Kostas Gavroglu, O Passado das Ciências como História, Porto: Porto Editora, 2007. Pp. 302, ISBN 960-524-175-7. Originally published in Greek in 2004.

By Ana Simões[*]

Kostas Gavroglu, the author of The Past of the Sciences as History, is a well-known historian of science whose career has been unfolding in the international landscape for the past decades. Despite his long time interest in historiographical questions, this book is a first substantial contribution to a topic, which, with a few exceptions, has not caught the attention of historians of science qua writers despite its unquestionable interest (H. Kragh, An Introduction to the Historiography of Science, CUP, 1987, Portuguese translation, 2003; J. Golinski, Making Natural Knowledge. Constructivism and the History of Science, CUP, 1998). Therefore, it is particularly telling that the author opted to address it to a Greek audience, a choice which has been informed by his willingness to actively contribute to consolidate a culture of professional practitioners. The Past of the Sciences as History was published initially in Greek (2004), and besides the Portuguese translation (2007), there is so far just another translation in Turkish (2006).

The book addresses some of the theoretical and practical aspects of doing History of Science: the type of questions asked; the kinds of sources and the specificities of the archival material historians use in order to answer their questions; the meaning of historical problems; the various ways of articulating solutions to historical problems; the processes of formation of arguments which substantiate particular viewpoints; the meaning of interpretations and the criteria used to validate them; the chief characteristics of main historiographical trends, including comments on certain aspects of social constructivism.

Since its very beginning the author offers the reader his understanding of what is the history of science: "the History of Science is the history of all those who tried to study and understand the structure and workings of nature. (…) Science was also moulded by the ideas, techniques, and practices which they imagined to understand nature, the entities, principles, and laws which they discovered, the various institutions they created, the applications they conceived – all these dimensions shaped the sciences. But humans also shaped science with their different ideological, philosophical, aesthetic, religious and political conceptions, as well as with their different social practices. Therefore, the History of Science takes as its subject matter science as

a social and cultural phenomenon and historians of science study its history having in mind that local, temporal and cultural specificities played a very important role in the formation of both the discourse of science and its social function." (p.21)

It is in this disciplinary framework that the book discusses aspects of the history of the History of Science and topics including controversies, consensus and legitimizing processes among members of the scientific community; scientific practice as a useful category of historical analysis; and the problem of priority seen as an upsetting historical problem with beneficial historiographical consequences. The book includes many examples stemming from different episodes in the History of Science, and furthermore offers a detailed analysis of various aspects of the Scientific Revolution; it also presents an extended bibliography.

Granted that the book was written having a specific audience in mind, in what follows I wish to highlight the main ways in which this choice is reflected in the books' content. First, the author discusses the difficult relations historians of science have always entertained with historians and scientists. While common to various local contexts, this tricky relationship is more acutely felt in peripheral contexts in most of which history of science is still an emerging discipline in the process of affirming its autonomy relative to other disciplines. Second, the detailed discussion of the contributions informed by positivism of the first generation of historians of science aims indirectly to call attention to the "dangerous seduction" of positivism which is still pervasive in many peripheral scenarios. Third, at the same time the pitfalls of positivistic and anachronistic writings are stressed (as the output of reconstructions by committed scientist-historians), it is given a prominent place to the discussion of the equally dangerous myth of the neutrality of the historian of science.

All the above features lay the ground for the author's agenda – to contribute to the consolidation of a culture of professional historians. His main strategy involves a plea for a third way for doing history of science, a middle-ground between the attraction to positivism and the excesses of social constructivism. The author argues for the need to avoid historical fashions and gurus, thereby proposing an eclectic appropriation of aspects of different, or even antagonistic, methodological approaches, which should be judged on the sole basis of their explanatory usefulness.

In this sense the book plays the double role of an introductory book to the historiography of science and a textbook in the noblest sense of the genre, aiming at forming a new generation of historians of science. This is why in my view the book is organized around very practical questions relevant to building up the historical persona of the historian of science

without the author ever committing himself to a single methodological option. In fact, he opposes the existence of single methodological modes.

While I enumerated ways in which this book is especially addressed to audiences specific to contexts within which history of science is still a young discipline, I insist that what makes the book truly original, and in this instance useful and interesting for audiences in both centres and peripheries, is the emphasis on the active role of the historian of science. Most books on the historiography of science deal with the historian as a mediator between past and historical interpretations/reconstructions, hardly with any thickness. Kostas Gavroglu's historian of science has thickness. In the book we follow him/her through his/her active practicing life, that is, feeling, asking questions, acting, formulating answers, taking decisions, in sum, going about practicing the discipline. And the immense attraction, not perilous but enthralling, of the History of Science, comes out reinforced from this brilliant book.

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