

Conflict and Reconciliation: An Overlook through the History of the Society of Jesus

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Abstract – Somewhat recently, reconciliation emerged as a theme in the mass media. Indeed, reconciliation is not a product of the mass media, but as a theme it serves to organize memory and make complex content simple. Other systems, such as religion and politics, in their turn have laid claim to this very theme. A certain type of historiographic production could be functional to the mass media system, which is always in need of information to carry out its communication. This type of historiography could be inscribed in a fictional discursive form. This paper argues an alternative to this type of historiographic production: this could be made starting from a theory that allows dealing with complexity and that has tools to differentiate the evolution of conceptual semantics capable of describing the social structure in which it operated.

1. Historical approach

People often approach history with a certain dose of levity. They will admit that history is a pleasant subject: «I am not a historian» – they say – therefore recognizing in some way the existence of a profession, or discipline – «but I always liked history». This kind of approximation can be very difficult to express in other areas. Within the medical field, for example, no one would put himself into the hands of someone who says that likes surgery, when it comes to undergoing a surgical procedure.

This kind of approach to history makes the subject somewhat close to literature, therefore generating the hybridization of narrative forms that produce a «story», which we may define as «fiction».

What is the «fictional history» in our social system, where cognitive production is carried out predominantly by means of science, which is based on the true/false binomial, regardless of ethical or religious beliefs? How can we support, even nowadays, this anachronism, by which one looks at the present with glasses that come from the past? A first

answer might be that this kind of perspective renounces by default to produce science by the means of making history.

Postmodern criticism and distrust towards 'absolute truths' only increases contingency within the social system, the latter being the consequence of an observation that acknowledges the components of a system to be neither impossible nor necessary. The results of this observation, in turn, imply a considerable increase of complexity. This light «fictional history» works as a powerful formula for reducing contingency and therefore complexity. This kind of narrative reduces the enormous selective pressure coming from the need to tackle decision-making processes, or from wanting to establish a causal chain that will allow us to generate knowledge at times of great uncertainty, amongst which are not only the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but, primarily, our modern times.

There are different viewpoints from which one can reflect upon the historical craft. The historian observes and confronts himself with an elusive complexity. In the attempt of reducing the complexity of documentary material, his research work, in fact, only augments the existing complexity. The number of details extracted from the mass of documents will serve as a guarantee of the seriousness of the work, but they will hardly generate knowledge.

In order to observe and handle complexity it will be, therefore, necessary to create a theoretical observation point that overcomes the continuity/discontinuity dialectic, by framing the differences. In terms of differences, it will be possible to grasp the novelties or the evolutionary continuity of a semantic that should be considered as «society's conceptual patrimony»¹.

Any historiographical process, as I understand it, should be part of a general theory, in which concepts can be placed from time to time. This theory could be called the theory of differentiation. The process of writing history, on its part, should start from a specific conception of society.

Each semantic reference might be considered within the context of the social structure in which it circulates. This evolutionary view takes into consideration novelty, understood as change, which, in turn, will trigger a positive or negative selection, leading to further stabilization of the system. Historical research will, thus, be able to reduce documentary complexity by concentrating its attention on various distinctions which,

¹ C. Baraldi - G. Corsi - E. Esposito, *Luhmann in glossario*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2002, pp. 204 ff.

from time to time, have been guiding systemic selection. This method should prevent getting lost in the details, by which it is not possible to generate knowledge. Furthermore, a theoretical approach of this kind acts as a river bank to the uncontrolled use of causal relationships by historiographic research. Causality must be understood within a specific construction of reality, expressed by the sources: the cause/effect relationship is always the result of an observation made by someone starting with certain distinctions. We could say that documents are neither transparent nor inert but, by wanting to tell us what is real, they are self-referential, and they will only change on the historian's table. This, in turn, will allow to move the observation on certain edges that have not been fully explored by research.

Saying that historical narrative is non-historical is a paradox difficult to maintain, as it does not take into account the evolutionary cycles, the flow of time or the conditions that make certain social phenomena possible, as well as their description.

