth; when, by interpreting terms of leases or contracts of employment, we have seen how this worker or that suffered exploitation; when, through surveys made for tax purposes, we have laid bare the trends of demographic change. Indeed, the attitudes of individuals and groups of individuals to their own situation in society and the conduct these attitudes dictate are determined not so much by actual economic conditions as by the image in the minds of the individuals or groups. And the latter is, of course, never a faithful reflection of reality, but is affected by a complex play of factors. Thus, by putting social phenomena into the straightforward context of economic phenomena, we narrow drastically the field of enquiry, restrict the scope of the problem and prevent ourselves from forming a clear view of the essential dynamic.

In fact, from a very early stage, when economic history itself was in its beginnings, some scholars had found it necessary to complement the study of the material foundations of prehistoric societies with studies of rituals, beliefs, myths and other aspects of collective psychology by which individual behaviour is ruled and which order social relations just as directly and imperatively as economic facts do. In this way, that branch of history, which has been called rather inexactly the history of the mind, was born, although its progress was for long slow and hesitant. From these beginnings the younger humane sciences, such as social anthropology and semeiology (the study of symbols), have in recent years made rapid growth, and have lent us their methods and enlarged our aims. The vast fields they have opened up to scholars should be all the more attractive to medievalists since most of the documents of that period were written by churchmen, and therefore place much greater emphasis on spiritual matters than on economic realities; for, while throwing particular light on attitudes of mind, they provide few quantifiable facts susceptible to statistical manipulation. But there is a pitfall here for historians, which some have not been able to avoid. By allowing themselves to espouse the same point of view as their witnesses and by trying hard to separate the spiritual from the temporal, they have sometimes been led to ignore the concrete world and to place too much

emphasis on attitudes of mind as compared to the material background by which these attitudes were determined. The history of attitudes of mind has thus unconsciously deviated in directions near to those of *Geistesgeschichte*.

Consequently, if we want social history to expand and gain its independence, we must set it on a path where the history of material civilization and the history of collective attitudes will converge. But first of all I think we have to postulate three principles of methodology. We have to start with the idea that man in society constitutes the ultimate object of historical research in which he is the leading protagonist. Social history is, in fact, all history. And since society is a single entity made up of economic, political and mental factors which cannot be separated except for the purposes of analysis, history draws upon all knowledge and all material, from whatever source. Obviously it should not be content with what emerges from written texts, either narrative or legal, which are intended merely to order the liturgy, to entertain, to point a moral or to make the transition from the real to the imaginary life. It is not even enough for us to reach out beyond the contents of the documents and to examine the formal constructions and try to reach a true understanding of the world of the men who wrote and used the manuscripts through the words and the arrangement of the vocables, figures and manner of calculation, the form of the discourse, or even the actual shape of the calligraphy. Social history has carefully to consider each relic of the past—the remains of tools and equipment unearthed on sites of excavations; all traces of former human settlement still visible on the face of the countryside or town; all that can be gleaned from the ground plan of a pilgrimage sanctuary, the composition of an illuminated manuscript, the rhythm of a Gregorian chant, or the universe reflected in the different manifestations of artistic creation. Because it is quite true, as Pierre Francastel has told us, that 'each society founding an economic and political order also creates a figurative order and simultaneously generates its own institutions, ideas, imagery and displays.'

Historians of society must, of course, make full use of all these sources, and must, for the convenience of research, begin by analysing phenomena at different levels. But they have to stop treating the history of society as the handmaid of the history of material civilization, or of power, or of ideas, for its true calling is one of synthesis. It has to gather together the results of enquiries conducted simultaneously in different fields and to unify them into a global vision. As Michelet has said, 'in order to rediscover the life of the past we have patiently to explore every path and to examine its every twist and turn.' But, he adds, 'we have also to weave our strands into a single web with loving care, and to connect the various parts so that, with one explosive movement, they fuse together into life itself.' Weaving the strands together means also recognizing the precise connections between the different threads.

