

Transversal: International Journal for the Historiography of Science, 4 (2018) 140-148  
ISSN 2526-2270  
www.historiographyofscience.org  
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## Dossier Georges Canguilhem

### Looking through the Corners: Althusserism and the Reception of Canguilhem in Brazil

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#### Abstract:

This paper presents the role of Althusser and two of his students in the 1960s, Pierre Macherey and Dominique Lecourt, in the diffusion of the work of Georges Canguilhem in Brazil. We begin by a brief review of Macherey's and Lecourt's analysis on the work of Canguilhem taken from two texts that served as postface and preface to the Brazilian and the Argentine translations of *Le normal et le pathologique*. Next, we present the works of Brazilian authors Sérgio Arouca, Cecília Donnangelo and Ricardo Bruno Mendes-Gonçalves to show some aspects of the reception of Canguilhem's ideas and concepts in the field of Collective Health.

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#### Keywords:

Georges Canguilhem; Althusserism; Collective Health; Sergio Arouca; Cecilia Donnangelo

Received: 30 December 2017. Reviewed: 26 February 2018. Accepted: 8 May 2018.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24117/2526-2270.2018.i4.12>

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In January 1970, Louis Althusser sent a letter to Ben Brewster, the American translator of *Pour Marx*. Brewster had added to his translation a glossary of technical terms relevant to the understanding of Althusser's work, such as "epistemological break". According to the translator, "*coupure épistémologique*" is a concept introduced by Gaston Bachelard in the book *La formation de l'esprit scientifique* (1938), and used by Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault in their studies on history of ideas. Brewster goes on explaining that the epistemological break describes "the leap from the prescientific world of ideas to the scientific world" and that this leap "involves a radical break with the whole pattern and frame of reference of the pre-scientific (ideological) notions, and the construction of a new pattern (problematic)". Finally, he informs that Althusser uses this concept to describe "Marx's rejection of Hegelian and Feuerbachian ideology of his youth and the construction of the basic concepts of dialectic and historical materialism in his later works" (Brewster 1970, 310).

Althusser believed that the glossary could actually make his work more accessible to the English-speaking readers, but he felt the necessity to add a "minor point":

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I should like to point out that Canguilhem has lived and thought in close contact with the work of Bachelard for many years, so it is not surprising if he refers somewhere to the term “epistemological break”, although this term is rarely to be found as such in Bachelard’s texts (on the other hand, if the term is uncommon, the *thing* is there all the time from a certain point on in Bachelard’s work). But Canguilhem has not used this concept *systematically*, as I have tried to do. [...] *Canguilhem’s* use of the concept “break” differs from mine, although his interpretation does tend in the same direction. In fact, this should be put the other way round: *my debt to Canguilhem is incalculable*, and it is my interpretation that tends in the direction of his, as it is a *continuation* of his, going beyond the point where his has (for the time being) stopped. (Althusser 1970, 324)

On a personal level, the acquaintance between the two philosophers began when Canguilhem left from Strasbourg to Paris in 1948, the same year that Althusser became a professor at the *École Normale Supérieure*. It was the bureaucratic tasks that promoted the meeting, for Canguilhem had assumed the position of General Inspector of Public Instruction, while Althusser became a member of the jury of *agrégation*. “He did not find me very reactionary, and he did not seem very obtuse to me. Then, we came to understand each other well”, said Canguilhem decades later (BING and BRAUNSTEIN 1998, 126-127). They remained close at least until the early 1970s, when Canguilhem retired from the Sorbonne. In 1980, a well-known dramatic episode: Althusser, in a psychotic outbreak, strangles his wife. At Canguilhem archive at the *Centre d’Archives de Philosophie, d’Histoire et d’Édition des Sciences (CAPHÉS)*, we find a folder with several newspaper clippings on the event, as well as a letter from Althusser, dated 6<sup>th</sup> of July 1986, sent from the psychiatric hospital *l’Eau Vive*, in Soisy-sur-Seine: “I am writing to say that I have an infinite debt to you. I read *Le normal et le pathologique* and nothing more. That was enough to understand you and understand that you were my ‘master’.”