2. The reconciliation theme

The theme of reconciliation has insistently emerged in recent years, both in political and religious systems. Browsing the front pages of various newspapers, news of reconciliation processes tend to appear more and more often: in Venezuela, Colombia, between the two Koreas, and most recently in Mexico. In some of these countries, among which Argentina should be included, reconciliation has been associated, on certain occasions, with the absence of justice and the attempt to forget.

In a functionally differentiated social system, the variants of the term «reconciliation» can only refer to communications that do not find identical correspondence in all systems (economic, political, religious, legal, artistic, etc.). Thus, when political communication follows the theme of «reconciliation», it does nothing but join the selection made by the media, which therefore generate public opinion and consensus. The selected theme does not determine the content of the opinions; however, it attracts attention, hence making politicians aware of it.

The Catholic Church, on its part, has supported this thematic trend within its own religious system, sometimes presenting itself as the bearer of semantics that are able to sort the semantics of other systems. The social system in which the theme of «reconciliation» is set up, is

characterized by functional differentiation. Such theme functions within a system in which hierarchically structured societies have dissolved, configuring themselves as polycentric societies without a dominant centre, and where different systems (political, juridical, economic, etc.) coexist in a more or less autonomous way.

One possible way of dealing with the theme of «reconciliation», coming from a theory of differentiation, is to reflect upon the concept which represents its opposite. What is it that we observe when we approach the notion of reconciliation? What is its hidden side? These questions contribute to define the binomial reconciliation/conflict.

Today the word «reconciliation» semantically implies a reduction of complexity that avoids thinking about conflict. The term «reconciliation» can be considered as a «floating signifier» in the sense that is used by Lévi-Strauss².

The «floating signifier» represents an undetermined value of meaning, whose function should be that of covering distances between signification and meaning, or better, indicating that in a given circumstance or situation, an inadequate relationship has been established between signification and significance, to the detriment of previous complementary relationships. This void in the floating signifier allows, for example, the theme of reconciliation to circulate within different systems characterized by different connotations.

3. The semantics of reconciliation at the time of Ignatius of Loyola

Writing history as a way of presenting itself in transdisciplinary terms, by adopting a social theory of differentiation, must begin with overcoming the naivety of the following question: «what happened?» and begin to wonder about «how ‘what happened’ has been perceived» (or how is it seen). History’s barycenter is built not so much upon an ontological conception of the past, but rather it is the result of an epistemological conception. We should ask ourselves, in this particular case, how «reconciliation» was seen, observed and experienced. The observation which I refer to, does not concern the individual but rather an observing system, which is the sixteenth-century society. Only when

² C. Lévi-Strauss (ed.), *Sociologie et anthropologie, précédé d’une introduction à l’oeuvre de Marcel Mauss*, Paris, PUF, 1950.

the historian succeeds at establishing and recording the variations that different social systems establish in the observation process, it will be possible to deny the equivalence between the term «reconciliation», as we find it in Pope Julius III's bull *Exposcit debitum* (1550), in which the foundational rule of the Society of Jesus is laid out and approved, and the way we use it today.

Everyone should agree that in front of a painting like Sebastiano del Piombo's *Flagellation*³, our impression and experience cannot be the same as that of people who entered the church in the sixteenth-century. The only way to support this point of view would be that of starting from a non-historical conception of «experience» by which the observer is indifferent, be it a Spanish priest by the name of Ignatius of Loyola or a Jesuit of today's Gregorian University. According to such a theory, the observer means nothing, and his experience is in no way historicizable.

If we assume that experience only means «recounted experience», we must necessarily go back to society, that is, to its very structure and semantics. This should lead us to consider that what can be experienced is determined by the distinction that a social system internally establishes between possible and impossible. In order to understand how to move the borders of possible and impossible, we should all agree that today, unlike what happened in the past, no mother would consider it acceptable to treat her child's cancer by relying exclusively on prayer. In the face of such a situation, both the legal and the religious system would intervene. One of the aims of historical research should be that of determining how the social structure has changed and how its borders have moved.

If we look at Ignatius's Society as a social system characterized by an internal, stratified differentiation (top-down), this implies that the semantics used at the time, have very little to do with ours. Taking into account the semantic aspects, which should be complemented by a history of concepts, will not only show us the use and meaning of a given term, but key terms such as «reconciliation», «war», «peace», «man», will grant us direct access to some of the fundamental images through which reality was built. This means that it would allow us to reflect on the representation of the world in different areas.

