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# Cultural History Between Tradition and Globalization

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# CULTURAL HISTORY BETWEEN TRADITION AND GLOBALIZATION

PREFACE TO A RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOK

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The first sensation these fourteen essays recently compiled by Philippe Poirrier evoke is an intense frustration, felt at the mention of so many books the reader is not familiar with, whether due to a lack of time, insufficient bibliographical knowledge or because he or she does not speak the languages in which the books have been written.<sup>1</sup> The biggest virtue of this book, besides conveying simultaneously the promises and nightmares of globalization, is reminding the reader that history, cultural or otherwise, is, luckily, still written in so many languages that no one reader could possibly know them all. This assertion has its consequences. To avoid the fragmentation and isolation of scientific practices, it is important to be aware of works published in languages that, for historic reasons, have not acquired universal hold. The reluctance of publishing companies to print costly and high-risk translations does not make one particularly optimistic. Thus, works such as this are particularly useful in making little-known or ignored bibliographies accessible, even if only from afar.

The essays themselves show, in their own way, the effects of such fragmentation. Foreign ideas, formulated in another language and appropriated into a national tradition, are almost exclusively cited from sources published in French or English. On one side, you have the successive paradigms born within the long-term history of the *Annales* school (*histoire des mentalités*, anthropological history, socio-cultural history), on the other side the openly marxist history of *Past and Present*, cultural studies and the linguistic turn. Other influences are rare, mostly limited to the Italian *microstoria* and the German *Alltagsgeschichte*. In every case, the gaps between the original publications of fundamental works and their translations into foreign languages have created profound historiographical time-lags. For instance, in France, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* was translated thirteen years after

its original release<sup>2</sup> and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* twenty-five years after its first publication.<sup>3</sup>

The richness and diversity of the case studies makes one wish for a sequel, covering the absences in this publication. The most glaring ones, at least from my own perspective, are those of Japan (where the journal *Ichiko* has played an important role in introducing European cultural studies); Central and Eastern-European countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic) who situate themselves quite close to the intersection of German historical science and the *Annales*; Portugal where cultural history is born both among historians of law (Manuel Hespanha, Bartolomé Clavero) and among the followers of Vitorino de Magalhaes Godinho (Diogo Curto, Francisco Bethancourt); and also Latin America. The practice of cultural history in Brazil could be placed in the Mexican tradition (including, but not limited to the Iberoamerican University, which publishes the journal *Historia y grafia*, the Mora Institute, the Autonomous University of Mexico or the Center of Historical Research of the National Museum of Anthropologie and its journal *Historias*), Argentina (at the intersection of the histories of societies, art and literature, like in the works of José Emilio Burucúa) or Chile, in the tradition of the pioneering works of Rolando Mellafe. The vast bibliographical landscapes of Russia, India and China also remain unexplored.

The first challenge lies in defining and delimiting the the concept of cultural history. The solution is not simple, oscillating between two approaches: defining cultural history as the collection of works defined as such by their authors, or proposing a definition that is conceptually and methodologically distinct from other forms of history. In the first case, we run the risk of further extending the grasp of cultural history that is already tempted to include works that would have normally been classified as social or political history. In the second case, we risk the opposite: imposing a definition too narrow and orthodox to respectably convey the diversity of the objects and approaches that characterize the practice of cultural historians.

Perhaps it would worthwhile to recall, as I have done in an article first published in 2003<sup>4</sup>, that this challenge is rooted in the two large families of meanings attributed to the term "culture" itself. On the one hand, culture is defined as a specific domain of productions, intellectual and aesthetic practices and experiences, on the other, culture by its anthropological definition, is seen as the collection of words, beliefs, rituals and acts through which communities give meaning to the world, be it social, natural or supernatural.