The recognition and public praise that Althusser always yielded to Canguilhem guaranteed, at first, a greater audience for the latter, but also contributed to the diminishing of its relevance when the French intellectual scene changed. According to Jean-François Braunstein, the main reason for the momentary eclipse of historical epistemology in France, during the last two decades of the past century, is the fact that Canguilhem was somehow “phagocytosed” by Althusser and the Althusserians: “It was believed that Canguilhem was only an Althusserian among others, or a kind of Marxist, which is evidently absurd, entirely contrary to Canguilhem’s own ideas” (Almeida and Camolezi 2016, 161). In fact, many of the criticisms addressed against Canguilhem’s take on the relations between science and non-science do not have their origin in his own works, not even in what Althusser said of Canguilhem, but in what Althusser intended to do based on his reading of Canguilhem. On the other hand, the interest of Althusser and his disciples was the main impulse for the projection of Canguilhem beyond France borders, and even for the reception of his ideas in Brazil. Among us, as we shall see, since the 1970s *Le normal et le pathologique* is well known to researchers in the field of Collective Health, where it has gained a prestigious reputation thanks to the works of authors such as Sérgio Arouca, Ricardo Bruno Mendes-Gonçalves, Cecília Donnangelo, Naomar de Almeida Filho, Ricardo Lafetá Novaes, Dina Czeresnia, José Ricardo de Carvalho Mesquita Ayres and many others.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “As a field of knowledge, [Collective Health] contributes to the study of health-disease phenomena in populations as a social process, investigating the production and distribution of disease in society as an aspect of social reproduction, and analyzing health practices as a labor process integrated into the other social practices. As a universe of practices, Collective Health focuses on its models or action guidelines four objects of intervention: policies (forms of power distribution); practices (behavior

It came as no surprise when, in 1978, in his preface to the American translation of *Le normal et le pathologique*, Foucault said: “Take away Canguilhem and you will no longer understand much about Althusser, Althusserism and a whole series of discussions which have taken place among the French Marxists” (Foucault 1978, ix). In fact, it was two disciples of Althusser, Pierre Macherey and Dominique Lecourt, who consolidated the image of Canguilhem as a “historian of the sciences”. For some commentators, such as Camille Limoges and Jean-Pierre Sérís, more than highlighting a philosopher’s interest in a discipline that until recently was a strictly philosophical field of research, Macherey and Lecourt spread the idea that the history of sciences was, for Canguilhem, “a vocation, a second or even a first nature” (Sérís 1993, 90). Macherey’s “La philosophie de la science de Georges Canguilhem: Épistémologie et Histoire des Sciences”, used since 1982 as a postface to the Brazilian translation of *Le normal et le pathologique*, was originally published in 1964, in *La Pensée*, a multidisciplinary journal associated to the French Communist Party. Canguilhem was not yet “the author of *Le normal et le pathologique*”, published only two years later, but it did not prevent Althusser from prophesying in his Presentation to Macherey’s article: “Canguilhem’s name and work will soon know a much larger audience” (Althusser 1998, 161). In “La historia epistemológica de Georges Canguilhem”, commissioned by the Siglo XXI publishing house (as recommended to the editors by Althusser) to preface the Argentine translation of *Le normal et le pathologique*, from 1971, Lecourt stated that the purpose of his text was to clarify the “truly inestimable theoretical debt” of the “Marxist-Leninist philosophers grouped around Louis Althusser” with the works of Canguilhem (Lecourt 1975, 162).

“The new epistemologists”, wrote Althusser on that Presentation, “are similar to ethnologists, who go ‘into the field’: they want to see science up-close, and refuse to speak about what they are ignorant of, or about what they know only at second or third hand (unhappily, this was the case with Brunschvicg) or perceive from outside, that is, from afar” (Althusser 1998, 163). Fifty years ago, Althusser identified a discontinuity in the history of philosophy which, according to him, had been provoked by the new possibilities open, in epistemology, by Jean Cavailles, Gaston Bachelard and Jules Vuillemin, and, in history of sciences, by Canguilhem and Foucault. Although Althusser divides the competencies, the revolutionary element lied in the fact that, from those authors on, epistemology and history of sciences refers to one another in a profound unity. “It is precisely this unity which today constitutes a problem and difficulty”, he said (Althusser 1998, 162).