³ The painting is located in the Church of San Pietro in Montorio, Rome, well known to Ignatius of Loyola.

Therefore, in order to move closer to what was defined by the term «reconciliation» in the first Jesuit documents or by St. Ignatius himself, we should reflect on the semantics of that specific social structure. This process will show a society that is foreign to us, as much as the Chinese culture is, or the Guaraní culture at the time of the Spanish conquest. The illusion of being close to the sixteenth century European society, is precisely what we should problematize without falling prey to the allure of the obvious.

As said before, the expression «ad reconciliationem dissidentium» is found for the first time in the bull *Exposcit debitum* and it is the foundational rule of the Society of Jesus. This term is the result of an extended process that saw contrary opinions and doubts among the founding comrades. In fact, a certain kind of historiography made a consistent attempt at showing unity and common purpose amongst them. Instead, the presence, or not, of «reconciliation» in a document of this magnitude has, at least, produced some serious doubts. Neither the first drafts of the *Formula Instituti*, known as *Quinque Capitula* and approved by Paul III in 1539⁴, nor the one contained in the bull *Regimini militantis Ecclesiae*, approved by the same Pope, make any mention of the expression «ad reconciliationem dissidentium». Over the ten years separating the *Regimini militantis Ecclesiae*⁵ from the *Exposcit debitum*, more documents of approval and recognition of the Society of Jesus were issued: *Sacrosanctae romanae Ecclesiae* (1541), *Iniunctum nobis* (1543), and *Licet debitum* (1549); even these pontifical documents make no mention of the term «reconciliation», although some important changes were introduced with regard to apostolic poverty. Whoever is to be inspired by a theory which identifies «the origins» as a place holding a nucleus of authenticity that has the ability to cross times, would be very disappointed at the lack of an element that, for example, is nowadays presented as foundational. Instead, the theme of «reconciliation» is emphasized in previous documentation that collects some of the doubts about the construction of various aspects considered as pivotal, prior to their definitive crystallization in the *Constitutiones*: these are the *Sex dubiorum series*⁶.

In the *Series Prima*, Fr. Juan Alfonso de Polanco, Ignatius of Loyola's adviser and secretary, raises doubts on the opportunity of disclosing

⁴ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Monumenta Constitutionum praevia*, Roma, IHSI, 1934; I, pp. 14-21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 268-355.

particular aspects and details of certain ministries. The answer to this *dubium* provides for a distinction between what should be part of the rule, meaning part of the *formula instituti*, and what should be a fixed feature of the *Constitutiones* and, eventually, also be part of the latter's *Declarationes*⁷. The fundamental Rule should, therefore, include basic contents not subject to changes, leaving room for making experiments and, possibly, revisions in the *Constitutiones*. Such differentiation will help us identify a space (the *Formula's* text) in which it is possible to combine broad generalization with high stability, i.e. defining a core from which it is possible to build, whenever necessary, an identifying image that is able to cope with variability and deviations. This kind of breadth allows for new selections that lead to a renewed stabilization of the organization. When the selective pressure increases within the organization, due both to an increase in the number of members and to the solicitations coming from the environment, but also, in general, to the growth of systemic complexity, normative texts gradually reducing the margins of the fundamental Rule will proliferate, mainly by the end of the sixteenth century. By the second half of the last century this tendency will have a turnaround in the form of theories that call for a «return to the sources» and that will identify the proliferation of rules and norms with a repression of the «original charisma».

Polanco does outline the way in which papal bulls should frame the Society's fundamental Rule: papal documents must reflect the essence of the institution, its aim and its most important means, which cannot but be subjected to changes. The bull should consist of a generic declaration and its words, Polanco adds, should be «preñadas», so to avoid closing the door to other possibilities. According to Covarrubias's Dictionary (1611) the meaning of the word «preñada» goes far beyond its literal meaning⁸. When doubts are raised whether or not to include *ad reconciliationem dissidentium* among the «corporal works of mercy», as they will be categorised in the *Constitutiones* (n. 650), Ignatius replies: «Affirmative, but without any scruple of obligation». This lack of compulsion shows a glimpse of a hierarchy of means, as far as how to fulfil the desired purpose. The aforementioned number (650) of the *Constitutiones* displays the pre-eminence of spiritual works of mercy over the corporal ones, as already expressed in the Thomistic doctrine

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 269-270.

