The positivist and Annales schools: an analysis of their complex relationship

As escolas positivista e dos Annales: uma análise de sua complexa relação

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ABSTRACT
Examining and scrutinizing historiographical paradigms are pivotal for the epistemology of historical studies, as fluctuations in the scientific discourse shape and echo through diverse interpretations within this intellectual domain. Hence, this study sought to dissect the intricate interplay between the positivist and Annales schools. This investigation is warranted by its potential to broaden the spectrum of understanding within historical epistemology, facilitated by exhaustive literature reviews and historiographical analyses. Notably, this study challenges the conventional dichotomy that portrays these two schools of thought as inherently antagonistic. The paper posits the following research query to elucidate this nuanced landscape: "To what degree do elements of synergy, antagonism, and rivalry manifest between the Annales school and the positivist school?" The overarching aim of this article was to unpack these multifaceted interactions using a qualitative exploratory approach, an extensive bibliography, and methodological and theoretical standards outlined in the literature by various scholars. A meticulous analysis was undertaken to gain relevant insights contributing to a coherent argument that addresses the central research question.

Keywords: complexity, positivist school, Annales school.

RESUMO
O exame e a análise minuciosa dos paradigmas historiográficos são fundamentais para a epistemologia dos estudos históricos, pois as flutuações no discurso científico moldam e ecoam por meio de diversas interpretações nesse domínio intelectual. Portanto, este estudo procurou dissecar a intrincada interação entre as escolas positivista e dos Annales. Essa investigação é justificada por seu potencial de ampliar o espectro de compreensão da epistemologia histórica, facilitada por exaustivas revisões da literatura e análises historiográficas. Notavelmente, este estudo desafia a dicotomia convencional que retrata essas duas escolas de pensamento como
inerentemente antagônicas. O artigo propõe a seguinte questão de pesquisa para elucidar esse cenário matizado: "Até que ponto os elementos de sinergia, antagonismo e rivalidade se manifestam entre a escola dos Annales e a escola positivista?" O objetivo geral deste artigo foi desvendar essas interações multifacetadas usando uma abordagem exploratória qualitativa, uma extensa bibliografia e padrões metodológicos e teóricos delineados na literatura por vários acadêmicos. Foi realizada uma análise meticulosa para obter percepções relevantes que contribuíssem para um argumento coerente que abordasse a questão central da pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: complexidade, escola positivista, escola Annales.

1 INTRODUCTION

The 19th century is often recognized as a historical period during which the field of history transformed into a scientific discipline; this transformation aimed to distance history from the Romanesque approach (Farias; Fonseca; Roiz, 2006). During this time, the field of history sought to establish itself as a science, and historians aimed to be recognized as professional scientists. In this context, rational positivism, based on Auguste Comte's scientific approach, had a significant influence, which was expressed in the historical field through the positivist school of historiography and rooted in the total separation of subject and object to achieve objectivity in knowledge (Petersen, 2002).

When considering historiographical approaches, it is crucial to explore the construction of a paradigm for producing historical knowledge. This paradigm is guided by traditional history, which relies on written documents, focuses on significant figures, maintains a complete separation of subject and object, and aims for neutrality. This is what is commonly known as the positivist school. According to Peter Burke (1992), as humanity became increasingly aware of the complexity of its actions and thoughts, a new movement in historiography was born: the Annales school. Edgar Morin (2005) posits that analyzing the subject and object separately is insufficient for explaining the complexity of historical and scientific knowledge.

In order to align with the principles of studying phenomena from the perspective of Edgar Morin's complexity theory, this study focuses on complexity, specifically within the context of the relationship between the positivist school and the Annales school. Emphasizing this delimitation, the research problem is rooted in the following reflection and question: "To what extent are relationships of complementarity, antagonism, and competition established between the Annales school and the positivist school?" By analyzing this proposal through the lens of
selected bibliographical references related to the theme of history and complexity, this paper aims to provide in-depth interpretations, critiques, and reflections that can shed more light on the historical process that historiography has undergone.