This then is our second principle—to attempt to isolate the real connecting links which are contained in the heart of the larger whole; to

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reveal, for instance, how the pressure of economic forces can influence a scheme of ethics. The manner in which a striving for spiritual improvement could end in failure because of the way it reacted on a system of production is exemplified by the fate of those peculiar twelfth-century societies, the Cistercian abbeys. These fraternities wanted to set an example and were governed by a code of conduct six centuries old, the rule of Saint Benedict. The code was reinterpreted with the solicitude of total faith, so when the constitution of the new order was drawn up emphasis was laid on the need for poverty. Some reaction was, indeed, essential against the moral consequences of the affluence of the monks of Cluny, the most eminent Benedictine community of the age: their life of comfort and security based on the ownership of land appeared scandalous. But because the Cistericians refused to live off rents, insisted on gaining their daily bread by their own toil, chose to live in the wilderness among pasture and forest, and conformed to the archaic rule of life they had rashly adopted, they found themselves, in spite of their vow of poverty, in the forefront of economic activity. Over and above their own needs they produced wool, meat and iron which was in ever greater demand in the outside world. Economic forces therefore took an unforeseen revenge by making the apostles of poverty rich. No doubt they continued to live in the wilderness, faithful to their ideals, but in the eyes of those who only saw them at fairs making successful deals as traders and rounding off their estates at the expense of their neighbours, or in the eyes of those who, in the midst of growing prosperity, did not fare equally well, the men of God were certainly not poor. The Cistericians, then, ceased after a time to represent spiritual perfection and the world's respect was transferred to the men who, clad in sackcloth and owning nothing, walked barefoot in the outskirts of the cities.

But our investigations into these ramifications reveal that each motive force, even though depending on a link with other motive forces, nevertheless finds itself propelled forward by its own momentum. Even though they do not overlap, the forces are so closely connected that they are linked in a coherent system, each forward movement developing in its own way, but stimulated by the constantly changing sequence of outside events and by economic conditions and other influences of an even more profound nature moving with their own and slower rhythm. The difference in pace produces frequent discordances, time lags, attractions and sometimes total obstructions, all of which serve to tighten indiscriminately the springs capable of suddenly releasing violent changes. The system of justice is one example. If the system is fixed by written statutes it can evolve only with difficulty; but if it is preserved by no more than the collective memory it can change relatively easily. Nevertheless, in feudal times oral customs, although flexible, were not able to adjust themselves without a certain time lag to changes in the distribution of a power which was designed for a permanent control of social relations. Thus in the French *seigneuries* of the eleventh century, habits of speech, forms of justice and customary acts corresponding to

them caused the survival for many decades of the cleavage between the descendants of slaves and labourers called free, although the public institutions which gave it birth were crumbling away. The differentials that these customs kept alive, and the prohibitions and exclusions which they permitted to continue for a time masked the evolution of economic forces. They slowed them down, held back population growth and created frustrations that helped the seeds of urban disturbances to germinate and the ferment of legal innovation to work. The very complexity of the social scene revealed so imperfectly by our discontinuous evidence leads us therefore to put forward one last methodological principle. The interaction of the forces of resistance and propulsion, the apparent interruptions thus provoked and the contradictions revealed must be analysed in minute detail. The static illusion of a coloured photograph produced at any given moment selected by the historian for his observation must be dissipated. It is only by picking out the connections and discordances from the scene viewed as a whole that we can attempt to construct a history of medieval society. I would now like to sketch out briefly the main outlines of this story.

There came a day when the chariots of the barbarians broke through the barrier of the Roman armies. There came a day when Sidonius Apollinaris was forced, to his disgust, to summon the Germanic chiefs to parley in the courtyard of his residence. In this way, an encounter between two societies with somewhat similar features inaugurated the middle ages. Rome still fascinated the barbarians; but in the west she presented no more than a crumbling façade. Indeed, for many years the repercussions of a prolonged demographic and economic decline had damaged and overstrained the network of cities and roads which the legions had thrown across the conquered provinces in order to hold them down and to protect the well-being of the small privileged classes in them. As the veneer of an urban and mercantile civilization peeled away from the rural and manorial substratum of pre-colonial times, the framework of the great estates peopled by bands of dependants tied to village headmen re-emerged. In the process of a slow osmosis, the actual barbarian invasions dated by historians appear as no more than especially turbulent episodes in a continuous evolution, during which the frontiers of the Empire lost their role as lines of demarcation. In their migrations the tribes probably brought with them some elements of their own culture—a less pervasive notion of liberty, a glorification of the military virtues, the art of making jewellery and a feeling for abstract design. They settled down in parts of the country where other traditions had survived—the consumption of bread and wine, the use of money and the employment of stone for building. Their leaders, acting against a backdrop of city palaces and amphitheatres, attempted to deck themselves out in the ostentatious finery of an expiring civilization. In any event the two societies, the invading and the native, were both rural, supported by slavery, dominated by a powerful aristocracy, and almost equally brutal in manners. Consequently they mixed without

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difficulty. The Christian church, anxious to gather into one faith all the peoples of the earth, hastened the fusion and the cross began to appear on Germanic tombs. But the church itself became more barbaric and countrified. Henceforth its outposts were to be monasteries, and in them were preserved no more than such fragments of Latin letters as would serve for its liturgy.

