


**METHODOLOGICAL INTERSECTIONS: SCHOOL OF ANNALES, "CONTENT ANALYSIS" AND CONTROLLED HERMENEUTICS** <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2024.029-036>**Daniel Florence Giesbrecht<sup>1</sup>****ABSTRACT**

Recorded at least since the 1960s, the approximation of History with Linguistics and Anthropology began to dialogue more intensely in historical research. With the methodological assumptions introduced by the *Annales* School, the most diverse languages have become privileged objects for analysis, increasingly seen as metaphors for reality. The various discourses (written, oral, architectural, urbanistic, iconographic, musical, gestural and ritual) began to be decoded more frequently, seeking to apprehend their elements of social tension and their historical meanings, their production and their circulation in each social environment. From this variety of sources, new analytical tools began to provide instruments of historiographical making, such as Laurence Bardin's method of "Content Analysis". Starting from the premise that historiography is the result of reflection on the nature of the historical, it is between the lines of the discourses of the sources that the historian is able to calculate the frequencies provided by the ciphered data, which makes it possible to extract categories and models, in a "controlled hermeneutics" process. This article invites the academic community to reflect on such methodologies and their importance for the analysis of the types of discourses used as sources in historiography.

**Keywords:** Methodology of History. Historiography. "Content Analysis". Annales School. Hermeneutics.

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<sup>1</sup> Doctoral student in Contemporary History  
Institution: Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Coimbra (CEIS20/UC)  
E-mail: daniel.giesbrecht@uc.pt



## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1960s, the breaking of the boundaries between History and the other sciences had intensified. This fact made it possible to favor the construction of bridges and epistemological appropriations that triggered fruitful approximations of History with Anthropology and Linguistics, as well as the appropriation of multiple concepts, expanding the universe of political action and rational intervention in society.

The rigid structure arising from crystallized scientific models, such as, for example, that of "culture", treated until then in its erudite aspect easily perceived in the texts of Jacob Burckhardt (1990), began to be glimpsed from the subaltern groups, in their popular ramifications, which allowed dialogue and counterpoint to the culture of the elites, a fact signed by the works of Edward Thompson (1981), Peter Burke (1989) and Michel Vovelle (1983), to name a few.

The complexification of concepts such as the "present time" reinforced mainly with the third phase of the *Annales* represented a new selection of objects of study towards themes considered trivial: greetings; etiquette; food; oral communication; gesturalization; sexuality. Around these themes, the researchers sought to establish connections and unveil social articulations as determinant and decisive for collective life as the economic conjunctures or the social structures derived from the two previous phases, through the proposals of historians entitled *Annalists*.

In the search for meanings and the functioning of societies, the most diverse languages have become privileged objects for analysis, increasingly seen as metaphors of reality. The various discourses (written, oral, architectural, urbanistic, iconographic, musical, gestural, ritual) began to be decoded more frequently, seeking to apprehend their elements of social tension and their historical meanings, their production and their circulation in a given social environment. In other words, there was an expansion of the traditional territory of politics and social struggles, from the most evident places (State, unions, parties, associations) to areas to which great relevance had not been attributed until then (school, family, culture). In other words, the identification of elements of "micro-history" as shown by Anthony Levi (1992) has its valorization in the face of traditional "macro-history". Sociocultural history imposes, in this sense, a revaluation of politics and its identification in all the plots of the social fabric (GIESBRECHT, 2019, p. 16).

The maximum expression of the *Annales School*, Marc Bloch (2001) defends the need to carry out historical research with the help of the other sciences, resignifying the condition of dispute between them, having, based on dialogue, the archetype that encourages responses to research. We have here a proposal for interdisciplinarity.



However, the union of History with the Social Sciences is regulated by a new conception of time that is incompatible with the unique, singular, unrepeatable, linear and progressive temporality of the so-called "traditional History". Based on these assumptions, it is our objective in this article to think about the possible relationships between the methodological principles of the "Annales School" and the techniques of "Content Analysis", postulated by Laurence Bardin (2011).

As it is an epistemology of science and the indissolubility between History and Historiography, we will use both terms in our reflections, however, we highlight History as being that which is linked to human cultural production and experience in the face of a delimited time and space; and, Historiography, as that constituted through narrative, circumscribed by methodological rigor, which reflects the context and intertext of what is historical, that is, the "social" and the "temporal" (RÜSEN, 2015).