In the 1960s this unity between epistemology and history of science emerged as the answer to the philosophical problem of the historicization of sciences, of the attribution or rather the recognition of a constitutive historicity inherent to scientific thought that was not a mere manifestation of the history of Reason. Therefore, for Althusser, in addition to the respect for the “reality of real science”, as opposed to the image of science projected by Idealist philosophers, the second great novelty brought by the works of Bachelard, Cavailles, Vuillemin, Canguilhem and Foucault would be this “elementary requirement”: the recognition “that it is impossible by right to take a simple chronicle, or a philosophy of history (that is, an ideological conception of history, of the progress of history, of the progress of Reason, etc.), for *History*”. The result of these two novelties, according to Althusser, was the

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modification; culture; institutions; knowledge production; institutional, professional and relational practices); technologies (organization and regulation of productive resources and processes; bodies/environments), and instruments (means of production of interventions). [...] Although not being in itself a paradigm, Collective Health, as a movement committed to the social transformation of health, presents some possibilities of articulation with new scientific paradigms capable of approaching the health-disease-care object with due regard to its historicity and complexity” (Paim and Almeida Filho 1998, 299).



overturning of “the old traditional, empiricist, positivist, idealist conceptions of epistemology and History” (Althusser 1998, 163).

“Georges Canguilhem’s epistemological and historical work”, said Macherey, “is striking first of all because of its specialization” (Macherey 1998, 165). Lecourt, in his preface, tried to explain the encounter between the theoretical preoccupations of the French Marxists with Canguilhem’s “strictly specialized works in the history of the sciences.” Since the opening of Canguilhem’s personal and working archive and the publication of his complete works, which informed us about the various domains where the philosophical activity led him, hardly anyone would begin like that a comment about his work. But it made sense that, at the time, the first characteristic pointed out by Macherey and Lecourt was the specialization of Canguilhem’s work. Later, in the preface to *De Canguilhem à Foucault, la force de las normes*, Macherey explained that in order to write his article, “the first task, particularly laborious, was to gather a corpus from which to study” (Macherey 2009, 20). In 1964, Macherey listed Canguilhem’s texts used in his research: the books *Essai sur quelques problèmes concernant le normal et le pathologique*, *La formation du concept de réflexe au XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, *La connaissance de la vie, Du développement à l’évolution au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (collective work originally published in *Thales*) and *Histoire générale des sciences* (collective work organized by René Taton); and the articles “Introduction au traité de physiologie de Kayser”, “Pathologie et physiologie de la thyroïde au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle”, “Note sur la situation faite à la philosophie biologique en France”, “Qu’est-ce que la psychologie?”, “Une épistémologie concordataire”, “L’histoire des sciences dans l’oeuvre épistémologique de Gaston Bachelard”, “Les fonctions de la thyroïde”, “La psychologie animale et la psychologie humaine d’après Darwin”, “La diffusion scientifique”, “Gaston Bachelard et les philosophes” and “The role of analogies and models in biological discovery”.

Macherey tried to be as exhaustive as possible in the survey of the bibliography. The texts collected “at great cost”, he says, give the fullest idea of “how the work of Canguilhem appeared in the early sixties to the eyes of those who had their curiosity aroused by it” (Macherey 2009, 19). For twenty years the specialization of this work in a particular domain of the history of the sciences, the life sciences, did not conceal the *diversity of objects* – the normal and pathological states, vitalism, the concept of reflex movement, the monstrosity and the monsters, thyroid gland functions, fibrillar and cellular theories etc. – and the *diversity of themes* (or *levels of analysis*) – the theory of sciences, the history of sciences, the theory of the history of science. But, according to Macherey, each of these levels of analysis is no pretext for the others. Although we can distinguish them and read differently each text, we cannot dissociate them. In Canguilhem’s work, the diversity of objects and themes indicates the *unity of reflection*. And, “through the diversity of subjects and points of view, the object or question is never given except within the discursivity of a succession, of an unfolding. It seems, from the beginning, that phenomena take on only the meaning that is reflected in their history” (Macherey 1998, 166).