Esteemed historiographical works often interpret the Annales school as opposing the traditional and methodical school. According to Farias, Fonseca, and Roiz (2006), the Annales school waged a real war against traditional history. Silvia Petersen (2002) corroborated this viewpoint, stating that the new Annales history is distinct from empiricist, rational, positivist, and methodical history. Peter Burke (1992) characterized the Annales school as offering a new vision of history that diverges from the traditional 19th-century historiography.

The rationale for this article lies in its potential to broaden the scope of understanding historical and scientific knowledge through literary and historiographical reviews. This is because it is vital not to limit oneself to the established historical paradigm that views the two historiographical schools in opposition. According to Morin (2005), seeing phenomena only as antagonistic contributes to a superficial understanding and fosters a disjointed perspective that prevents a more holistic understanding, which is often unexamined due to the limiting function of paradigms.

To address the research question, the overall objective of this paper is to analyze the extent to which relationships of complementarity, antagonism, and competition can be established between the Annales and positivist schools. For this, the specific goals are to discuss the concept of the positivist school, analyze the main characteristics of the Annales school, and present the complex relationships between them. A qualitative, exploratory, and analytical approach with a theoretical framework was utilized. It is primarily bibliographic, comprising elements that aim to contribute to the practice and production of knowledge on this subject.

The rest of the article is organized into three sections. The first section briefly overviews the positivist school and its origins according to different authors, followed by a discussion on the characteristics of the Annales school, concluding with a critical, interpretive, reflective analysis of the complex relationship between the positivist school and the Annales school. This analysis seeks to shift away from a limited and myopic view and reframe the perspective on the pathways and transformations that the main historiographical approaches have undergone, specifically the traditional positivist school and the Annales school.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 THE CONCEPT OF THE POSITIVIST SCHOOL

The positivist school is also commonly referred to as traditional historiography, although the terminology can carry with it a prejudiced and pejorative paradigm. The term "traditional" often conjures associations of being outdated or irrelevant, which can cloud scholarly discussions about the school's origin, objectives, and the historical context that influenced its theories. As Peter Burke (1992) pointed out, quoting Febvre, "history is a child of its time."

One of the initial milestones for the positivist school was the 1876 publication of the journal Revue Historique, founded by Gabriel Monod and Gustave Charles Fagniez. This journal aimed to serve as a positive sciences repository and a platform for free intellectual discussion. Another significant development was the 1898 work entitled Introduction to Historical Studies by Charles Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos. This manual, inspired by Revue Historique, provided guidelines and methodologies that historians should follow and included the personal perspectives of Langlois and Seignobos. Edgar Morin (2007, p. 20) stated:

The attitude of contextualizing and globalizing is a fundamental quality of the human spirit that fragmented teaching atrophies and, contrary to that, must always be developed. Knowledge becomes pertinent when it can place all information in its context and, if possible, in the global set in which it is inserted.

From this perspective, as Petersen (2002) states, the origins of the positivist school were undoubtedly greatly influenced by 19th-century positivism, with the aim of adapting history to the scientific standards of the time. There was an undeniable desire to eliminate subjectivity and promote a total separation of subject and object, as advocated by Kant in his moral law quoted by Morin (2005). According to Farias, Fonseca, and Roiz (2006), the goal was to remove the subject so that scientific analysis of historical documents could prevail. In this sense, it was essential to maintain neutrality and break with subjectivity to produce an objective, factual, scientific, and credible history.

In the positivist school, the role of the historian encompassed the synthetic operations of grouping facts in written history, as well as analytical operations through erudite and hermeneutic criticism. The historian of the late 19th century played a leading role in social conflicts, giving up the fact-event due to believing that the truth of a society lay in the economic-social structure, in an abstract reality, in an invisible structure. After the Annales paradigms, the historian follows
a new doctrine based on interdisciplinarity, thus opening up the range of research objects, resulting in an explanation-understanding of history.

For Farias, Fonseca, and Roiz (2006), the main purpose of this school was to clearly delineate the documentary approach (methods) for professional historians. Hence, the object of analysis would be the written past, recorded in text and official documents as the main and only reliable historical source. From this perspective, history is conceptualized as a science of the past, impartial, objective, without interdisciplinary relations, in which this field of knowledge is characterized as factual, synthesized and represented in the history of important politicians. This elitist and segregating history goes beyond the scientific academic universe of universities, reaching the school benches, in reverberations of a subject based on memorizing the past, decontextualized and separated from the daily lives of students.