Two authors vividly illustrate this dual definition. The first, Clifford Geertz whose impact is recognized in many of the essays contained herein, defines culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.”<sup>5</sup> The second, oddly and unfortunately absent in this historiographical review, is Carl Schorske, who suggests a two-dimensional analysis for the study of symbolic productions, whatever they may be: “One line is vertical, or diachronic, by which the historian establishes the relation of a text or a system of thought to previous expressions in the same branch of cultural activity (painting, politics, etc.). The other is horizontal, or synchronic; by it, he assesses the relation of the content of the intellectual object to what is appearing in other branches or aspects of a culture at the same time.”<sup>6</sup>

Explicitly or implicitly, these two dimensions attributed to the object of cultural history are present in all of the essays and organise the (always incomplete) inventory of privileged fields of study in particular national conditions. The relationship between the concepts of *habitus* (which refers to patterns of representation, classification and judgment incorporated by each individual) and cultural fields (which differ from other social fields by their distance from everyday exigencies and the contemporaneity of their successive pasts), both formulated by Pierre Bourdieu – also curiously absent from this volume (except in the case of Brazil) – can provide a conceptual formula to understanding the inclusion of intellectual and aesthetic productions within the perceptions and categories that make them possible and give them meaning. From this perspective, cultural history could mean, as the Spanish example suggests, the study of the processes of ascribing meaning, not only to texts and to images, but also to practices and experiences.

The journey that this book invites to shows, first of all, the vast variety of matrices of cultural history in different countries. Its “precursors”, as they are referred to now, have very different roots: history of material culture and rural ethnography of the Scandinavian countries, the *Volkskunde* and Burckhardt in Switzerland, history of literature in Romania with Georges Călinescu and Nicolae Iorga, Brazilian anthropology and sociology, spearheaded by the works of Gilberto Freyre and Sérgio Buarque, history of ideas and beliefs in Italy, characterized by the works of Franco Venturi and Delio Cantimori, or social history of *Past and Present* in Great Britain. Even if specific forms of writing and conserving cultural history have been shaped by na-

tional roots, it is nonetheless also true that from very early on cultural history has been marked by reciprocal loans and creative appropriations. Shared references traveled from one part of the world to another, but that does not mean that they always interacted with pre-existing traditions in the same way. This applies for instance to the history of mentalities in France, which dominated the sixties and the seventies, art history of the Warburg Institute, which Carlo Ginzburg placed at the heart of interactions between morphology and history, history of popular and workers' culture in the style of E.P Thompson, Natalie Zemon Davis or Peter Burke and most recently, Italian microhistory. The cultural history practiced in these cases is the result of meshing a framework inherited from the tradition of a national historiography and methodological propositions created – and also received – by the most innovative historians.

These interaction have left permanent traces, revealed by the proximities and overlaps between disciplines. This is also how the Scandinavian or Swiss traditions of cultural history have maintained a strong link to ethnography, folklore studies and linguistics. In Australia, research pertaining not only to the country itself, but also to the Pacific Islands or the Americas carries a strong imprint of symbolic anthropology in the tradition of Geertz or Rosaldo. Or yet another example: in Spain, cultural history is largely defined as the history of written culture, built from the foundations of three perspectives that are often used separately elsewhere: the social history of written competences, productions and practices, in the vein of Fernando Bouza and Ricardo García Cárcel (and their students), paleographic studies that have turned into the history of “graphic culture”, as Armando Petrucci and his students (Francisco Gimeno Blay, Antonio Castillo) like to call it, and history of literature resting on the shoulders of philological, bibliographical and historical studies, as with Francisco Rico or Pedro Cátedra. Hence also the central role of journals such as *Litterae* or *Cultura escrita y sociedad* where these diverse approaches to written culture meet, but where practices of oral culture are also transcribed and transmitted.

This importance given to the history of texts, books and reading is not unique to Spain, though it is particularly apparent there. In many cases (in France, Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia), multi-volume projects about the national history of the book had the privilege to stand at the intersection of scholarly disciplines, the history of literary genres and works and the historical sociology of practices. More generally, interest in written culture has forged alliances, particularly in Brazil, between the his-

tory of education and the history of reading. In countries that, unfortunately for the people but to the benefit of the historians, suffered under the Inquisition, the censorship of books and journals created exceptional access points for studying the ways in which the diverse lists of banned books were compiled. In Italy, Spain and Portugal the archives of inquisitorial tribunals became the foundations of not simply inventories of prohibited books and their multiple interpretations and uses for capable readers, but also a historical approach, magnificently utilized by Carlo Ginzburg or Armando Prosperi, who situate in the unequal dialogue between the judges and the accused a construction of identity for the most unprivileged, forced under the pressures of physical and symbolic violence to adopt a imposed representation of themselves that often brushes aside the one they proclaimed and advocated.

