

1974-02-04: [METHODOLOGY] Humanism and VIe Section [EHESSE]

In so far as the thrust of humanistic study is traditionally to comprehend the creative works of individuals, or small collectivities, in artistic or intellectual endeavors, the work of the Annales group to reconstruct the past according to quantitative methods, and understanding the ordinary conditions of life of the average person, seems far removed from humanism. The reconciliation seems to be in the concern for "humanity" in the large sense, as opposed to its more creative element as individuals, or the upper classes as a more intellectual group. One can sense that the Annales group feels itself more devoted to the past of mankind in the large sense than the humanists do ("pernicious humanism" as Braudel calls it in Burke, *Econ. & Society*, p. 11). Le Roy Ladurie is regarded as the model of the new school of "total history", and it is no limitation in the eyes of most that he deals only with the peasantry. If his treatment is that complete that we have a full mental image of the average peasant's life over many centuries in Languedoc, that image is always a composite, not of an individual. The *humanitas* involved here, then, is the same as the love of simple types one encounters in life today: the rough-mannered but honest farmer, the open and generous character of many ordinary people. It has very little to do with enduring creations of the human spirit. If one wants to say that every generation was necessary to get where we are now from our more primitive conditions earlier, then every generation of the common folk has had its role; but one cannot escape the fact that those ordinary people upon whom this loving scholarly concern is expended would not themselves be able to reciprocate by comprehending their counterparts in earlier times with the kind of intellectual sympathy which the modern historian gives them. That is to say, the normal kind of humanistic study deals with the intellectual elite over the centuries, which one somehow imagines is a single group of those who count in all eternity, and if they are gathered in some afterlife they will constitute an elite that can communicate. But the ordinary folk will never belong to that group. In this fashion, humanism always has some element of élitism in it, even when it strives to reconstruct the life of the most humble elements of society.