The positivist school sought to study the facts as they really happened according to their specific time, dates, and influential actors. The historian's purpose was simply to narrate these facts, with a neutral and objective stance, without expressing their opinions. Therefore, in order for historians to be able to report events in detail, they had to seek out written and official sources linked to the state. Their subjects were exclusively linked to political, diplomatic, and administrative phenomena, which suited conservative projects. In addition, its methodology was heuristics, analytical operations, and synthetic operations. The origins of the positivist school are thus attributed to the influence of Von Ranke, B. Niebuhr, Fustel de Coulanges, Fagniez, and others. As Reis (2004, p. 15) pointed out:

Ranke had a vast body of work dedicated to the 16th and 17th centuries. An erudite scholar, he relied mainly on diplomatic documents to write the history of the state and its foreign relations, as he believed that diplomatic relations determined the state's internal initiatives.

Especially in France, the fledgling discipline received substantial support from the state, which was interested in producing its own history, based on the revolutionary chronology that established scientific knowledge as fundamental to human sociability. As a result, it was in Europe that history would achieve considerable prestige and status as a discipline, with important professionals originating there, such as M. Bloch, M. de Certeau, M. Foucault, Jacques Le Goff, and Guy Bourdé, in short, a vast range of historians who would revolutionize the plastic features of the analytical field.
Auguste Comte is considered one of the pioneers of the positivist school, although various assessments of his biography—"duly made without bibliographical references—give the profound impression that Comte's work, particularly that of his most mature phase, was the result of the speculation of a lunatic" (Lacerda, 2009, p. 323). Comte apparently went through a period of distancing himself from academia towards the end of his life, including an event mentioned by Bourdé and Martins, which critics considered to be a moment of madness, his exacerbation of teleology that led to theology (he founded a religion towards the end of his life according to the plans mentioned).

Among the merits of the positivist school, one can include the stabilization of the profession of historian, the documentary assessments of the period—which today are a rare gem due to their judiciousness and systematicity, methodological fixation, which would later be multifaceted according to the cleavages arising from the sub-criticisms, and the conflict with other disciplines for power and status within the university. The space conquered by the discipline of history, as opposed to a union with geography or other human knowledge as agreed, undoubtedly owes its breadth, since the 20th century, to the positivists' meritorious defense of autonomy and the need to detach the field of historical research from other theories.

Another contribution that can be attributed to the positivists is the critical spirit (which differs from the critical method in that it belongs to a sphere of voluntary action, not imbricated with the method per se), given that

its primary function is to educate the historian's gaze in relation to their sources; if you will, it is a form of asceticism and, in any case, a learned attitude, not spontaneous, but one that forms an essential mindset for the performance of the profession (Prost, 2008, p. 61).

It therefore consists of not lightly believing the data with the certainty that it is full of automatic answers, but analyzing its producers, its collection, its intentions and various other inherent characteristics. This is why it is said that criticality is not something natural and comes from a simple symbiosis of hypotheses or statements but is in fact a real exercise in disciplining the mind, so that what is apparent can be perceived between the lines and in its latency.
2.2 THE ANNALES SCHOOL

In the mid-20th century, as Peter Burke (2002) stated, the Annales school emerged, also known as New History. According to Burke, this fresh perspective originated from the necessity for a more comprehensive history connected to the aspirations of the present time, as the political, factual conception was inadequate to capture the complexity of human life over time. For Burke, the key feature of the Annales school was broadening the historical field into diverse areas. Therefore, the history of mentalities, cultural history, economic history, and the history of civilizations gained importance.

As Farias, Fonseca, and Roiz (2006) pointed out, the object of analysis in this new history is not confined to the past. The present, past, and future are interconnected, as there can be no present without a past and no future without a present. Additionally, it is essential to note the newfound importance and space given to other historical sources, such as oral accounts. In other words, history is no longer solely reliant on written historical sources and official documents. This shift in the diversity of sources became essential for considering and studying other historical periods without official written records, such as Prehistory.