## FROM "ANNALES" TO "CONTENT ANALYSIS": METHODOLOGICAL CONVERGENCES AND HERMENEUTIC CAPACITY

The most important contribution of the Annales group, including the three generations, was to expand the field of history into several areas. (...) They are also associated with collaboration with other sciences, linked to the study of humanity, from geography to linguistics, from economics to psychology. This interdisciplinary collaboration has been maintained for more than sixty years, an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of the social sciences. (BURKE, 1991, p. 112-113)

All sciences are characterized by the use of systematized and rigorous methods; On the other hand, not all branches of study that employ these methods are sciences. From this statement we can conclude that the use of scientific methods is not the exclusive purview of science, but there is no science without the systematized use of these methods (LAKATOS & MARCONI, 1991). In the case of History, it is no different.

As Gaston Bachelard (1977) pointed out, the epistemology of scientific history has certain specificities, given that its construction is intrinsically articulated with the social, spatial and temporal fabric. Knowledge of the methods that help historiographical production, regardless of what they are, has acquired a fundamental role in its complex form of theory, justifying or compromising it. If the researcher's choices are inadequate, an entire work can collapse, since the lack of methodological concern can decree fatal mediocrity (DEMO, 1995, p. 12).

In the History of Science, paradigmatic changes do not always fit into watertight models of analysis (KUHN, 2021). When it comes to History, its scientific assumptions changed relatively quickly, taking into account its first phase of systematization, which



occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, through the efforts of positivist and/or historicist historians in search of a "universal axiom".

Such an axiom, as proposed by Émile Durkheim (1999), could be salutary in a History that possessed the same rigor as the exact sciences, based on truths and immutable, governed by universal laws, with an untouchable structure, free of pre-judgments and any interpretation in the light of its individual reality. Or, as Wilhelm Dilthey (1999) argued, an imaged model as a cultural, social and political phenomenon that must be understood through, and in its historicity, in which natural contradictions coexist among those who study it, given that each subject expresses his or her own point of view, a historically conditioned but true version of one of the various dimensions of the concrete.

It is to the detriment of these models that the movement known as *Annales* is unleashed. Its first and notable creators were the Frenchmen Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, who bet on the foundation of a magazine that would revolutionize the way of seeing and making History: in 1929 the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*<sup>2</sup> was born. Bloch and Febvre led the "New History" movement in France, a History written as a deliberate reaction against positivism and "conservative" historicism, endowed with new methodological resources, such as hermeneutics, now seen as a possibility of breaking with the factual in historiographical construction (GIESBRECHT, 2019).

Among the main proposals of this movement, we can highlight the following: a) replacement of the traditional narrative of events by a "Problem-History"; b) search for the History of all human activities and not just political History; c) expansion of the use of historical sources beyond writing; d) collaboration with other disciplines, aiming to contemplate the first three objectives, such as geography, sociology, psychology, economics, linguistics, social anthropology, among others.

Overcoming the determinisms of the nineteenth century that hierarchized human beings, cultures, and also the sciences, the necessary space for the dialogue of History with other apparently competing methodologies was opened up in the French cultural effervescence of the twentieth century, especially those derived from the Applied Social Sciences, such as the case of "Content Analysis", coming from psychosociology, widely tested and disseminated by Professor Laurence Bardin, holder of the chair of Psychology at the University of Paris V.

Since the end of the 1940s and 1950s, techniques of "Content Analysis" have been elaborated, even if they are still restricted to the limits of the objective, systematic and

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<sup>2</sup> A revista possuiu mais três títulos além deste: *Annales d'histoire sociale* (1939-1942-45); *Mélanges d'histoire sociale* (1942-44) e *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* (1946-).



quantitative description of the content present in the documentation collected during research procedures in the Social Sciences (BERELSON & LAZARSELD, 1948; BERELSON, 1952). According to Bardin (2011, p. 26), it was from the end of the 1950s, especially with the discussions held in several congresses, that "Content Analysis" gained the breath it needed to enter the universe of the other Human Sciences, as in the case of Ethnology, Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, Linguistics, and also of History.

In the case of the Annales School, one of its most significant epistemological foundations is translated by the principle of hermeneutics, which is the interpretation of the deep and careful meaning of what is considered historical from the sources (material or immaterial), the raw material of the historian's craft. It remains for us, then, to reflect on which methodologies and/or techniques would be able to handle the complexity of materials that are often so heterogeneous.

