

THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY: A PROPOSAL

I should make something clear from the outset: I am not a historian of education, much less of universities. Rather, I am a social historian with a strong interest in cultural history, and I happen to work at a university. While the latter fact affords me ample opportunity to indulge any ethnographic curiosity I may have, it does not, alas, provide me any real qualification for addressing you on the subject of the cultural history of the university.

I have never believed ignorance to be an advantage. Still, perhaps there is something to be gained by an outsider's musing on what a certain sort of cultural history of the university might look like. I would thus ask you to treat the following as a proposal, an experiment in thinking out loud. In it I shall try to outline a history which to my knowledge has yet to be written. I nevertheless hope that such a history may be considered interesting to read some day.

I would like to start by trying to make clear what I mean by cultural history. The best way to do so, I think, would be to give a brief summary of its evolution and broader role in the writing of history.

Cultural history—that is, narrative and analysis of the past that focuses on phenomena explicitly defined as cultural, and that acknowledges their importance in the overall scheme of things—has been with us since the earliest days of western historiography. The first student of history to be acknowledged as such, Herodotus, was a cultural historian if ever there was one¹. Indeed, his equally famous successor, Thucydides, criticized Herodotus on precisely this and other counts, for showing excessive interest (and credulity) in reports of matters that Thucydides judged as extraneous to the real stuff of history. For the latter, this stuff was politics and warfare, and the vast majority of historians since has heartily agreed with him.

¹ A point amply explored in François Hartog's, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, trans. J. Lloyd (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1988; orig. ed. Paris, 1980).

So much so, in fact, that in the long run virtually all other dimensions of human experience —not just cultural, but also social and economic— have received at best an occasional nod from historians, both professional and amateur.

Well, most historians. The Renaissance revival —in many respects a reinvention— of classical historiography focused, predictably enough, on elite politics. However, it was also accompanied by the renewed study of cultural phenomena, especially language, literature, and art. A tacit if fruitful alliance therewith developed between two tribes of scholars. The first were philologists —historians of language and its changes, as well as of all those things needed to be known in order to understand past language, which is practically everything. The other included the assorted practitioners of what would eventually be labelled the «auxiliary disciplines» of history, such as numismatics, epigraphy, archaeology, and other valuable (and often para-documentary) keys to the past. At the intersection of these two traditions a sort of cultural history *avant la lettre* developed, under the umbrella of what Arnaldo Momigliano in an extraordinary study labelled antiquarianism². It was here, in a bewildering array of often exasperatingly local and pedantic studies, that cultural history slowly developed as an alternative to the mainstream, and usually official, history of politics, rulers, and institutions.

I shall return to this condition of alternative in a moment; suffice it for now to locate in the eighteenth century the definitive emergence of a history focused specifically on cultural matters, and recognized as such. I do not wish to tire you with a long list of names of contributors to this wellspring. Three will do: Voltaire, most famously in his history of the customs (*moeurs*) of the French nation; Vico, who from his basis in the history of law developed brilliant insights into the millennial history of civilizations; and Herder, merely the best known among a remarkable series of Enlightened German writers who took up the task of charting the past and present of cultural change³. The fertile if usually isolated accomplishments of these and other scholars allowed this nascent cultural his-

² «Ancient History and the Antiquarian», in his *Studies in Historiography* (New York, 1966), pp. 1-39.

³ While it would be senseless to try to provide a detailed bibliography regarding these much discussed figures, I would draw particular attention to the work of Peter Burke, the foremost student of the history of cultural

tory to weather the so-called Rankean revolution, one of whose gravest consequences was to identify the professional practice of history with a thematic focus on politics, and of the history of the nation-state in particular. Ironically enough, it was a student of Ranke's who has entered the textbooks as the first and still foremost advocate of cultural history: Jacob Burckhardt⁴. His *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) marked a watershed in the development of cultural history, and was largely responsible for its being increasingly tolerated by mainstream historians, even if they relegated it to the status of a subdiscipline or avocation.