⁸ «Preñada: la muger que trae creatura en el vientre ... Palabras preñadas, las que contienen virtualmente mucho más de lo que expresan», S. Covarrubias, *El tesoro de la lengua castellana*, Madrid, Luis Sanchez, 1611.

and collected by Peter Canisius for his catechetical teachings, as well as by eighteenth-century authors, such as Giuseppe Domenico Boriglioni (*Christian Doctrine*, Turin, 1764).

Starting from From Rabanus (ca. 776-856), both clerics and churchmen embrace the spiritual works of mercy, among which is to advise the doubters, teach the ignorant, etc. (*The Formation of the Clerics*, 2.28), moreover since they are poor, they have no assets to give out.

As with Thomas Aquinas, one might think that the works of spiritual mercy, destined to address the «defects [faults] that partially affect the soul» (ST, II-II, q. 32, art. 2), are ranked higher than corporal alms-deeds. This kind of primacy reflects the soul/body hierarchy that represents the unity of a substantial form in which the rational soul subsumes all those functions that pertain to the lower forms (vegetative and sensorial). The subsequent, modern drive towards secularisation, which coincides with the birth of the modern state, will lead to a growing distinction between religion and ethics, and will therefore jeopardize the common referential principle. This evolution will gradually lead to the monopoly of corporal practices of mercy, versus the spiritual ones. Caravaggio's painting, *The Seven Works of Mercy* (Naples, Pio Monte della Misericordia, 1606-1607), is a wonderful example of this change.

The «series of doubts» clearly shows, on the one hand, the existence of a distinction between means and ends and, on the other hand, it adds instability to the typology of means that must be used in order to reach the end for which the Order was founded: especially dealing with the defence and propagation of faith, and of the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine. The distinction between means and ends is a way of safeguarding identity as a communication construct. The aim remains broad enough, in order to organize and manage differences, while means, since they must be identified, represent, for this reason, the varying part that reinforces the organization's immovable *telos*. Gradual introduction of the concept of *novitas* within the social system as a value, will jeopardize this theology.

The reconciliation theme, aside from appearing in some foundational documents of the Society of Jesus, emerges from the correspondence of Ignatius of Loyola, where the same distinctions are made. What are the situations that trigger the reconciliation mechanism? In the face of what conflict? Reconciliation comes into play only for friends who estranged because of wounds caused by honor. Honor appears to be the medium through which it is possible to identify and maintain a hi-

erarchical position within the system, especially in Ignatius of Loyola's time (mid-sixteenth century), during the transition period from the feudal conception to the birth of territorial states. Aristocracy, as well as religion, will have to create new ties with politics, in the name of what will be called *raison d'état*, which in turn will gradually take on the task of settling conflicts, war and violence in general. Legitimation of the aristocracy will also have to go through political consensus. The decisions made during the Council of Trent accurately reflects the existence of these new ties between politics and religion, as shown by the condemnation of duel introduced in the general reform decree, at Chapter 19:

«The detestable custom of duelling, introduced by the contrivance of the devil, that by the bloody death of the body he may accomplish the ruin of the soul, has to be utterly exterminated from the Christian world».

The old position of the Medieval Church on duel as part of the *iudicia Dei*, seems to be clearly outdated.

Hierarchically differentiated societies tend to express a need for avouchment and recognition of rank, especially in moments of change. The conflict/reconciliation pair activates whenever one has to «provide satisfaction» for the wounded honor. The concept of «honor» will serve to make distinctions within a hierarchical order that, from time to time, goes through some degree of uncertainty. In fact, the practice of duelling is one of the mechanisms that contribute to promoting the recognition of honor, and therefore of social order.