The constraints imposed on historical actors applied, in certain cases, also to the historians themselves. In dictatorial regimes (francist Spain or communist Romania are here only examples of an unfortunately much wider reality) cultural history provided at the same time a refuge from histories more explicitly subjected to censorship or ideological control and the means for bringing in new historiographical approaches to breach the walls of orthodoxy. The *Annales* played such role, particularly in Romania, Poland and Hungary starting in the sixties. Even outside the context of coercions and censorship, cultural history has a stake, moreso than other disciplines, in political and civic discourse. This is true when it provides the tools and symbols for the construction and preservation of a national identity in an environment of linguistic plurality and assertive communities, as the Belgian, Swiss and Canadian examples have shown. This is also true, when cultural history undertakes a critical examination of the creation of traditions or foundational myths (such as in the case of Australia).

This particular role of cultural history explains first and foremost the impressive feedback to works in English historiography that deal with the construction of reality by specific languages, collective memory or the invention of traditions. Peter Burke has recalled that in 1983 alone, three books dealing with productive force of words and representations were published: Gareth Stedman-Jones' *Languages of Class*, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition*<sup>7</sup>. The social importance of cultural history also explains its recently developed yet powerful links to issues of memory. The *Lieux de mémoire* project, directed by Pierre Nora<sup>8</sup> has found followers in Germany, Italy and Canada and acquired an even stronger charge when, for example

in Spain, the wounds created by a rock thrown in the past, are yet to heal. For these reasons, cultural history has in recent years boldly entered the twentieth century and proposed new, often controversial interpretations of the two world wars, colonial wars and civil wars. The mobilization of Swiss historians in the “Bergier commission” as well as the debates of Belgian historians regarding the German occupation are perfect examples of applying cultural analysis in order to understand a past that in many ways isn’t even past. In Latin America, the recently escalated scholarship of the dark ages of military dictatorships in the seventies and eighties has the potential to spur many others, from Argentina to Chile.

Eager to measure the impact of the “linguistic turn” and “cultural studies”, the authors of this essay collection conclude in very general terms that they scarcely influenced historical practices developed outside Great Britain and the United States. While this assessment might apply to the linguistic turn, it does not, in my mind, apply to the field of “cultural studies”, if we take that to mean the approaches focusing on questioning the construction of gender, the intersections of race and class, forms of colonial dominations and the modality of miscegenation. Even if the United States is the boldest and most prominent center of such research, not just in French cultural history, but also in Latino, Carribean, Chinese, Japanese and naturally American studies, similar steps have been taken everywhere as the cultural studies of “interconnected histories”, colonial empires, clashes of civilizations, slavery and abolitionism undertaken by Indian, Brazilian, Portugues, Spanish, British and French historians clearly show. Perhaps cultural history grew tired of examining small objects and is making a return by focusing on comparative studies, examining large spaces with the understanding that has since the sixteenth century dominated at least one part of the world, the understaing of the globalization of the world. This new historiographical “turn” requires prudence and precaution, because this sort of history is particularly exigent. It requires a vast linguistic basis, mastery of a wide dispersion of sources and profound understanding of each of the societies and cultures brought into contact by the course of history or the analysis of the historian. The legitimate and necessary elaboration of the objects and spaces of cultural history should not become an excuse to forego the principles and criteria have been the foundation of history as a scientific pursuit since the birth of the humanist critique.

According to the authors of this book, the success of cultural history is undeniable. This can be measured in many ways, from the percentage of

books and journal articles dedicated to the discipline, to the number of research projects in this category (such as in the case of those subsidized by the Council of Research in the Human Sciences of Canada), the existence of associations and research groups (for instance the Grupo de Trabalho em história cultural in Brazil), colloquiums and seminars dedicated to it, or books that even before this one have attempted to provide an assessment.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, these indications of the popularity of cultural history do not signify an institutionalization at the university level. In fact, faculty positions and courses dedicated to cultural history are quite rare – with Great Britain being a pleasant exception.