The identity of the Annales was established through the opposition between the generation of Bloch and Febvre and the preceding generation of historians like Lavisse, Seignobos, and Langlois (Dosse, 2003, p. 38). Before the Annales was conceived, Berr's journal *Revue de synthèse* had already criticized "traditional history," proposing a universal history that included economic, social, and mental aspects. Dosse (2000, p. 70) posed the question: if a journal with a similar proposition already existed and Bloch and Febvre were actively involved in its publications, why create another? The answer seems to be that Berr was not focused on amassing followers or establishing a school around his journal; he did not employ any institutional strategies to secure university positions, unlike the "annalists."

The strategies employed by Bloch and Febvre, primarily through academic discourse, solidified their program. The guidelines set for articles and their authors became the standards of scientific research in history. This underscores the significance of establishing a social institution for studies, which consistently disseminates its scientific language through journals and bulletins: "Intuition does not merely provide a 'doctrine' with social stability. It enables it, and, covertly, determines it" (Certeau, 2000, p. 70).
With the Annales school, history has been redefined not as the science of the past, as described by Farias, Fonseca, and Roiz (2006), but as the science of humans in time. Everything related to humans becomes a subject of study for history, with a continuous focus on interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, aiming for a contextualizing perspective that integrates parts with the whole—in other words, a perspective that is globalizing, connected, and interconnected with various types of knowledge. The concept of time has been reconfigured from a long-term perspective, as articulated by Braudel (1980), indicating a certain continuity between different historical periods.

2.3 THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE POSITIVIST SCHOOL AND THE ANNALES SCHOOL

The relationship between the Annales and the positivist schools is commonly characterized and essentially reduced to antagonism. According to Farias, Fonseca, and Roiz (2006), the New History has redefined and reformed the rules and principles of the traditional school. When we systematically and deeply examine the foundational bibliographies that discuss the relationship between these two historiographical schools, it becomes apparent that the relationship between the two historical movements transcends the narrow confines of a merely antagonistic conceptualization. The Annales School did not emerge in a vacuum; it has a well-established historical origin. Hence, Farias, Fonseca, and Roiz (2006, p. 121) asserted:

Based on criticisms formulated since the early 20th century, the Annales School aimed to revolutionize historians' work and the scientific milieu. From these criticisms, the Annales School derived its innovative character, transitioning from problematic history to the promotion of collective research (Dosse, 2003a, p. 48). The "school" of the Annales effectively declared war on traditional history, targeting primarily the positivist school, pejoratively termed as "historicizing history [...] therefore, the objective was to remove the subject to break the historicizing narrative and establish the scientific authority of historical discourse renewed by the social sciences" (Dosse, 2003b, p. 327).

From this standpoint, it can be inferred that while the Annales School seeks to revolutionize, it cannot be completely disassociated from Traditional Historiography. Its emergence is tied to criticisms generated from the analysis and practice of the positivist school; that is, the much-lauded innovation originates from an existing historicizing paradigm. For broader ideas of complementarity and improvement to emerge, it was essential for history as a science to be constructed and practiced from a methodical perspective. As Morim (2005) noted,
the emergence of the new is intertwined with the old; dismissing the importance of the old as merely an opponent or competitor due to its differences limits a comprehensive and in-depth analysis.

The rise of a new historiography does not mean complete eradication or, consequently, the disappearance of all characteristics of the preceding school. Even with their divergent characteristics, they coexist simultaneously, as Petersen (2002) reported:

> That conception of scientific history at the turn of the century aimed at reconstructing what truly occurred through the complete separation of subject and object to ensure the objectivity of knowledge and which had narration as its primary written expression, though quickly criticized for its empiricist limitations, has curiously but not surprisingly persisted to this day. As we know, historical knowledge is not exclusively produced by academics; due to the inherent social necessity for its construction and the fact that anyone can self-designate as a historian (as Pierre Vilar noted, it is a poorly protected brand...), a significant portion of what is termed "history" results from the intent of amateur (or professional) historians to discover, through empirical appropriation, what actually transpired.

Shifts in historical paradigms can be slow, procedural, and incremental, containing subtle remnants and continuities that often go unnoticed. The overwhelming enthusiasm for the new can generate alienation and a distorted perception that the despised old, perceived as the enemy, has been eternally eradicated. While the Manichean reductionist perspective pervades the common sense of scientific analysis, the viewpoint of complementarity and improvement is gaining traction in contemporary times.