The twentieth century has seen the flourishing less of cultural history, than of a wide and variegated assortment of approaches to the histories of culture⁵. These range from certain schools in art history, such as that linked with the «iconographical» revolution associated with the Warburg Institute, which have branched out from an earlier concern with style and attribution to offer broader characterizations of cultural moments and contexts, to a handful of influential initiatives within Marxist historiography (eg Gramsci, Thompson, Hill, Goldmann), in reaction against the narrow economic determinism that has long been the most distinctive hallmark

history. Especially relevant here is his «Reflections on the Origins of Cultural History», now in his *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, 1997), pp. 1-22. For the ups and downs of cultural history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see also his «Ranke the Reactionary», in G.G. Iggers and J.M. Powell, eds., *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline* (Syracuse, 1990), pp. 36-44; K. Weintraub, *Visions of Culture* (Chicago, 1966); I. Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (New York, 1977); and D.G. Kelley, «The Old Cultural History», *History of the Human Sciences*, 9 (3), 1996, pp. 101-126.

⁴ Much has been written on Burckhardt's relations with Ranke; indeed, this question became the central theme of Felix Gilbert's studies of nineteenth-century historiography. See his «Jacob Burckhardt's Student Years: The Road to Cultural History», *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 47, 1986, pp. 249-74; «Ranke as the Teacher of Jacob Burckhardt», his contribution to the Syracuse symposium on Ranke listed above (pp. 82-86); and his final book, the brief but penetrating *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (Princeton, 1990).

⁵ Once again, I call upon Peter Burke for assistance. See in particular his «From Cultural History to Histories of Cultures», *Memoria y civilización*, 1, 1998, pp. 7-24.

of the followers of this doctrine. The situation at the moment is one of an extreme if cheerful diversity. Various sorts of cultural histories are thriving, and the historical study of culture enjoys an unprecedented popularity with both professional historians and the broader reading public.

This is obviously a woefully schematic—and, I fear, excessively optimistic—overview of a complicated past. To over-simplify further, I wish to make three more broad generalizations about the equally complicated present of cultural history.

First, this history is characterized by a—in my view highly creative—tension between two radically opposed definitions of culture. The first is the standard, colloquial understanding of culture, that is, formal, «high» culture, or that which finds expression in what have come to be accepted as the more elaborate and refined forms of human creativity: art, literature, music, architecture, and the like. Perhaps the approach most closely tied to this restrictive understanding of culture is that known as «intellectual history,» or the «history of ideas.» Many other forms of cultural history derive inspiration from a much less exclusive definition of culture, one traditionally associated with the discipline of anthropology. Culture in this broader sense is any set of beliefs or practices shared among members of specific social groups. Such a definition does not limit its purview to formal products of the individual imagination, but rather tends to focus its attention on collective values and behavior. The approach most deeply grounded in this definition is what has become recently known as the «new cultural history»—an explicitly interdisciplinary endeavor which draws heavily on literary theory as well as anthropology and social theory⁶.

Second, much of the present popularity of cultural history is rooted in a growing dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to history. Two approaches in particular have fallen under increasing challenge: political and institutional history on the one hand, and economic history on the other. Both are seen as overly narrow, prone

⁶ For useful overviews of this approach, see L. Hunt, «Introduction: History, Culture and Text», in L. Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1989), pp. 1-22; P. Burke, «La nueva historia socio-cultural», *Historia social*, 17, otoño 1993, pp. 105-113; and I. Olábarri and F.J. Capistegui, eds., *La 'nueva' historia cultural: La influencia del postestructuralismo y el auge de la interdisciplinariedad* (Madrid, 1996).

to ignoring crucial aspects of human existence, and blind to their condition as partial narratives parading as the whole story. The main charges usually laid against them are, in the former case, elitism, and in the latter, a reductionism based on over-reliance on quantitative techniques. Seen in this light, cultural history feeds, and has long fed, on a sense of dissatisfaction with the way history is written in the mainstream. It often nourishes a combative attitude toward the status quo, against which it measures itself as an alternative, or counter-history.

Finally, for all the talk of challenge and combat, it is my impression that one cannot identify cultural historians with any given political position. Cultural history is practiced by Marxists and conservative Catholics, believers and non-believers, what have you. In other words, to promote cultural history is not necessarily to promote any specific political agenda, even if some conservative political historians have denounced it as a form of Marxist subversion, while some Marxist historians have railed against it as a Trojan Horse of reaction. In short, cultural history is not an ideology, even if it has been used at times for ideological purposes.

Having said that, let me return to the matter at hand, the cultural history of universities. A glance at what has been written on this subject shows—predictably enough—the unquestionable predominance of the traditional, history of ideas approach, that is, one that identifies the history of culture exclusively with the great figures and institutions of formal learning. To take merely one example, this view informed the great nineteenth and early twentieth-century syntheses of the past of universities—the old, blue leather-bound tomes of Rashdall, Powicke, and other dusty but marvelous works of European historical scholarship. My task today is not to duplicate their point of view. Instead, I shall try to imagine a history of the university from the other point of view, the new cultural history of anthropological inspiration.