Contemplating the open and interdisciplinary character of *Annalist* historians, "Content Analysis", if properly applied, can be one of the possibilities of technical and procedural response, as it presents a diversified and constantly improving methodological set, applicable to the most diverse types of "discourses" contained in the primary sources of investigation, equipping the historian with a range of resources that allow calculating the frequency of data were used, to extract structures and models and, through deductive paths, to promote a "controlled hermeneutics", that is, "inference" (BARDIN, 2011, p. 15). "Inferring" is the ability to compose a systematic and logical explanation of discourse. When aiming to produce a narrative that aims to understand a certain theme through the sources that one has, "inferring" is the procedure that makes it possible to interpret the available documentation with a level of excellence.

Once the research problem(s) have been defined and based on the documentary sources collected, it is common for the historian to follow the paths offered by the qualitative and, when necessary, quantitative approach.

In quantitative analysis, what serves as information is the frequency with which certain characteristics of the content appear. In qualitative analysis, it is the presence or absence of a content characteristic or a set of characteristics in a given message fragment that is taken into account. (BARDIN, 2011, p. 26-27)

According to "Content Analysis", both approaches can interact around the validation of "inference". Such a condition can achieve promising results in the search for the "presences" and "absences" of the sources and overcome the descriptive reach. This is if we assume that the "inference" is carried out "based on frequency indicators, or, increasingly assiduously, with the help of combined indicators" (*Idem*, 2011, p. 27).



## FOR A METHODOLOGY OF SOURCES IN LINE WITH HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PRODUCTION

What is usually called historical "documents" or "sources" are not necessarily produced by individuals with the aim of leaving testimonies for those who will live in the future. It is up to historians to understand a certain document/source and "infer" about it, which is not an easy task.

Regarding the complexity of the process of unveiling the past through human remains, the *Annales* movement reached a high level of production, hence we agree with the premise postulated by Jacques Le Goff (1988, p. 33-34) that, "more than ever, the 'Annales' want to make understood. To pose the problems of History: to provide a History that is not automatic, but problematic".

According to José D'Assunção Barros (2010), the Annales School, in its three generations<sup>3</sup>, maintained the initial concern of considering historical documents and sources not only from their singularities, but also from the possible links of similarities and differences between them, a fundamental hypothesis for the effectiveness of the practice of what many *Annalist historians* have called "Comparative History" (temporal and spatial).

It can be seen, so far, that the multifactorial opening of the process of selection of sources suggested by *the Annales* has shifted the axis of "traditional history" from its neutrality to a "New History", more interdisciplinary, less hierarchical and less ethnocentric. New interpretative possibilities have opened up, as well as the need to coexist with other methodological realities, which has made "Content Analysis" a tool for some *annalists*.

A historiographical production that intends to benefit from the technologies derived from "Content Analysis" begins with the so-called "pre-analysis" phase. It is in it that the organization of the investigative framework that the historian proposes to focus on occurs, defining the type of documentation that will form the basic structure of the project to be executed.

We emphasize that in the construction of the narrative based on *Annalithic foundations*, the documentary supports are diverse, and these can transit, for example, between official documents (laws, contracts, accounting records, notary records), private

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<sup>3</sup> Its first phase, from 1920 to 1945, was characterized by being small, radical and subversive, conducting a guerrilla war against traditional history, political history and the history of events. In the second phase of the movement, the historians of the *Annales* made a "leap" in the construction of historical knowledge by taking possession of concepts (particularly structure and conjuncture) and new methods (especially the "serial history" of long-term changes), in which the contributions of Fernand Braudel (1902 – 1985) were very important. A third phase begins around 1968, deeply marked by fragmentation, emphasizing sociocultural history, the return to political history and narrative. There is an incorporation of themes for studies such as dreams, bodies, odors, women, death, sex, among others. At this time, psychology is widely used, as well as economic history, popular and regional culture (GIESBRECHT, 2019, p. 49).



(company or personal), music lyrics, inscriptions on monuments, statistical data, paintings, sculptures, constructions, films, photographs, scientific publications, household utensils, jewelry, coins, in short, any object created by the human being. If this range of options were not enough, the historian also has as a documentary resource various types of oral sources, such as interviews, reports, tales, legends, myths, fables, among other verbal manifestations.