In a letter to Diego Mirón (5.4.1554), Ignatius of Loyola praises a provision issued by John III of Portugal in which the practice of duelling is forbidden throughout the kingdom. The royal provision, in tune with the dispositions of the Council of Trent, established that kings were entitled ban those «temporal lords» who allowed the practice of duel in their domains. However, Ignatius's motivation, as it appears in his letter, is always and mainly linked to the protection of honor, and not of life as such, which could not be conceived as a separate issue from the question of honor. Ignatius adds two more points that may reinforce the King's decree; first: the man who accepts the challenge of honor should be considered a traitor and an infamous person, since by doing this he may not only loose his possessions, but his life as well. Therefore, Ignatius adds:

«the contrary medicine will heal the disease, and the man who is willing to take the field in order to defend parts of his honour will ultimately give up for fear of losing everything».

The second point is that disputes of honor should be discussed before a judicial court.

Neither religion nor the force of the law of the state were able to put limits to seeking «satisfaction», which came from the practice of duelling. Putting one's life at risk in a duel will continue to be the practical way to show (insofar as it is the visible force put into practice) that honor is a non-negotiable issue, as it affects the person as a whole and his social status. In fact, «pacification» through duel or a juridical trial implies recognition of the existence of a defamed and an infamous one.

4. The reconciliation theme within the 'universal wall'

If we want to examine how the concept of «reconciliation» was perceived in the times of Ignatius of Loyola and compare it to ours, we may give a clarifying example. As we have seen, the only papal bull – among the three that approved the foundation of the Jesuit Order – where the term (*ad reconciliationem dissidentium*) appears, is the *Exposcit debitum* of 1550. In that year, the viceroy of Sicily, Juan de Vega y Enríquez, organized an expedition to Al-Mahdia (Tunis) in order to rescue it from the dominance of the Ottoman corsair, Turgut Reis, and try to free the western Mediterranean from the continual incursions of Barbary pirates. Ignatius of Loyola obtained for this army the grace of the Jubilee, that was being celebrated right at that time. Among the «noble and courageous men» whom the grace was granted to, was Fr. Diego Laínez, chaplain of the viceroy's army⁹. The Jubilee was solemnly announced in the African camp (Campo d'África) from the mouth of Diego Laínez who, when writing to Ignatius of Loyola, recounts: «many confess and change their lives ... peace is made and compensations are offered»¹⁰. In this case, reconciliation occurs exclusively among Christians. War, or

⁹ «Illustris dominis ac nobilibus ac strenuis viris, ducibus ac militibus et omnibus christianis qui in Africa contra infideles bellum gerunt, Xpi domini protectionem et auxilium ac salutem in eodem sempiternam», quoted in F. de Borja Medina, *Ignacio de Loyola y el Mar: su política mediterránea*, in «Revista de Historia Naval (Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval. Armada Española)», 13, 1995, 50, pp. 11-56.

¹⁰ *Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu (MHSI), Lani Monumenta. Epistola et acta Patris Iacobi Lainii*, 8 vols., Madrid, Gabriel López del Horno, 1912-1917, I, p. 166.

rather the crusade, in the singular form, as pointed out by Alphonse Dupront¹¹, coexists with this exclusive kind of reconciliation. According to the French historian, the crusade/pilgrimage binomial is animated by the same kind of zeal. The *milites* open and secure the way for pilgrims, and it is pilgrimage that makes the crusade meaningful. Descriptions of the life of Ignatius of Loyola, as portrayed, for example, in the so-called *Autobiography*, or in some of his correspondence, are an icon of the ambivalence between the crusade and the pilgrimage, where the latter is made into a mission. The disappointed expectation of remaining in Jerusalem (1522) was coupled by the impossibility of returning there (1537) because the ship destined for the war against the Turks, in the Eastern Mediterranean, never sailed. The quest for Jerusalem is resumed in some letters, in the last years of his life.

The crusade is not only a cohesive force, but also an expansive force capable of extending the Christian world towards those borderlands where it was not present yet. The momentum of the missions, which coincides with the reforms' crisis, should be interpreted in continuity with this conception. The world outside of Christianity is seen as a limited space that has to be conquered. By expanding the world as it was known until then, the mission lands, especially the American lands, will put a strain on this construction of reality. This disappointment of expectations coincides with the collapse of the Mediaeval vision of the world. The crusade did not produce the conversions that were expected; hence, it is time to start a mission.

