

The Annales School in Mexico: The Work of Mexican Historian Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru

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The presence of the *Annales* approach to historiography in Latin America has not been thoroughly accounted for.¹ This presentation examines the influence of the *Annales* school on Mexican historiography, emphasizing the work of the late Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, general editor of the five-volume *History of Everyday Life in Mexico* and author, in addition to many research publications, of *An Introduction to the History of Everyday Life*. At the end, I discuss the relevance of the topic for my own pedagogy and research and how it is important for a literary historian like myself.

In his book on the French historical revolution, Peter Burke mentions Latin America several times. He describes the crucial importance in Fernand Braudel's intellectual development of the two years that he spent as a relatively young professor in Brazil. This extended residence in São Paulo coincided with that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and there they both became familiar with the writings of the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, whose interests already paralleled those of the young French scholars.² Looking beyond Braudel to the influence of the *Annales* school in Latin America, Burke also cites the Mexico-focused research of Serge Gruzinski, as well as the importance of Braudel's work to Latin American historians, discussing three exemplary Latin Americans trained by *Annales* historians in Paris: the Argentine Tulio Halperín Donghi, the Mexican Enrique Florescano, and the Brazilian Luiz Felipe Alencastro.³ Burke's approach centers on academic genealogy; leaving out the development and transmission of ideas through what we

¹ A notable exception was Carlos Antonio Aguirre Rojas, *Los Annales y la historiografía latinoamericana* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1993).

² Peter Burke, "Elective Affinities: Gilberto Freyre and the *Nouvelle Histoire*," *The European Legacy* 3, no. 4 (1998): 1–10.

³ Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–2014*, 2nd ed. (Stanford University Press, 2015), 37, 109, 121–22.

read and absorb. Historiographical methods are not determined by dissertation directors alone, who, when at their best, teach what it means to be a scholar, rather than any particular approach to scholarship. The historian on whom I focus this presentation did not have a genealogical affiliation with the *Annales* school, but she certainly carried out her scholarship in that tradition.

Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru was born in Madrid in 1935, on the eve of the Spanish Civil War.⁴ She took her first university degree at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid; subsequently, an invitation to a conference in Guatemala first exposed her to Latin America, and she then moved to Mexico City, where she did her postgraduate studies, with a dissertation on women's education in New Spain. She taught for many years at the Colegio de México as well as at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and other prestigious institutions. She wrote or directed over forty books, many with an extensive list of collaborators, as required by the nature of her historiographical approach to everyday life. She focused on the colonial period in Mexican history, particularly the (long) eighteenth century, and her best-known research was on everyday life and the *mentalités* it reveals—about women and family life; education; emotions, especially love and fear—examining life in the capital as well as in other cities. One book title in particular sums up her approach: *Vivir en Nueva España: Orden y desorden en la vida cotidiana* (Living in New Spain: Order and disorder in everyday life), from 2009.⁵ I choose this particular title because it epitomizes her conception of the family, the workplace, the convent, the school, and other locales commonly associated with the private sphere as places of both order and disorder, both of which easily spilled over into the public arena. Indeed, she emphasized the concept of the everyday over that of the private, seeing the latter as culturally and historically contingent. She reminded students and readers that even the acts that we consider most intimate and private, up to and including defecation and sexual intercourse, were often carried out much more publicly than the way that we imagine them today.

From a methodological perspective, however, one of Gonzalbo Aizpuru's most telling essays is the general introduction to the *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México* (History of daily life in Mexico), a six-volume collection of which she was the general editor as well as the principal editor of the third volume (dedicated, naturally, to the eighteenth century) and a significant contributor throughout. In the general introduction, she elucidates how everyday life coexists with the succession of events that constitute public history. While everyday life can shape, postpone, or even precipitate those events, its nature is independent of those public or political events. So far, this is standard *Annales*-type rejection of *événements* in favor of a representation of the underlying *longue durée* of social conditions. But she elaborates on the disconnection as follows:

Hoy se aprecia la influencia de actitudes tradicionales en la gestación de revueltas en las que antes se pretendía ver un proyecto renovador. Sin desdeñar la importancia de los factores económicos, vale considerar que aún más que la explotación y la pobreza, lo que provoca el descontento es el cambio en las formas de opresión y la diferencia comparativa entre la pobreza de ayer y la de hoy, y [de] la riqueza de los otros, antes y después.

