

# Georges Duby, Scholar and Popular

An Interview with Felipe Brandi

*By Ariel Suhamy*

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**For the first time, the *Pléiade* collection is publishing the work of a contemporary historian. This event celebrates the centennial of the birth of this great mediaevalist, a historian of mentalities who found a way to make historical knowledge accessible to a wider audience. Felipe Brandi, an expert on Duby, edited and annotated the book.**

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**Georges Duby** (1919–1996), Professor at the Collège de France and member of the Académie française, considerably renewed the field of medieval studies. His immense work, which skillfully articulates economic realities, social structures and systems of representation, also won the favour of the general public, thanks to a fluid and accessible writing. The volume of *La Pléiade*, published on the occasion of the centenary of his birth, includes *Des sociétés médiévales, leçon inaugurale au Collège de France*; *Le dimanche de Bouvines*, *Le temps des cathédrales*, *Les trois ordres* ou *L’imaginaire du féodalisme*, *Guillaume le Maréchal*, *Dames du XIIe siècle* and other scattered texts. It is presented by Pierre Nora, with an introduction and critical apparatus by Felipe Brandi.

**Felipe Brandi** was born in Rio de Janeiro and studied history at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro before obtaining a PhD in History from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris in June 2017 under the supervision of François Hartog. His thesis, which was the first ever to be written on Georges Duby, was entitled *Georges Duby: Thinking History. The Construction of a Model for Social History (France, 1950-1980)*. His research focuses on Historiography and the Intellectual History of the humanities in contemporary France (in the 19th and 20th centuries).

**Books and Ideas: A historian in the *Pléiade* collection? Doesn't it usually only include writers?**

**Felipe Brandi:** Georges Duby is not the first historian to be published in the prestigious *Pléiade* collection. It has already covered Thucydides, Herodotus, Froissart, and Michelet, whose volumes about the French Revolution have just been published in a new edition. But Georges Duby is a contemporary historian, an academic historian. And that is indeed a first. Actually, his being included in the *Pléiade* is, I believe, part of the tradition of the great essayists in the humanities, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was published in the *Pléiade* in 2008, Michel Foucault, soon afterwards, or Michel Leiris. Why has Georges Duby been included in the *Pléiade*? It's very certainly down to the quality of his writing, the formal excellence of his texts, which means his work is a wonderful expression of the important role played by essays in the French literary world in the final third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I also think that his inclusion in the *Pléiade* is justified by the originality and modernity of his thinking as a historian, of the way in which he practises a kind of history that is always reflecting on the way in which we do history, the very practice of it.

**Books and Ideas: As well as Georges Duby's books, the *Pléiade* edition includes a range of references that were not part of his original texts. Why?**

**Felipe Brandi:** His books do not include any references: no bibliography, no notes—this was an important aspect of his idea of what a historical narrative should be. So I chose to add the notes that did not exist. The *Pléiade* edition allowed me to do this since the notes are not inserted as footnotes but at the end of the book, as endnotes. Readers can thus read Duby's narrative as he intended, but this time—for the first time—they can also discover what we might call the backstage area, the “historian's workshop”, to use the wonderful expression coined by Dominique Iogna-Prat,<sup>1</sup> and also discover the theoretical and erudite framework that underpins all of Georges Duby's work.

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<sup>1</sup> Dominique Iogna-Prat, “L'Atelier de l'historien”, Georges Duby, *Qu'est-ce que la société féodale ?*, Paris, Flammarion, 2002, p. VII-XXXIII.

## Books and Ideas: What are Georges Duby's Middle Ages?

**Felipe Brandi:** It's France from the year 1000 to Bouvines—i.e. from the year 1000 to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century (1214). It's a French Middle Ages, centred on Northern France in the case of some books, on Burgundy (Cluny and Mâcon) in the case of some other studies, and also on the South of France.

In some other works he steps a little outside this framework. In *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West* (1962) and *Warriors and Peasants* (1973), he leaves for England, into the regions of the Empire, and also into Scandinavian countries; in *The Age of the Cathedrals*, he goes as far as Italy at the beginning of the Quattrocento. Nevertheless, he was very careful not to move too far away from his usual framework. He pays a lot of attention to what he calls the “fringes of interpenetration”: the correlation between simultaneous, contemporary events in economic terms, in social terms and on the level of mental representations. He is a little cautious when it comes to transhistorical or transdiachronic approaches, which roam over long periods of time, and prefers to be what he calls a “synchronist”, i.e. focussed on a very limited spatiotemporal framework, one that is as specific as possible, in order to observe the horizontal and vertical interferences between various phenomena.

## Books and Ideas: What is left of the history of mentalities? What is happening in this field today?

**Felipe Brandi:** History of mentalities has been made all the less visible today by the fact that it is everywhere. In fact, the history of the *mentalités* is a term that sounds quite dated now, hearkening back to the 1960s and 1970s. But if we look closer at how this field of research developed, we realise that on the eve of the 1980s, the term “history of mentalities” diffracted into a multitude of new terms and new areas: the history of imagination, the history of representation, the history of ideological systems, cultural history... Religious history and even what we call “historical anthropology” both owe a lot to the contribution and achievements of the history of mentalities.