In the obscurity into which by the seventh century the wreck of classical culture had sunk, we may discern in the history of production and human settlement a few tenuous signs of a decisive reversal in the secular trend. From this point, then, we can trace the start of a slow growth, encouraged perhaps by the more favourable climatic changes in western Europe. But because the first stirring of growth took place against the primitive background of an economic system partly agrarian and partly military, the peasant clans found their only source of wealth in expeditions of plunder. In the process of the raids, and as a result of them, the bands of the best armed warriors consolidated into states founded on conquest. The most glorious of these political entities was the Carolingian Empire. But what was the reality of this empire? It was no more than glorified village settlement blown up into a universe which drew together in a series of concentric rings all the lands from the outer fringes of settlement to those of the sovereign himself. It stretched from the margin of impenetrable forests in which outlaws sought sanctuary, herds of swine rooted in autumn and huntsmen ventured, and included the clearings where the starving peasants struggled to grow the food they were forced to bring to the residences of the gentry—the men trained in combat, whom the king, their warlord, led each spring-time further afield on raiding sorties. This concentric organization was linked together by a chain of personal obedience forged in the inner heart of family groups and households and in the bands of fighting men. The chain depended on a complex play of dues and obligations which Carolingian legislation claimed to institutionalize. But clustered around the person of the sovereign were the monks and clergy whose attitudes to a large extent disguised the reality of social relations. They were the heirs of Roman culture, and just as they urged Charlemagne to transport antique columns from Italy to help build his chapel at Aix, so also they endeavoured to rebuild a political edifice based on the remnants of Roman culture which turned out to be in fact no more than a re-assembly of the debris of the old. They attempted to persuade the king that he was Caesar's successor and that his mission therefore was to preside over the rebirth of the Empire and the Roman order. Taking their inspiration from both Bible and classical literature they set themselves the singular task of constructing an all-encompassing society. And so successful were they in their efforts that this society was for centuries able to maintain its place in collective consciousness.

This society's shape was also a concentric one. As it was felt to be the earthly reflection of the only true reality, the kingdom of God, it was conceived to be permanent, for it was a part of the divine purpose in

which the only advance was by a spiritual road leading mankind to the last judgment. Alone at the centre was the king, the Lord's anointed, representative of the one God, presiding over the destiny of all Christianity and charged with the duty of leading it to salvation. As Augustus, the Prince of Peace, he was obliged to spread the faith by chastising evildoers and by forcing baptism on pagans beyond the frontiers. His other duty was to reduce, or at least to halt, the expansion of the Jewish community, a hard core of spiritual opposition which, though rejected, was still full of vitality. As he was the guarantor of the established order, so also was he the appointed protector of the church and of the poor who were threatened by the forces of evil and the assaults of the mighty.

This account reflects sufficiently accurately some of the tendencies of contemporary reality—the missionary zeal, the pushing back of frontiers which from the beginning of the ninth century turned military expeditions into hazardous and barely profitable undertakings and, most of all, the increasing pressure of the great estate which absorbed and yoked the few peasants who were still independent. The picture as painted by the intellectuals of the church is thus revealed as a complete contrast to the very framework of power that it was intended to reflect and justify. The wish to make the king a peaceful ruler had in fact the immediate effect of loosening his hold over the powerful nobles whom he controlled best when they were assembled for war and the division of spoils. The wish to moralize about the royal function, to impose duties on the king, and to range him on the side of the poor, was to set him in direct opposition to an aristocracy which was becoming more and more aggressive and whose power was being reinforced, without it realizing it, by changes taking place in the rural economy. But no sooner was the idealized picture of the social structure clarified and, as in the reign of Louis the Pious, beginning to affect the ruler's consciousness, than other forces gathered to encompass the ruin of the great Empire. The political structure implanted by the Carolingian colonization in the new lands of Germania was to survive for many years to come; further afield, in the savage world of Slav and Scandinavian, foundations were being laid of an organization of powers similar to the one which two centuries earlier had been sketched out by the ancestors of Charlemagne. But in southern and western Gaul and in Lombardy, the most advanced regions, the king's authority was by the beginning of the tenth century crumbling away; the high level of cultural achievement was for a time brought down with it. The shaft of bright light thrown by the renaissance of the written word was followed by a darkness in the court of the Frankish rulers which plunged their social relations into obscurity and seemed to interrupt the march of history.