The emphasis on the differences between one school and the other by historians who were protagonists of the Annales, as well as the focus on criticism aimed at valorizing the new, which is antagonistic and competes with the old historiographical model—deemed by historians of the new history as insufficient to answer the questions of the present through historical research—did not negate the fact that the members of the new history have appropriated contributions from the positivist school, particularly concerning the method of analyzing historical sources and conducting historical research. The object of study is no longer solely the past, politics, or significant figures, but these have not ceased to be examined; the historical source is no longer only the official written document, but this has not lost its relevance in the Annales School. Thus, the relationship is far more nuanced than mere antagonism; it is complex, involving competition but also complementarity in an effort to advance historical science.
3 METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative and exploratory, grounded in a comprehensive bibliographic review (Gil, 2008). The research relies on seminal books and scholarly articles, conforming to the methodological criteria outlined by Minayo (2010) and drawing theoretical inspiration from an array of distinguished scholars, including but not limited to Farias, Fonseca, and Roiz (2006), Petersen (2002), Burke (1992), Morin (2005), Braudel (1980), Kuhn (1989), and Morin (2007). The inclusion criteria focused on qualitative studies and classic works that are academically and scientifically recognized for their contributions to the dialogue between positivist history and the Annales school. Additionally, we considered seminal works explicating the theory of complexity. Studies that were repetitive or lacked significant academic and scientific contributions were excluded.

In the initial analysis stage, the titles of each selected study were carefully evaluated for their relevance to the research topic. Then, abstracts and full texts were fully read to extract germane information, enabling the construction of a cogent argument that aligns with potential resolutions to the research question under investigation. The data analysis followed the best practices for qualitative research, incorporating a synthesis and discussion of the primary findings. This was supplemented by a comparative assessment of the information and a thorough review of the pertinent literature.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to scrutinize the complex relationship between the positivist and Annales schools of historiography. As indicated in the introduction, the history of the Annales school leaves several questions unanswered. Various theorists have explored the relationship between these two historiographical movements, and despite being a topic of ongoing discussion in contemporary scholarship, it requires further investigation for a more nuanced understanding of its historical origins and academic conceptualizations. Although the prevailing narrative emphasizes the antagonistic relationship between the positivist and Annales schools, a deep and systematic analysis using Morin's (2005) theory of complexity reveals aspects of complexity in a more nuanced way. Such studies highlight not just antagonism but also elements of competition and complementarity.
The insights presented herein bolster our assertion that the positivist school holds a unique and deserving place in academic historiography, particularly in a Brazilian context (Perrone-Moïsés, 2004), despite orthodox resistance within particular institutions. While the positivist school has its limitations, they are significantly outweighed by its contributions, meriting its inclusion in academic curricula and potentially serving as a gateway to understanding other schools and intellectual traditions.

Moreover, this article aims to provide a preliminary examination and discussion of the potentially complex relationships between Traditional and New History. Consequently, future research is recommended to expand and deepen this initial exploration. The continuation of this study is crucial; knowledge should not be static or based solely on an absolute truth. A limited analysis risks fostering ignorance and intellectual blindness. As Morin (2005) asserted, knowledge is both specific and technical, as well as broad and globalized. Both the individual components and the entire structure are interrelated and must be considered.

The Annales school has spearheaded numerous innovations, including the expansion of historical sources, an increased focus on social and economic history, problem-driven historical research rooted in contemporary issues, and a redefinition of the concept of temporality. However, as reported at the end of the first chapter, many features touted as "new" by the Annales school were already present in what the "annalists" deem "traditional" historiography.

It is imperative to move beyond dichotomous thinking, as such an approach hinders the comprehensive understanding of phenomena, creating a chasm between knowledge and human experience. Given the inherent complexity of human nature, phenomena must be understood in relation to this human condition. This ensures that scientific knowledge, irrespective of the field, resonates meaningfully with individuals, empowering them to be agents of knowledge, to feel a sense of belonging, and to act as problem solvers and protagonists in their own right.
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