The history of mentalities is still present whenever we have an approach that explores the relationship between the social, material and socio-economic levels, on the one hand, and ideological systems and mental representations, on the other hand.

Throughout his career, Georges Duby was constantly reformulating his syllabus. He was the author – something people tend to forget – of one of the first cultural history syllabi in 1969, which was published in the *Revue de l'enseignement supérieur*;<sup>2</sup> then, in 1974, he reformulated his syllabus, giving it the title of “Social History and the Ideology of Societies”,<sup>3</sup> turning it in short into a history of ideologies. He was then one of the first French historians to

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Duby, “L'Histoire culturelle”, *Revue de l'enseignement supérieur*, 44-45, p. 85-89.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Duby, “Histoire sociale et idéologies des sociétés”, in Jacques Le Goff, Pierre Nora (ed.), *Faire de l'histoire*, t. I, “Nouveaux Problèmes”, Paris, Gallimard, p. 147-168.

use the concept of the “*imaginaire*” (“imagination”) in the title of one of his works. He was thus the author of the manifesto for the history of mentalities, but also one of the first historians to get rid of this concept, replacing the term “history of mentalities” with others that seemed to him to be more up to date, more precise, less vague.

**Books and Ideas: What books does one select for an anthology? Is there one title that stands out in the life work of Georges Duby?**

**Felipe Brandi:** We selected Georges Duby’s masterworks. Some of them seemed to us, precisely, to transmit his global view of history: a kind of history that draws relations between all dimensions of human society (economic, social, ideological, religious) instead of privileging, for example, works that focus on economic history, or social history, or art history. All of the works that we chose are anchored in his view of the correlations between different “instances” of social life.

Which is the most important book, or the best book written by Georges Duby? That’s a tricky question. *The Legend of Bouvines* or *The Age of the Cathedrals* are great history books. We could say the same about his major overview of the *Rural Economy and Country Life*, which we did not include in the anthology precisely because it is very focused on material life and rural life in the Middle Ages. *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* has a very important place in Georges Duby’s work because it is his only book, along with his PhD thesis, that was not commissioned by an editor. This book is a kind of crowning of his first piece of work, of his PhD thesis on society in the Mâcon region during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This time, he attempts to rework his model a quarter century later, by adding to it all of the new knowledge gained from the history of mentalities and the contribution of anthropology and social sciences to understand how feudal society was constructed; or how the power relations between classes were established, in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, thanks to a mental framework that legitimised the power of some people and the exploitation of others.

**Books and Ideas: A history of women studied by a man: is this an original approach?**

**Felipe Brandi:** In his day, yes, this was an original approach. The history of women had been studied—first in the United States, then in England, then in France—since the 1960s and 1970s. We might mention Michelle Perrot’s work, among many others. But during the 1970s and 1980s, the history of women was mainly studied by female historians. Georges Duby took an interest in the history of women because of his research into marriage and gender relations, between masculinity and femininity—it was a history of love that got him interested in women and femininity.

What is very striking, very present in the way Georges Duby studies women, is the attention he pays to the silences of women, to the silences of history. He mainly works—and he has been criticised for doing this—on statements made by men: by clerics, bishops and monks in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, who were, in his view, the people who shaped the ideology

of the ruling class at this time. He always wondered—and this is what makes his approach original: he himself, as a man, how should he study the history of women? He says somewhere: “I’m a man too,” meaning: “I too am haunted by the image of femininity that is transmitted by the society I am a part of”. So his approach is interesting in that it takes into account what we might call the mental frameworks, the ideological frameworks that somehow constrain it. This “dubitative” approach, if I may make this pun on his name, is part of the unfolding, of the construction of Georges Duby’s narrative. To such an extent that it acts as a kind of guarantee behind what he says. It’s actually by highlighting his doubts, his own hesitations, that he earns the reader’s trust.

**Books and Ideas: Two years ago, you completed a PhD on the work of Georges Duby. Can you go into more detail about what your thesis examined, and what you wanted to show?**

**Felipe Brandi:**My PhD thesis was an attempt to understand the way in which, throughout his career, Georges Duby was developing a personal social history project. This was a project that he constantly refined and reworked over three decades, and which gives the whole of his work, of the texts he produced, a remarkable unity and an impeccable coherence. This social history project of his can, broadly speaking, be broken down into two main aspects. On the one hand, he was driven by a totalising ambition, and was extremely careful, in book after book, to define the terms according to which historians would be able to analyse the existing correlations between the concrete, material level of social life (the economic, technical level) and that of intangible realities, of mental representations. On the other hand, he also wanted to highlight the originality and importance of the role historians played in our thinking about humanities in his time: the formation of new relations of domination between different social groups, the establishment and triumph of unequal social models, the power of symbolic violence and ideologies. These are all great theoretical, collective challenges facing the humanities. I think Georges Duby’s ambition was to show that the contribution of historians—through the attention they pay to chronology, their taste for an empirical approach and their expertise in the criticism of evidence—is not only indispensable, but could also serve as a model for neighbouring academic disciplines. Which might be a way of claiming a unifying role for history as the pilot science at the heart of the social sciences.

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