Lecourt’s text does not depart from the framework established by Althusser and Macherey. But much more than his colleagues, Lecourt was decisive to the transformation of the Bachelard-Canguilhem affiliation into a historiographical dogma: “it seems completely justified to make him [Canguilhem] Bachelard’s heir. Recognition of the historicity of the object of epistemology imposes a new conception of the history of the sciences”. And he adds: “Gaston Bachelard’s epistemology was historical; Georges Canguilhem’s history of the sciences is epistemological. Two ways to state the revolutionary unity that both institute between epistemology and history of the sciences” (Lecourt 1975, 166). It mattered little to Lecourt that the new discipline created by Bachelard in 1938, the psychoanalysis of the scientific spirit, was not entirely successful. This simple attempt, Lecourt said, made the philosophy of sciences undergo a revolutionary displacement: “[Bachelard] pointed out for it a place which had never had an occupant: an empty site, but one recognized as such, at the

junction of each scientific practice and the ideologies that intervene in it under philosophical cover” (Lecourt 1975, 165). More specifically, Lecourt says, “the practice of the history of the sciences inaugurated by Georges Canguilhem thus sets to work, develops and rectifies Bachelardian epistemological categories in its own proper field. It has the same specific relationship to its object, and, installing itself in the space uncovered by the Bachelardian break-through in philosophy, it pursues and deepens the polemic against the philosophy of the philosophers” (Lecourt 1975, 167). This is important because it allows Lecourt to eliminate the apparent paradox of the approximation between the history of sciences and the theoretical concerns of the “Marxist-Leninist philosophers grouped around Luis Althusser”. According to Lecourt, the unity between epistemology and history of the sciences, made possible by the work of Canguilhem, had brought those two disciplines close to historical materialism, “the Marxist science of History”. This unity, says Lecourt, will be seen in practice in the history of biological sciences which, to be effective, must deal with two concerns: to show the specific character of its object, and to specify, based on the specific case of medicine, the relations between techniques and theoretic knowledge. “The first explains the insistence with which Georges Canguilhem returns to the so-called question of *vitalism*. The second makes comprehensible the status he accords the notion of *norm*”, said Lecourt (1975, 178).

The decision, in 1982, to include Macherey’s text, with Althusser’s presentation, as a postface to the second edition of the Brazilian translation of *Le normal et le pathologique* (the first edition is dated from 1978) must be understood in the context of the reception of Althusser’s ideas in Brazil, strongly marked by the name of Carlos Escobar, around whom it was organized a circle of intellectuals dedicated to the study and dissemination of the work of the Marxist philosopher. Among these intellectuals were Manoel Barros da Motta and Severino Bezerra Cabral Filho, editors of Canguilhem in Brazil. However, even before Forense publishing house translated *Le normal et le pathologique* in 1978, the references to the Argentine translation (1971) prefaced by Lecourt was constant among the constructors of the field of Collective Health in Brazil. Sérgio Arouca, in *O dilema preventivista* (1975), Cecília Donnangelo, in *Medicina e estrutura social* (1976), and Ricardo Bruno Mendes Gonçalves, in *Medicina e História* (1979), dexterity articulate the ideas of Althusser, Canguilhem, Foucault and Lecourt, in such a way that we can undoubtedly say they were the first to make of *Le normal et le pathologique* a leitmotiv for an original reflection on philosophy of health, more specifically, a reflection on the historicity of medical practice and thinking and on the health-disease process in populations.

About this reception of Canguilhem in Brazilian medical and public health schools during the years of civilian-military dictatorship (1964-1985), Naomar de Almeida Filho and Maria Thereza A. D. Coelho wrote the following:

An interesting hypothesis of history of science, to be duly considered, at least for some of these authors, is that this reference [to the works of Canguilhem and Foucault] would have worked, among other reasons, as a camouflage of the Marxist theoretical base of the proposed analyzes, at a time of intense political repression and ideological censorship. An anecdote of the time suggested that the methodological chapter of Sérgio Arouca’s (1975) thesis on the “preventive dilemma” [...] had been written in a hermetic and purposely confuse style, precisely to discourage censors and other unwanted readers. In this way, both Foucault and Canguilhem inadvertently came to acquire, in the Latin American sanitary literature, a respectful consideration as theoretical exponents of a leftist epistemological thought. (Almeida Filho and Coelho 1999, 15)

And they add:

On what concerns Foucault, this aura was quickly revised, right after his Nietzschean-genealogical turn, in the early eighties [...]. The same did not occur with Canguilhem's epistemology, which, protected from deeper critical analyzes, perhaps due to the lack of knowledge of the whole of his work [in this point, in a footnote, Ricardo Bruno Mendes Gonçalves and José Ricardo de Carvalho Mesquita Ayres are indicated as exceptions], continued to be referred to as the conceptual basis for important theoretical developments grounded in Marxism in the field of Collective Health. The most striking example of this effect is perhaps the theory of the 'work and health process', elaborated by Laurell et al., which is extremely influential in the area of Worker's Health. (Almeida Filho and Coelho 1999, 15-16)

In a recent article entitled "Georges Canguilhem e a construção do campo da Saúde Coletiva Brasileira", José Ricardo Ayres argued that, despite its original political motivation, the recourse to historical epistemology, particularly the works of Canguilhem, opened the possibility of a critical reflection on the potentialities and limitations of Collective Health as well as a reflection on the "strategies to improve it, both in its characteristic critical investments in health sciences and techniques, as well as in its practical commitments and instrumental tasks" (Ayres 2016, 140). Ayres acknowledges that in these four decades of official existence of Collective Health in Brazil the importance of Canguilhem among the researchers was somehow diluted. However, he maintains that Canguilhem's texts, especially *Le normal et le pathologique*, "have accompanied the academic project of Collective Health since its beginnings" (140).

This dialogue between Collective Health and historical epistemology, according to Ayres, was established, first, in relation to the philosophical concepts of Canguilhem, such as "the normative character of life and its knowledge, the qualitative discontinuity between normal and pathological phenomena and the definition of health guided by the notion of value", but also in relation to his historical methodology,

focused on the rational development of concepts as the nucleus of historical-epistemological research, the recognition of 'external' influences on scientific developments, such as social and technological conditions, and the positive role attributed to obstacles, failures and accidents in the progress of scientific disciplines. (Ayres 2016, 140)

We can say with certainty that there was an intellectual movement, tributary of historical epistemology, of search for the theoretical and practical means for the fulfillment, by Collective Health, of the demands imposed by the concrete problems of Brazilian social reality. In the preface to the book *Saúde, Sociedade e História*, dedicated to the work of Ricardo Bruno Mendes-Gonçalves, Naomar de Almeida Filho synthesized the question in the following terms:

In order to rigorously and precisely structure a canguilhemian historical epistemology subsidiary epistemology [of health], Ricardo Bruno Mendes-Gonçalves formulates a central hypothesis: the historical development of an abstract body of scientific knowledge occurs in response to the need placed by a social practice which seeks to respond to concrete situations and problems. In its historical trajectory, the scientific practice systematizes the questions posed by the explanatory theories, always limited by the current rationalities, which makes possible the instrumentalization of new acting techniques, but does not allow ignoring the peculiar nature of the practice,

given by its working condition imbricated in a social structure and by the particularized nature of its object. (Almeida Filho 2017, 19-20)

If, in the 1970s, Canguilhem became one of the theoretical exponents of a left-wing epistemological thinking in Collective Health, it was also because his work, as presented to his readers outside France by Althusser, Macherey and Lecourt, allowed considering the knowledge of health in “truly rational” bases, those of the historical materialism. An original question of those Brazilian researchers who, in the context of transformations in social medicine experienced in Latin America, took the form of a reflection on medical practice and thinking in capitalist societies from a historical and epistemological approach to the concepts of “life”, “normal”, “pathological”, “health” and “disease”. Consider these words of Ricardo Lafetá Novaes, in his master’s dissertation on “health and concepts” presented in 1976 to the Department of Preventive Medicine of the University of São Paulo (where he later became a professor):

Canguilhem appears to us as an author of the greatest importance because he takes the medical and biological categories as a subject, but from a historical perspective of the sciences (ideologies) that constituted life as an object of knowledge. A historical perspective that is also epistemological and indicates not only the prehistory of a science, but also how they get involved (or rather, they are involved) with the general conceptions of the world, making their categories and social values more expressive of the dominant interests than the truth of its object. (Novaes 1976, v)

In *Saúde e Sociedade*, Donnangelo considers that “medical practice as a therapeutic act is not a scientific practice (...). It has particular dimension of knowledge and action over a particular object” (Donnangelo 1976, 17). Donnangelo reaffirms the precedence of the clinic over pathology to criticize the “tendency towards the analytical identification between science and scientifically founded medical practice”, which, she argues (always quoting that Argentine translation of *Le normal et le pathologique*), “often leads to ignoring the specificity of the medical work to reduce it to a set of technological resources and, more than that, of material technology”. When she criticizes this tendency, Donnangelo takes a stand against what she called “anatomophysiological body-centered medicine”. For Donnangelo, Canguilhem, through his studies on norms and normalization, was responsible for showing that “the body, as an object of medical practice, is not exhausted in its anatomophysiological dimension” and that it is precisely the “extra-scientific dimension of the norms and the normal body that medicine faces in its concrete practice, whether or not it recognizes the theoretical formalizations that guide this interference” (Donnangelo 1976, 23).