With the universe demarcated (the type of documents on which the analysis can be carried out), it is often necessary to proceed to *the constitution of a corpus*. The *corpus* is a set of documents taken into account to be submitted to analytical procedures. (BARDIN, 2011, p. 126)

It is from the initial contact with the *documentary corpus* that we have the first opportunity to systematize and catalog the inventory (recognition of the type of document and its location; the exact or approximate dating; the definition of the main theme; who are the interlocutors; in addition to the attribution of an identification code).

After defining the *corpus*, the hypotheses and objectives are formulated. The hypothesis consists of the provisional statement that we propose to verify using the analytical tools and, the objectives, the general purpose of the project. Only after these definitions is it possible to move on to the last stage of the "pre-analysis" phase, which consists of referencing the indexes and elaborating the indicators that will enable the cutting of the sources into comparable units of categorization and for thematic analysis (BARDIN, 2011, p. 130).

Starting from the premise that the operations described so far have been carried out with due rigor, the historian is able to begin the procedure of exploring his documentation. The most laborious phase of an investigation, it is summarized, based on pre-established criteria, in the execution of coding, decomposition and/or enumeration operations.

Once the exhaustive work of organization and exploration has been overcome, it is possible to move on to the "categorization" phase. This approach is feasible, because the Annales School, especially from its second generation onwards, established approximations with concepts derived from Anthropology, notably structuralism. The social structure defined by Levi Strauss is related to the theoretical elaboration capable of giving meaning to the empirical data of an observed reality and is capable of distributing and ordering this information (REIS, 2008). With due reservations, it was from this logic that Fernand Braudel was able to propose the resizing of historical time, configuring two twin concepts: that of "long duration" and that of the "multiplicity of historical times" (BARROS, 2010, p. 152).



Social structure and resizing of historical time are elements that need categorization and "Content Analysis" can be fruitful by offering a technique for this. Bardin (2011, p. 138) defines that it is through the identification of "presences" and "absences" that we can "infer" indicators that refer to the interpretation of the contents analyzed through frequency measurements.

The choice of frequency indices is not something fortuitous and, if well applied by the *Annalist historian*, "the appearance of an item of meaning or expression will be all the more significant – in relation to what is sought to be achieved in the description or interpretation of the intended reality – the more this frequency is repeated" (*Idem*, 2011, p. 139).

With the frequency indices identified, the researcher will be able to concatenate them with categorization models; establish an interpretative structure that can start from *a priori* categories; perceive more accurately the elements frequently found, excerpts and interconnections between one or more elements; *a posteriori categories*; interlocutions with other researchers; and, finally, the logical deductions that result from his analysis.

Once Content Analytics decides to code your material, it must produce a system of categories. The first objective of categorization (in the same way as documentary analysis) is to provide, by condensation, a simplified representation of the raw data. (BARDIN, 2011, p. 149)

Once the categorization phase has been overcome, we can glimpse the achievement of the last stage of the analysis process: that of "inference as a result". When we reach this stage, it is necessary to show that the *Annales* movement proposes the success of the "Problem-History", a combative element that seeks to demolish merely descriptive History. It is the turn of an "interpretive, problematized, hypothetical, hypothetical, capable of cutting out the event by means of new reading tables, being able to problematize this very gesture of cutting out an event" (BARROS, 2010, p. 109). In "Content Analysis" such a conjecture is called "pole of analysis".

The process of searching for "inference as a result" starts from "problematization". On the one hand, the meaning, code and support of the documentation and, on the other, the sender and receiver of it. Regardless of who the sender (individual or group) was, we have the act as an expressive or representative function of a communication, hence the hypothesis that the message expresses or literally represents its sender. By stimulating a dialectical procedure, logic is inverted as to the receiver of the message who, in reaction, acts or adapts to it. Here we arrive at the most concrete convergence between the





"Annales School" and "Content Analysis": "Problem-History" becomes synonymous with "inference" and its result is "controlled hermeneutics".

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A historian who refuses to think about the human fact, a historian who professes pure and simple submission to these facts, as if they were not of his making, as if they had not been previously chosen, in every sense of the word 'chosen' (and they cannot but be chosen by him)—is a technical aid. Which can, by the way, be excellent. But he is not a historian. (FEBVRE, 1978, p. 106)

The excerpt above is combined with the main objective of this article, which sought to reflect on the possibilities of dialogues and convergent methods between the "Annales School" and "Content Analysis". The Annales School, since its emergence, has brought a renewing perspective to the field of History. Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, founders of this movement, proposed a break with traditional historiography, which focused on the narration of political facts and chronological events. Instead, the *Annales* sought a "Problem-History", focused on social and cultural phenomena, which required dialogue with other sciences, such as Sociology, Anthropology and Psychology. The central idea was that History could not be understood in isolation, but should be investigated in a network of interactions between different spheres of knowledge.