The break was an artificial one, however; barely discernible among the shadows, population continued to grow and agrarian technique to improve, thus strengthening the everyday life which was not to be found in the king's court, nor in the heavens above, nor on the earth beneath, but rather in the manor. The manor was the focal point of a power rooted

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in the soil of the countryside and contained within the narrow perspective of a totally rural world and it could not be directed from a distance. The fragmentation of royal power allowed the lords of field and forest to dominate their men more completely at an ever deeper level. Their castles, the centres of local defence, became the only places of refuge for a people terrorized by the latest incursions of pillaging hordes, and their new-found function of protection gave them the means to appropriate a yet larger share of the constantly increasing produce of the soil. Thus the frontiers of two clearly defined classes were drawn—on the one hand the lords, and on the other the peasants. Meanwhile, competition for profits between the lords themselves ruptured the common interest which had until then bound together the aristocracy of laymen and churchmen. Now they were to be opponents and rivals.

So for its part the church had joined the ranks of the lords: it had become rich. The ensuing cultural revival about the year 1000 favoured the formulation of a new set of mental attitudes. It was once more the work of the clergy and monks and appeared in the event to be no more than a reworking of the Carolingian original. Indeed, it held kingship to be fundamental. 'A single being who makes the thunder reigns in the kingdom of heaven,' one of these intellectuals affirms; 'it is therefore only natural that below him a single being should also rule the earth.' But the authority of the sovereign was henceforth to be intangible, manifest in real life only by a display of supernatural power. The system, like its prototype, rested upon the idea of peace, relying on an ultra-conservative concept of social stratification, confirming and foreshadowing the order of relationships in the celestial Jerusalem. It proposed a triangular organization with three orders—three stable, strictly defined, social categories, each invested with a particular function. In the first rank were the men of prayer, united to form the church; this, in its reforming zeal, tried to distinguish itself ever more clearly from the laity by invoking the superiority of the spiritual over the temporal power, and sought a closer cohesion by offering clerks the monastic code. The order next in rank consisted of the warriors whose duty it was to defend all the people, and whose mission, like that of the clergy, justified their right to be supported by the labour of others. Last of all, in total subjection, came the peasants, burdened with endless toil because they were charged with the duty of feeding the other two orders of humanity.

A straightforward model of this kind, perpetuated for so long by its very simplicity, presents three different aspects. In the first place it reflects certain changes in social relationships arising from progress in material civilization and certain changes in political relations. Thus, by welding all country dwellers into one homogeneous class, it brought about under the pressure of manorial cultivation the gradual disappearance in private jurisdiction of the last relics of slavery. It also brings even more clearly into the open a triple antagonism between three related aspects of domination—the economic domination of lords over their labourers; the political domination of warriors over unarmed men;

and the spiritual domination that the Church wished to extend over the laity. But in another way, of course, the model tended to make the antagonisms less blatant. This it did by relying on the notion of service reinforced by personal obedience which it claimed was the basis of the social order. The men who devised the notion of service through obedience had taken Saint Paul's precept that 'the body is a whole with many members, which in spite of their plurality, form but one body.' To their way of thinking, therefore, each of the three orders of society had to play its part in maintaining the status quo in a world which was ordered by divine dispensation and was consequently unalterable. But thereby—and this was the model's third aspect—it was brought face to face with concrete reality, that is the pursuit and acceleration of the economic changes occurring in the last years of the eleventh century. Agricultural growth did indeed take place and increased in speed: wastes and marshes were retreating everywhere before the cultivated fields and vineyards and new villages were springing up. And because agriculture expanded into virgin soil with accumulated reserves of fertility, yields did not fall off and the volume of output constantly increased. As growth was taking place under a manorial system of cultivation where the condition of labourers was at the lowest level, the larger part of the surplus went to the lords, and thereby stimulated their inclination towards luxury. To satisfy new demands, groups of specialists, masons, vinedressers, craftsmen and merchants, emerged from the mass of peasants and the resultant quickening of the exchanges of money and of goods encouraged a rebirth of towns. All over Europe new suburbs grew up around the ancient towns, and *bourgades* appeared where roads and waterways intersected. By the end of the twelfth century the civilization of the west had experienced a fundamental metamorphosis: based for centuries on the countryside, it was from now on to be dominated by the existence of towns, and all wealth, power and creativity was to emanate from urban activities.