At Ignatius of Loyola's time the Christian vision is resumed. At that time, religion had a social function, which aimed at offering interpretative certainties and channelling expectations. Religion, especially in moments of uncertainty, will manifest its polemogenic features. Production of conflict leads to the identification of the frontiers of Christianity, together with its ability to consolidate and expand them; one can identify the other more quickly and more easily by reducing the emergence of the friend/enemy connotation.

After the fall of Tripoli in the hands of the Ottomans and the defeat of Andrea Doria's army in the Battle of Ponza, Ignatius wrote to Juan de Vega in 1552¹², proposing the creation of a great army for the purpose of defending the Western Mediterranean area. The plan, which Ignatius

¹¹ A. Dupront, *Il sacro. Crociate e pellegrinaggi. Linguaggi e immagini*, Torino, Bollati Borin-ghieri, 1993.

¹² Letters on this topic can be found in *MHSI, Epistolae et instructiones*, IV, pp. 353-359.

wanted to present to Emperor Charles V and his son, Prince Philip, was meant, along with other goals, to break the Franco-Turkish alliance. A detailed economic plan foresaw the establishment of a fleet of at least 300 galleys: «this solution will produce a great good for Christianity and create hope for its rise, precisely where its decline is feared most as well as its great damage».

As Juan Alfonso de Polanco points out in his letter to Jeronimo Nadal, Ignatius «takes the initiative» not only for zeal of charity, but also in the «light of reason» by which he «sensed» that this «great army» had to be created. The explanation provided by Polanco of Ignatius regarding Ignatius's decision, establishes a distinction that shows the emergence of a certain novelty within the structure of the social system. Polanco writes that Ignatius has been, for a few days, under a certain «impression». Based on the Augustinian conception (*De Civitate Dei*, book 9), this term refers to a footprint that is formed in the person's mind-soul (*animus-mens*). This «impression» is, however, a rational one and, once it is transmitted to the mind (*mens*), is has to be examined and evaluated. The contents of the letter show this as being already a «señal», a divine sign legitimising action; however, for the lack of «a greater sign of divine will», other people's advice becomes necessary as, in this case, that of Fr. Jeronim Nadal. Yet, along with the spiritual/religious distinction, another one emerges towards the end of the letter: «it would be more appropriate if others talked about these things». The context of the letter leads to the impression that «these others» are the Christian princes, who are happy to spend money for hunting and enriching their tables, but do not finance the galleys «against the infidels». The other the distinction pertains to the political sphere. In fact, in the seventeenth century, the religion/politics binomial will be increasingly dominated by contrast.

According to the letter, the army that Ignatius of Loyola imagined and longed for, may be compared to a «universal wall». The expression designates the fact that defence must be understood as absolute (the wall) and universal, where the universe coincides with the Christian world (*Christianitas*). What is inside the wall refers to the symbolism of the Mediaeval *Hortus conclusus*, which does not only evoke the garden of the Annunciation, but – as pointed out by Franco Cardini¹³ – creates

¹³ F. Cardini, *Il giardino del cavaliere, il giardino del mercante. La cultura del giardino nella Toscana tre-quattrocentesca*, in «Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen-Age», 106, 1994, 1, pp. 259-273.

a space where the synthesis between culture, cultivation and wild nature presents itself as a nostalgic memory of Paradise: «se paradiso si potesse in terra fare» [if it were ever possible to make Paradise on Earth] it would have the shape of the garden described in Boccaccio's *Filocolo*. It is mainly St. Augustine's *tranquillitas ordinis*, the place of peace, that ultimately justifies 'just war', and convinces those men that this war, the one that prepares the way for peace, and that will defend it and secure it, will be also the last one.

At the time of Ignatius of Loyola, the term «reconcile» was applied to fairly narrow semantic fields. It was applied to the Sacrament of Penance and to the action that was proper of the Holy Inquisition, that of «ridurre», as it was then called, meaning leading back to the «womb [gremio] of the Holy Church those who had departed because of some heresy». The most common significance is that of «riamicamento», or re-establishment of friendship, as friends alone can be reconciled. Reconciliation, so to speak, applies to those within the boundaries delimited by the «universal wall». The actions that can be carried out towards the outsiders are different: it is either conversion, or war in order to reconquer. In fact, Ignatius's plan moves between these two options. According to a letter dated 1554¹⁴, he hopes, if possible, to end his days in the Berber Coast, where he could have translated the Koran in order to «undo its errors», organised a mission in the Berber states (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Tripoli) and planned the crusade. The foundation of the Jesuit college in Messina, should be considered as a step towards the mission.