⁴ Biographical information: Anne Staples, "Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru (17 de enero de 1935–26 de febrero de 2024): In memoriam," *Historia Mexicana* 74, no. 1 (2024): 381–88; Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, "Blog y artículos," in *Historia de la Vida Cotidiana: Textos, conferencias, entrevistas, investigaciones y más* (2024), <https://vidacotidiana.pilargonzalbo.com/>, accessed December 24, 2024.

⁵ Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Vivir en Nueva España: Orden y desorden en la vida cotidiana* (Colegio de México, 2009).

(Today, the influence of traditional [historiographic] attitudes is evident in the representation of revolts that were previously seen as projects for social reform. Without disregarding the importance of economic factors, it is worth considering that even more than exploitation and poverty, what provokes discontent is change in the forms of oppression, and the comparative differences between the poverty of yesterday and that of today, and [between] the wealth of others, before and afterwards.)⁶

One cannot help but wonder if this is a mere restatement of the shortcomings of political history or a pointed critique of messianic representations of political events. To Gonzalbo Aizpuru, it is not the mere discrepancy between the rich and the poor that provokes the cataclysmic events of political history, for such discrepancies are built into the underlying mentality of everyday life. Rather, it is the change in the conditions of everyday life, in the nature of that social and economic discrepancy, that brings the new social and economic structures into disaccord with the accustomed mentality. This is the key connection between the changes in everyday life and the events of conventional political history. She then continues:

Incluso en condiciones excepcionales de opresión, encierro, incertidumbre o violencia extrema, los individuos restablecen pronto alguna forma de cotidianidad, un comportamiento que les permita resolver continuamente los problemas de supervivencia y de mantenimiento de su identidad. No hay duda de que son posibles las historias de la vida cotidiana en campos de concentración, en ciudades sitiadas o bajo cuarentena sanitaria, en pueblos nómadas y en grupos de exiliados.

(Even in exceptional conditions of oppression, confinement, uncertainty or extreme violence, individuals quickly reestablish some form of everyday life, a behavior that enables them to continue to resolve the problems of survival and of maintaining their identity. There is no doubt that histories of everyday life in concentration camps, in cities under siege or quarantine, in nomadic villages and among groups of exiles are possible.)⁷

Here she addresses the converse: how events, even of extreme violence, affect everyday life. She acknowledges the moral imperative not to ignore human catastrophes and, indeed, proposes a method that looks them directly in the eye, regardless of whether the catastrophes are man-made or due to natural causes. People in the midst of catastrophic events, even those that result from misguided attempts at social reform, struggle to survive by reviving the mores of everyday life. The story of this tenacity can be—and indeed needs to be—told.

Still, I think that it is no accident that Gonzalbo Aizpuru, in her own work as a historian, concentrated on the eighteenth century. I do not think that this is only an extension of the *Annales* school's fixation on the premodern and the Old Regime. The long eighteenth century in Mexico was a relatively stable and prosperous era, extending from the Indigenous rebellion of 1691 to the wars of independence brought on by the transformations at the dawn of the nineteenth century in the aftermath of the French revolution (notably, for the Hispanic world, the abdication of Charles IV, shortly followed by Napoleon's occupation of Spain and the imposition of his

⁶ Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, General editor, *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México*, 5 vols., vol. 5 in two parts. (Colegio de México, 2004–06), 1:11.