Such profound upheavals obviously helped to disorganize the system of relationships which was intended to perpetuate the model of the three orders, although it was conceivable that for a time spiritual harmony could have been restored by the Crusaders' armies, marching to the end of the world to recapture Our Lord's tomb. Disturbances there were and they were manifest on three levels. To begin with, material progress began to complicate the social stratification by arousing within each social category increasingly acute antagonisms. Within the church itself the renewal of urban life brought out into the open the divergence, hitherto concealed, between monastic society, identified with country life, and the society of the secular church centred on the cathedrals. The latter was pulsating with vitality and was to produce many of the leaders of a new era. The increasing circulation and exchange of money reinforced the power of the state and helped to widen within the warrior class the gap between the majority, possessing no more than their land and living humble village existences, and a small and shrinking group,

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in whose hands were concentrated the reins of power from which they derived ever greater profit.

Finally, the economic condition of the labouring classes showed divergent tendencies. The greater mobility of landholding raised some richer peasants above the general level, while the pressure of population fragmented inheritances and multiplied the numbers of landless villagers in need of any job that would keep them alive. In the suburbs of the towns, there was an even sharper contrast between the groups of craftsmen and small shopkeepers on the one hand and the great merchant adventurers on the other.

In the second place, material progress had a profound influence on the ordering of social relations. The latter had up to that time operated mainly in a vertical direction through the hierarchy of authority and subordination. Now, cutting across this arrangement, appeared horizontal connections which brought about the association of equals, such as religious brotherhoods or the inhabitants of rural parishes combining in defence of common interests. In the towns there emerged communes or guilds, companies of armed men and groups of masters and scholars in the vicinity of the episcopal seats. Lastly, the economic forces encouraged personal initiative, stretched the ancient bonds of family, household and great estate, spread widely the hope of personal advancement and imprinted on people's minds an all-pervading sensation of progress. This accentuated several new antagonisms. The latter sprang not only from the opposition between old social categories whose dividing lines were gradually becoming blurred, or between the various strata within all classes, which caused growth while at the same time it helped to break them down; but they also ranged whole generations against each other. The older generation, content with the existing order and anxious to preserve it unchanged, henceforth found itself opposed by a younger generation who saw before it a future rich in prospects for those individuals with the spirit of adventure and initiative. Among these were students competing in scholastic disputations, bachelor knights-errant seeking fortune and glory in tournaments and adventure, and the sons of peasants hoping to find liberty and greater freedom of action in the newly colonized wastelands. But the true inspirers of the great forward drive of the economy and the real architects of progress were those servants of the great magnates who promoted their master's interests while also building up their own fortunes, and those merchants who met at the fairs, changed money on the bridges and lent it out at interest.

By the second half of the twelfth century we can discern various ideas emerging which attempted to embody and justify these social innovations. Those responsible were mostly in the privileged group, the clergy in holy orders, who continued to be the guardians of learning: for while both moralists and preachers were attempting to construct a system of ethics appropriate to the separate professional 'estates' they had distinguished, the problem of poverty was becoming urgent and was creating a spirit of soul-searching among Christians. Within the orthodox as well as the heretical sects, the 'haves' were becoming increasingly aware

that the only act of salvation capable of compensating for the prosperity which they felt to be sinful was to divest themselves of their wealth. But charity towards the sick, the homeless and the wretched who dwelt on the outskirts of the towns was accompanied by a growing contempt for the poor who were held to be themselves responsible for their miserable state and were considered a danger to society. Imperceptibly the notion became current that the poor of all sorts, not only lepers but also the able-bodied indigent, ought to be herded together and excluded from society.