5. The reasons behind this effort

This research work, being at a crossroads between social history and historiography, may show its agreement with the way of perceiving the work of the historian as described by Michel de Certeau, who considers it as building a place where one's gaze becomes restless.

This kind of anxiety, which the French historian ascribes to history, is, in his view, the result of having placed a distance between past and present. Historian is the one who knows how to maintain the distance between past and present, and who is able to outline the differences rather than the similarities.

¹⁴ *MHSI, Epistolae et instructiones*, Madrid, Gabriel López del Horno, 1907, VI, p. 195.

Historical narrative operates within the social system in the form of reduced complexity¹⁵. This reduction of complexity, as we said, corresponds to a certain selection of differences produced by the historiographic operational process, within a given social system. A theoretical approach of this kind, implies giving up the ontological conception of the past, while concentrating on the analysis of which semantics are used in a given social structure. According to the anxiety concept decried by de Certeau, it would be possible to achieve a greater abstraction by thinking outside of any ontological reference, and therefore leaving behind a narrative that pretends to appear as a mirror of reality. The weight of this anxiety could, therefore, be lightened, not by stating that it is impossible to narrate without betraying, but by accepting that reality cannot be but observed reality. Making historiographic operation within our social system equals to observing the observer, that is to say making a second-order type of observation¹⁶.

Conceiving the process of history writing this way, implies thinking of it as a non-trivial, known machine¹⁷ especially when dealing with latency, upon which the historical narration has been stratified, which does not reveal what happened, but how the story was told. Considering the existence of latency is admitting that it is possible to observe what others are neither able to observe nor to describe within a determined social structure. The purpose of this heuristic process is to discover not so much whether «latent causes» do exist, but whether there are latent functions and structures.

This method of historiographic research might contribute to reflect upon how a particular observer has observed in a certain way, and not in another; why has he made this decision, and with what consequences. It is a matter of grasping the observer's blind spot. The observer which we are here referring to, is not the individual but the observing system,

¹⁵ See N. Luhmann, *Illuminismo sociologico*, Milano, Il saggiatore, 1983, p. 135.

¹⁶ Key to understanding the «observation operation» on which, see: E. Esposito, *L'operazione di osservazione. Costruttivismo e teoria dei sistemi sociali*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1983.

¹⁷ The term here must be understood according to its cybernetic definition, as codified by Heinz von Foerster (*Sistémica elemental desde un punto de vista superior*, Medellín, Universidad EAFIT, 1997), that is, any operation that, providing for a causal / linear causal / linear connection, is able to establish a closed and complete cycle. This cybernetic use of the term, has already been made by Daniel Georg Morhof, in his *Polyhistor, literarius, philosophicus et practicus*, Book III, Chapter 13, Lubecae, sumptibus Petri Böckmann, 1708, p. 767, in order to define a file as a machine designed to extract and collect selected text excerpts («ad excerpendum et colligendum machina»). See also A. Cevoloni, *De arte excerpendi. Imparare a dimenticare nella modernità*, Firenze, Olschki, 2006, p. 61.

in our case a historiographic system comprising a certain rhetoric and corresponding to a specific structure¹⁸.

This attitude may lead to a considerable cognitive gain: we could, for example, understand the evolution of the social system by comparing the changes of a hierarchically differentiated society to ours, which is a functionally differentiated society. This ability to establish differences and contrasts may be useful not only for approaching the complexity of the past, but also for the purpose of describing, in a more subtle way, the social complexity in which we move today. This will also give us the chance to avoid manipulating history in the service of our reductive views, or in the service of ideologies that refuse to confront with complex (from Latin: *complexus* = comprehend, embrace) thinking, while stumbling over unnecessary complications (from Latin: *cum-plicare* = fold, make things difficult).

¹⁸ N. Luhmann, *La ciencia de la Sociedad*, Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México, ITESO - Anthropos Editorial, 1996, p. 69.