In this context, "Content Analysis", a methodological technique widely applied in the Social Sciences, has proved to be a powerful tool to assist historians in the investigation of historical sources. Created by Laurence Bardin, "Content Analysis" offers a rigorous and systematic methodology that allows the interpretation of discourses in a quantitative and qualitative way. It aims to explore the "presences" and "absences" in documents, enabling inferences that expand the understanding of the sources. The main convergence between the *Annales* and "Content Analysis" lies in hermeneutics, that is, in the interpretative capacity that both approaches share. While the *Annales* promote an interpretative History, focused on problematizations and hypotheses, "Content Analysis" offers the technical means to organize and decode historical discourses, facilitating the reading and understanding of the complex data that make up the historical narrative. The "controlled hermeneutics", promoted by "Content Analysis", dialogues directly with the epistemological principles of the *Annales*, especially with regard to the deep and detailed interpretation of the sources.

Throughout the article, it was highlighted how interdisciplinarity, promoted by the *Annales*, revolutionized historiographical practice by incorporating new objects of study and methodologies. The study of themes previously considered marginal, such as gestures,



food and sexuality, revisited the importance of everyday practices in the construction of the social fabric. This focus on "Social History" has led historians to seek methods capable of dealing with the variety and heterogeneity of data, a role that "Content Analysis" has played effectively. "Content Analysis", when applied to historical documents, proves to be a potent means to encode and categorize large volumes of information in order to make it interpretable. This categorization process is essential for the analysis of complex sources, such as written texts, images, oral discourses, and even material objects. By categorizing and decomposing information, "Content Analysis" allows the historian to identify patterns, relationships, and contradictions in the sources, contributing to a deeper understanding of the historical context analyzed.

In addition, the concept of inference, central to "Content Analysis", allows the historian to go beyond the simple description of facts and explore the interpretive layers of discourses. This inference makes it possible to develop hypotheses and the creation of explanatory models about social and cultural behavior, so that historical events are understood in their entirety. The concept of "Problem History" in the *Annales* fits perfectly into this perspective, as both reject a purely factual view and seek more complex interpretive explanations.

Despite the potential of "Content Analysis" in the historiographical field, its practical application faces some challenges. The first of these is the need for methodological rigor in the collection and organization of sources. Unlike other fields, where sources are produced specifically for research (such as in laboratory experiments), historical documents are not always produced with the intention of being sources of study. This requires the historian to pay special attention to the selection, categorization and interpretation of data, requiring time and resources.

In addition, there is the challenge of applying the categories of "Content Analysis" to sources that were not originally thought of as textual discourses, such as images, objects, and immaterial cultural manifestations. The transposition of a technique originated in the analysis of texts to these other types of sources requires methodological adaptations and an interdisciplinary vision, which in turn, also requires training in other areas of knowledge. Even so, the Annales School, by advocating a more open and interdisciplinary History, offers the basis for these adaptations to be made in a conscious and productive way.

Another point of challenge lies in the subjectivity inherent to the process of interpretation. As much as "Content Analysis" offers a systematic method, the inference and categorization of data involve interpretative decisions that may vary according to the researcher. This does not mean that the method is flawed, but it highlights the need for



transparency in the research process, with the explicitness of the choices and criteria used. In the Annales' mold, this subjectivity should not be seen as a limitation, but as an intrinsic part of the historiographical craft, since the construction of History will always involve some level of personal and contextual interpretation.

Both the *Annales* School and "Content Analysis" share a common point: the desire to expand the frontiers of historical knowledge, breaking with rigid paradigms and opening space for new approaches and perspectives. The use of "Content Analysis" in the field of History is just one of the many ways in which contemporary historians can explore interdisciplinary potentialities in constructing more complex and profound historical narratives.

In conclusion, the dialogue between the Annales School and "Content Analysis" is not only possible, but fruitful. The union between historical hermeneutics and the quantitative and qualitative methods offered by "Content Analysis" allows for a deeper and more comprehensive investigation of historical sources, promoting a richer and more multifaceted historiography. The new generations of historians can, by following this path, contribute to the construction of a more inclusive, interdisciplinary History that is sensitive to the complexities of historical time.



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