In the decades before and after the year 1300 several clear breaks in continuity occurred. One such break came in the economic field, when a long period of growth was followed by a period of decline, in which the most obvious feature almost everywhere in Europe was a demographic collapse. There was another break in the cultural field with a sudden vulgarization of Christianity. The shift from clerical to lay influence, and the introduction of new values and images, turned Christianity into a popular religion. In fact the main centres of the creative impulse were gradually removed from the patronage of the church and came to reside in the courts of princes. Finally, one even more decisive break with the past occurred in the raw materials of history. The historian's sources become suddenly both much more plentiful and largely non-ecclesiastical in provenance. Thus, by making use of notaries' registers and tax records, by analysing the themes of paintings that had become largely realistic and concerned to portray real life, and by examining the abundant objects dug up by archaeologists which for the first time reveal the atmosphere of the interior of a peasant's hut, the plan of a village, the organization of an estate, or the tools to be found in a craftsman's workshop, it is possible to uncover economic reality and to lay bare, with the help of some quantitative data, the mechanics of growth and decline. The documents also reveal for the first time an array of symbols, ornamentation and emblems which in contemporary eyes marked the distinction between social ranks. Lastly, this documentation throws a direct light on a section of society which had never before been observed except through a distorting glass formed by the judgment of the clergy and the nobility—the only witnesses up to now available to us. For the first time ever our sources reveal the humble folk as they really were. All these breaks in continuity have effectively cut a swathe through the traditions of medieval historiography and nowhere is this more apparent than in France. The result has been to isolate the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries from earlier ones. Is this change of emphasis also valid for the history of societies? Does it not risk introducing fallacious discontinuities into this field?

It so happens that for many years—in France as also in most other European countries—the two last centuries of the middle ages have been the period chosen for the most active research and have produced the most illuminating discoveries. This is why we can see more or less clearly the way in which Europe was decimated by the great

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epidemics of 1348, and are familiar with the business affairs of the merchants of Toulouse or the bankers of Genoa. And even if country life is less well understood than town life, at least we have some idea today of the relations between lords and peasants in the Bordelais or the midlands of England, and of the sort of life led by men in the region of Senlis, and by the knights of Namurois or the Ile de France. But just because our sources are so very abundant and the methods of medievalists themselves are so like those of craftsmen, they cannot be speedily exploited; the studies so far completed are generally confined within the framework of small provinces, individual cities or, an even more restricted field, selected social classes within individual cities. But the very multiplicity of these studies, their widely separated impact, and their often excessively narrow area, prevent us from easily taking a general view. It is true that recent progress in historical knowledge has allowed us to correct the conclusions of older attempts at synthesis. We no longer speak of the great changes which occurred in European history during the fourteenth century as a 'crisis' and we may now dispense with the romantic notions which, excited by the sounds of battle, the overfull charnel houses and the macabre atmosphere of religious art, show the middle ages as a whole ending in a aura of slump, withdrawal and uncertainty, and which neglect all those currents of vitality that caused great expansive enterprises and the wonderful outpourings of a reborn aesthetic in many different localities. But we have to go even further and combine in a single stream the material enriched by so much historical analysis and attempt to grasp the significance of some major events. One phenomenon in particular claims our attention because it seems so characteristic of the age. I refer, of course, to the mass outbreaks of violence, the series of popular revolts and agitations which convulsed the lower ranks of society and which spread in the course of the fourteenth century from one end of Europe to the other. All over the place peasants rose, tools in hand, pillaged the habitations of the nobles and massacred the agents of the princes. Here and there in the suburbs of the towns, bands of craftsmen rioted and, like the Ciompi in Florence, claimed the right to share in communal government. One preliminary question mark is raised by movements of such amplitude continuing over so long a period. Were the later middle ages the only times to have experienced such commotions? Were not the thirteenth, and even the twelfth, centuries similarly shaken? And did equally violent tensions persist between the masses and their lords, although the evidence for them has not perhaps been examined with sufficient enthusiasm, and still lies concealed? And when we seek to isolate the motives which provoked the troubles in earlier periods, we look first at economic conditions because the new documentation available to us means that economic history dominates social history in this period even more imperatively. But in doing so we notice that men like Jacques du Beauvaisis and Wat Tyler's English mob were not recruited from the very poor and that the pauper class was not always attracted to the movements of protest. We may therefore ask ourselves: what precisely