What would such a history look like? In my view, it would have at least five characteristics.

1. As in most good anthropology, it would seek to ground its cultural analysis in social reality. One way to conceive of this grounding would be to situate the university at the intersection of different grids of social relations. These grids are of two basic types. The first involves exogenous relations, that is, those linking the university with its external context. This has been the leading focus of the

now-classic studies of universities from the point of view of social history, starting with Lawrence Stone's pathbreaking article on the early modern English university, and followed in the case of Spain by Richard Kagan's well-known book⁷. It also marks some of the more recent works specifically concerned with cultural history, such as the interesting collection of essays edited by Thomas Bender on the relations between universities and their urban surroundings⁸.

Consideration of such external contexts raises a number of issues. These include questions such as those of access and transparency, that is, the degree of permeability of the university to outsiders. It also involves the problem of what might be called the university's utility, that is, society's perceptions of its different roles, and thus the reasons, real or imagined, for its existence. Among the latter one finds in particular the perception of the university as a locus for the production and reproduction of formalized knowledge, and of the social and political groups —especially elites— identified with that knowledge⁹. Needless to say, these dual roles are often not perfectly compatible, especially on those occasions when the university generates new and publicly disruptive forms of knowledge. At first glance, most universities appear to be remarkably conservative in terms of their governance and operating procedures, in addition to their general socio-political functions. Yet the historical reality is more complex, and suggests that universities often live out a deep contradiction between their traditions on the one hand, and the demands for innovation posed by distinct forms of academic rationality.

The second grid involves endogenous relations, that is, those which develop within the institution itself. It is perhaps here that the cultural history of the university receives the most direct assistance from the burgeoning speciality of the anthropology of academia. I would

⁷ L. Stone, «The Educational Revolution in England, 1560-1640», *Past and Present*, 28, 1964, pp. 41-80; R.L. Kagan, *Universidad y sociedad en la España Moderna*, trans. L. Toharia (Madrid, 1981; orig. ed. 1974).

⁸ T. Bender, ed., *The University and the City: From Medieval Origins to the Present* (New York, 1988).

⁹ There is a vast literature on this subject. Pierre Bourdieu is perhaps the analyst most closely identified with this perspective: see, for example, his *La reproducción: Elementos para una teoría del sistema de enseñanza* (Barcelona, 1977; orig. French ed. 1970), co-authored with Jean-Claude Passeron, and his *Homo Academicus* (Paris, 1984).

mention in passing three English examples in particular, chosen not only for the special quality of their analysis, but also because few would begrudge British universities, especially Oxbridge, the honor of being the most curious specimens for study. The first is perhaps the most amusing and, unfortunately, still timely tract for the social and political organization of universities: F. M. Cornford's «*Microcosmographia Academica*», first published some ninety years ago¹⁰. The second is an essay the cultural historian Peter Burke wrote about his college in Cambridge, and which for several decades has circulated widely if anonymously (both the author and the college's names are changed, which apparently did not prevent anyone in Cambridge from knowing which professor and institutions were involved)¹¹. The final text is perhaps the best-known «standard» monograph of academic behavior, by the distinguished practicing anthropologist, F.G. Bailey¹².

There are many lessons to be learned from these pioneering efforts at educational ethnography. I would single out one in particular, found in all three works: the need to pay special attention to a series of particularly sensitive notions and relations revealed by the language of the university community. The often peculiar language of university communities often sheds important light on attitudes such as friendship, loyalty, love (and hate), and duty and obligation. One could go on to argue that all of these affects are intensified by the equally peculiar relations of domination and subordination so characteristic of university life.

On balance, the forms and contents of language provide crucial markers of the multiple modes of hierarchy, rank, and classification within universities. What the cultural historian would pay special attention to are the ways in which these modes both resemble and

¹⁰ *Microcosmographia Academica: Being a Guide for the Young Academic Politician* (Cambridge, 1949; original edition 1908). The author was the same Cornford whose *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (Philadelphia, 1971; orig. ed. 1907) eloquently demonstrated how much there was to learn about ancient Greek culture in the works of Thucydides. He doubtless would have had a good laugh over the fourth paragraph of this essay.

¹¹ William Dell [pseud. of Peter Burke], «St. Dominic's: The Ethnography of a Cambridge College», unpublished and undated manuscript. I am indebted to the author for providing me a copy of this work, which apparently will soon be published under his name.