The eminent position of cultural history puts it in the line of harsh critique – which this book perhaps does not sufficiently cover. Some fault the ambiguous definition of the object of study and its transformation into an endless inventory of everyday practices; others suspect that cultural history ignores more fundamental determinants that govern human relations and social inequalities thus falling into the trap of relativist illusions that postmodernism is so well known for. To the second criticism, there is, I believe, no better reply than to remind that in fact those very historians most attached to locating the mechanisms that institute and reproduce power relations, were the first to point to the decisive role of mental representations in creating the social world. In this sense, to paraphrase Lucien Febvre, cultural history is social by definition.

To the first imputation, often confirmed by the offers of publishing companies and certain complacent historians, one can object on the grounds that in spite of the diversity of its themes and approaches, cultural history is constructed on some very fundamental issues. In the essay I previously mentioned, I have named three that to me seem essential: the relationship between popular culture and elite culture (a theme found at the roots of the German and Scandinavian tradition of cultural history), the link between collective representations and unique productions (which is another way of focusing on the mechanisms involved in the creation of meaning), and the relations between discourse and practice, language and experience that one can formulate using the conceptual distinctions proposed by Foucault, Bourdieu or de Certeau, or using the terms of the anglo-american “cultural studies”. These widely shared issues do not impose a unique and restrictive paradigm, but give, at least, a theoretical and methodological consistency to cultural history.

In this sense, the biggest contribution of cultural history was forcing his-

torians to question their seemingly strongest convictions. Against the hard truth of facts, it set their construction by the clashing representations of actors. Against the postulation that ideas, doctrines, texts and images have intrinsic meaning, it affirmed the historicity of those meanings, wholly dependent on their materiality and their appropriations. To the quantification of gestures and thoughts borrowed from statistical history it preferred anthropological analyses of conscious strategies and unrecognized constraints. Suddenly, the research practices, criteria of proof and models of historical understanding were completely changed. Hence, as Paul Ricoeur<sup>10</sup> lucidly shows, attention shifted to the notion of representation, understood as a privileged object and register of historical discourse, or the force of semiotical paradigm, or furthermore, the link between different modalities of historical reasoning, tying together the motives of historical actors and the decisions that they ignore.

<sup>1</sup> *L'Histoire culturelle : un "tournant mondial" dans l'historiographie ?* edited by Philippe Poirrier, Dijon, Editions universitaires de Dijon (EUD), 2008

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy : Aspects of the Working Class Life*, Londres, Chatto and Windus, 1957, tr. fr. *La culture du pauvre*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Londres, Victor Gollancz, 1963, tr. fr. *La formation de la classe ouvrière anglaise*, Paris, Gallimard/Seuil, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Chartier, "La nouvelle histoire culturelle existe-t-elle ?", *Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, 2003, 31, p. 13-24.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture : Selected Essays*, New York, Basic Books, 1973., tr. fr. *L'interprétation d'une culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-siecle Vienna : Politics and Culture*, New York, A. Knopf, 1980, tr. fr. *Vienne Fin de Siècle. Politique et Culture*, Paris, Seuil, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Gareth Stedman-Jones, *Languages of Class : Studies in the English Working-Class 1832-1982*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983 ; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities : the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Londres, Verso, 1983 ; *The Invention of Tradition*, Edited by Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> *Les lieux de mémoire*, Edité par Pierre Nora, Paris, Gallimard, 7 vol., 1984-1992.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History ?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004 ; Philippe Poirrier, *Les enjeux de l'histoire culturelle*, Paris, Seuil, 2004 ; Pascal Ory, *L'histoire culturelle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004 ; Julio Serna et Anacleto Pons, *La historia cultural*, Madrid, Akal, 2005 ; Alessandro Arcangeli, *Che cos'è la storia culturale ?*, Rome, Carocci, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Seuil, 2000.