⁷ Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México*, 1:12.

brother Joseph on the Spanish throne). But stability and prosperity do not mean stasis and stagnation. The eighteenth century was also the period when the contradictions of a colonial mentality gradually gave way to a new mental or imagined community, a concept of Mexicanness.⁸ Gonzalbo Aizpuru nods at these developments. But with her focus on women, the family, education, sexuality, religious experience, and ethnic mixing, she traces the period in a different way that does not turn its back on economic and political history but does not dwell there either.

This becomes most evident in yet another book, her *Introduction to Everyday Life*, or one might say to the *Study of Everyday Life*, since the intended audience is not primarily professional and academic historians, but students. She begins with some anecdotes:

A fines del siglo xvi, un vecino de la Ciudad de México informaba que una señora española, viuda de conquistador, había decidido vivir entre los indios porque no disponía de dinero que le permitiese vestir como correspondía a su calidad. Es un simple informe sobre la vida cotidiana de una persona sin méritos especiales, pero en pocas líneas nos da una idea de la manera en que se conformaba la sociedad colonial, según los criterios de categoría social y de exigencias formales de presentación exterior, a la vez que la opción para algunos españoles de convivir con los indios.

(At the end of the sixteenth century, a resident of Mexico City reported that a Spanish lady, widow of a conquistador, had decided to live among the Indians because she did not have the money to dress as befitted her status. It is a simple report on the daily life of a person without special merits, but in a few lines it gives us an idea of the way in which colonial society was formed, according to the criteria of social status and formal requirements for external presentation, as well as the option for some Spaniards to live with the Indians.)⁹

She continues with several similar stories, about a Peruvian lady who filed for an annulment when she discovered that her husband was not a white Spaniard but a mulatto slave; about the revolt of women in the convents when the bishops tried to impose a more severe monastic rule than that to which they were accustomed; and about an early twentieth-century rent strike. Each of the stories is seemingly insignificant in itself, save for the window that it opens up on a variety of attitudes about race, class, gender, religiosity, money, way of life, etc. For the incipient historians, the cumulative lesson in the compilation of the anecdotes is to go where the archive takes you and to interpret deeply. Thus, in a chapter in this book on the historiography of everyday life, she dutifully traces the history of the *Annales* from Bloch and Lefebvre through Braudel to Duby and his successors. But by underlining the potential riches of the micro-narrative, she reveals a primary affinity with Carlo Ginzburg, like her a historian of everyday life who did not sprout directly from the *Annales* tree.¹⁰

Finally, I want to talk very briefly about how her work has been important to me. I teach a course on notions of everyday life from Cervantes to the twentieth century. Gonzalbo Aizpuru's work is important in the course for bridging Cervantes and the nineteenth century by providing information about the eighteenth, especially by the way that she describes it: the way she uses

⁸ Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, "El nacimiento del miedo, 1692: Indios y españoles en la Ciudad de México," *Revista de Indias* 68, no. 244 (2008): 9–34.

⁹ Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Introducción a la historia de la vida cotidiana* (Colegio de México, 2006), 11.

¹⁰ Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–2014*, 121.

narrative; her teasing out of maximum context and collective mentalities from the narratives; and the seriousness with which she approaches both material and emotional reality. The course has led to a book project, one that I am still sketching out. While I would connect the *Annales* school to a nonnarrative historiography that goes back to Burckhardt, I would also make a lateral connection to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*.¹¹ In the mentality of post-World War I Europe and the collapse of the nineteenth-century world order, there was a fascination with everyday reality and its depiction, one that ironically made for a new grand narrative precisely about its own futility.¹² A

¹¹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 1953).

¹² I want to thank the Stanford University Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies and the University of California, Berkeley Designated Emphasis in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies for organizing this conference on the historiography and influence of Fernand Braudel, and in particular Rowan Dorin and Diego Pirillo for inviting me to participate. I would like to dedicate this brief essay to my Mexicanist colleague Ivonne del Valle.