were the germs of conflict which originated in the organization of the productive process? Political history, also well served by the nature of the sources, supplies part of the answer. It encourages us to see in these uprisings a reaction to the increasing weight of the state apparatus and the pressure of taxation. However, to reach conclusions which satisfy us completely we have obviously to delve more deeply into mental attitudes. We must search for links between the origins of the troubles and the systems of beliefs and myths which governed popular consciousness and which in this period become apparent for the first time. We must ask ourselves if these movements were not also set in motion by the millenary yearnings of a still unsophisticated religion, or more simply by the process of education which accompanied the slow popularization of Christianity through the sermons of the wandering friars and the theatre, both of which were powerful means of instructing the masses. The study of religious attitudes, the activities of the brotherhoods and sects and also oral traditions and iconographic themes must all be called upon to shed light on these aspects of social history. But it is as well to recognize that among all the elements that the desired synthesis should assemble, those emerging from history of the collective mind still appear the most uncertain and the least studied. This leads us to conclude that the progress of the history of society depends henceforth on the progress of the history of the mind. But it immediately raises another question, perhaps the most important of all, with which historians today are preoccupied. How can we combine the history of people's minds with the rest of historical research?

It is my fervent wish that the chair to which I have been elevated should become a permanent place for meeting and reflection on this aspect of history. Indeed, it seems to me that the study of the middle ages provides peculiarly favourable conditions because economic theory is perhaps less directly relevant to it than it is to more recent times, and also because the period is sufficiently far removed for the historian to have a better perspective of modes of thought and resulting behaviour. In fact, of course, anyone wishing to understand societies of the past must make a determined effort to liberate himself from the pressure of his own mental attitudes. I have just pointed out how difficult it is to free oneself from current views of economics in order to be able to see the economies of former times in their true perspective. It is even harder not to carry over into our observation of the attitudes of other ages reflections of our own times. And this is what makes the history of collective psychology, and the ethics and concepts of the world upon which it is based, such an intractable subject. It is hard enough that the phenomena of the mind should be embedded in mechanisms far more subtle than those set in motion by the material framework of life: they are not responsive to any of the measurements we dispose of at the present moment and their very lack of substance makes them intangible. What makes history of this kind all the more difficult is that different levels of culture coexist in society and that close interactions develop between them: they are

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bound together by movements of which the strongest are those that cause models fashioned for elites to become gradually involved in deeper and wider circles, and thereby to become distorted. The dividing lines between the cultural strata are blurred and shifting and they seldom coincide exactly with those defining the economic conditions. In the last resort history of this kind is difficult because man's mental images and behaviour in the past are never perceived except through the medium of languages, many of which have become confused and sometimes totally lost, while others have a history peculiar to themselves. In this development the signs which make up these languages are generally little modified; by gradually taking on a new sense they combine with the movement of the collective mind, but such semantic shifts are not easily observed by those nearest to them. Yet history of this kind has somehow to be written. The only scientific way of doing so is to throw overboard the principle that perceptions, knowledge, affective reactions, dreams and fantasies; rites, legal maxims and customs; the amalgam of received ideas adhering to individual awareness from which even intelligent beings wishing to be totally independent never quite succeed in disassociating themselves; and the half jumbled, half logical view of the world which infuses men's actions, desires and negations in their mutual relations, are isolated elements. Instead we must accept that they are all closely united into one coherent structure. Furthermore, we must admit that such a structure can never be viewed in isolation from any other edifice which influences it and which it influences in return. Progress in the history of ideas, and consequently in social history, without which the former cannot exist, must therefore depend upon our using the most effective tools and methodology available to historians of today. I mean of course that we need to analyse concurrently and with equal energy the material world in its ecological and economic aspects, the political structure, and finally the ideological superstructure. This is because there are facts widely separated in time and apparently totally unconnected which may prove in effect to be interdependent: facts of this sort might be, on the one hand, the almost imperceptible climatic changes that encouraged the spread of cultivation on the fringes of the Merovingian forests and, on the other, the decision made by Paolo Uccello and his patrons in the early days of the Renaissance to crystallize the tumultuous events of the victory of San Romana in a geometric and nocturnal universe. To make our way as best we can through this jungle of articulations and resonances would mean to advance painfully, patiently or devotedly towards an understanding of that historical whole which is the history of society and, in pursuit of Michelet's dream, to try to grasp it 'in one stupendous movement which would become life itself'.