For Sergio Arouca, the object of the history of sciences is the intellectual facts of the sciences, but, and this is important, he adds that the scientific ideas “find their specificity in the relation they have with the social structure that generated and allowed its appearance”. There is no contempt for the history of practices, but a qualification derived from the specificity of ideas, from their strategic position in the discursive and non-discursive fields. In Canguilhem’s article “L’objet de l’histoire des sciences”, translated and published in Brazil by the journal *Tempo Brasileiro* in 1972, and quoted by Arouca in his doctoral dissertation from 1974, Canguilhem explains that history of sciences as a discipline “constitutes the specific domain in which the theoretical questions posed by scientific practice in its development find its place” (Canguilhem 1979, 19) and adds a note on the origin of this idea, the Althusserian concept of theoretical practice, which was also quoted by Arouca: “theoretical practice”, says Althusser, “returns under the general definition of practice. It works on a first matter (representations, concepts, facts) given to it by other practices, whether they are ‘empirical’, ‘technical’, or ‘ideological’.” And, as for Arouca, concepts and facts are the “first matter” on

which these theoretical practices work, “it is a matter of determining, in a given social context, to what type of rationality the concept belongs” (Arouca 1975, 32).

The strength and vitality of Arouca’s book is due to his efforts to unveil the ideologies and ideological practices that are at the origin of the shortcomings of Preventive Medicine: “Preventive Medicine, rather than the production of new knowledge, rather than changes in the structure of medical services is an ideological movement”, he said in his Introduction. For the Brazilian historiography of medicine and public health, *O Dilema Preventivista*, one of the works most cited by the researchers in those areas, was fundamental for the construction of a social health theory in Brazil, whose materialization would have occurred through the incorporation of the right to health in the Constitution of 1988 and, in the following years, the institutionalization of the unified federal health system (the “*Sistema Único de Saúde*, SUS”). The paradigms of Collective Health in Brazil were proposed by Arouca in his foucauldian-canguilhemian-althusserian critique of Preventive Medicine, a book that, despite the fact it was censored by the dictatorship, soon became an object of debate in medical schools and served as a theoretical basis for the organization of the Sanitary Reform movement of the 1980s.

Different from what happened in France, where the interest in the Canguilhemian theory of the history of medicine also made a career in the history of the medical specialties and their specific rationalities, in Brazil, Canguilhem’s work know its vitality by the researches on public health. The Sanitary Reform movement in Brazil, which many authors treat as part of a revolutionary moment of social medicine in Latin America, put the relationship between health and society at the center of the discussion. What followed was a prevalence of historical studies on public health and social medicine, social movements, the state, and capitalism. It explains why is so common to find, in the texts produced in the 1970’s and 1980’s, references to Canguilhem and Henry E. Sigerist side by side. Nevertheless, if the studies on “social health” remain in continuity with the political project of those first Brazilian readers of Canguilhem, with the years they moved away from the historiographical and epistemological model usually expected by French commentators.

Diffusion and reception are not passive notions: they presuppose valuation and appropriation. For François Azouvi, author of books such as *De Königsberg à Paris: La réception de Kant en France (1788-1804)* and *La gloire Bergson: essai sur le magistère philosophique*, the history of the diffusion and reception of texts and, of course, the history of the reception of ideas are as important as the history of systems, that is, the internal history of an author’s works: “I believe there is an immense field of research here, because in reality we could trace back the whole history of the thought and philosophy from the point of view of its reception, from the point of view of the use that was made of the works” (Azouvi and Camolezi 2016, 120). It is a problematic forged by intellectual history, which is not a history of philosophy ashamed of itself, but a history that, in the expression of François Azouvi, “agrees to look through the corners”.

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