¹² *Morality and Expediency: The Folklore of Academic Politics* (Oxford, 1977).

differ from those structuring relations in the rest of society. He or she would also place emphasis on studying the key patterns of patronage and protection—that is, the play of sponsorship, promotion, and their opposites—that not only help structure the university and its component units as communities, but also generate conflicts, while providing means for their resolution¹³. The relations shaped by these patterns is predictably broad. They comprise those among professors; among students; between professors and students; between the university community and outsiders and dependents; and, in short, among virtually all individuals and groups, formal or informal, in or attached to the university and its surroundings.

2. Another dimension of university life that cannot be overlooked is the constitution, at least within the western tradition, of all these relations along gender lines. What is perhaps most striking from a historical point of view is the university's lengthy history as an exclusively male community. The question of gender obviously has a major role to play in the future cultural history of this institution, even if it has received scant mention up to this point¹⁴.

3. Examining the specifically cultural side of the social relations I just mentioned means focusing on them not only as constituting certain groups and patterns of relations, but also as forms of belonging, and in particular, as a thick web of identities. I say «thick web» because it is evident that the complex society and culture of the university fosters a singularly broad range of identities. To begin with, the university itself often gives rise to strong loyalties among its members. This is in part a byproduct of its success in defining and promoting itself as a social space bound by corporate privilege. Yet this overall or general loyalty does not supercede or erase other identities, for example, those

¹³ The attentive reader will note that I have not included in these considerations the perennial staple of anthropological analysis, kinship. There are obvious limits to the relevance of this theme in the cultural history of universities; however, one would certainly not rule out the cautious application of notions of ritual or artificial kinship to this sort of study. For some valuable background observations, see E.R. Wolf, «Relaciones de parentesco, de amistad y de patronazgo en las sociedades complejas», in M. Banton, ed., *Antropología social de las sociedades complejas* (Madrid, 1980), pp. 19-39.

¹⁴ For a significant exception, see Bonnie Smith's «Gender and the Practices of Scientific History: The Seminar and Archival Research in the Nineteenth Century», *American Historical Review*, 100 (4), 1995, pp. 1150-1176.

linked with its different constituent bodies. On the contrary: university identity is neither exclusive nor monolithic. The plurality of identities in play makes for a great deal of overlap. This itself sometimes makes for contradictions and conflict—to cite one notorious historical example, among students organized collegially by different places of origin, as in the famed *colegios mayores* of early modern Castilian universities. However, it is striking how these often highly ritualized conflicts dissolved into a broader spirit of institutional attachment when its members moved outside to confront the rest of society.

4. The future cultural history of the university may find it worthwhile to ponder certain questions regarding boundaries and scale. For example, to what extent may one speak of an academic or university «culture»? And, for that matter, may one legitimately refer to the university as a «community,» in the way in which I have done so above? There is abundant historical evidence for viewing the university as a world apart, or at the very least, as one of several influential institutions dividing society into the categories of insiders and outsiders. Still, this view of things is hardly to be taken for granted. Were not other adscriptions and loyalties in society considerably more important? After all, the vast majority of individuals—themselves a tiny minority—who entered into contact with the university did so only during a single, very specific part of their lives, as students. For this reason, would it not be more proper to talk about «student culture», distinct from and even opposed to the more visibly «academic culture» of the professorate? The highly influential literary scholar Mijhail Bajtin located much of his carnival spirit in the university, thanks to the special links he perceived between youth on the one hand, and license and cultural play on the other. Focusing on the university as a meeting-place between popular and learned culture has already offered valuable insights into the complexity of its many cultural and social roles, and to the surprisingly broad catchment of its many cultural resources¹⁵.

¹⁵ For an especially interesting essay along these lines, see G. Ferrari, «Public Anatomy Lessons and the Carnival: The Anatomy Theatre of Bologna», *Past and Present*, 117, 1987, pp. 50-106. For a (now rather dated) ethnography, see T. Leemon, *The Rites of Passage in a Student Culture* (New York, 1972), based on fieldwork undertaken during the 1960s. Leemon compares the initiation rituals of an American college fraternity with those of small-scale societies elsewhere, such as African circumcision ceremonies.

Many other questions along these lines could be raised. For example: may one properly speak of the university as a «belief system», or of its members as participants in a common «cognitive system»? To answer these and similar queries, one would do well to examine the systems and modes of communication within universities, including—but not limited to—the patterns of circulation and interpretation of information. Of particular relevance to a «new cultural history» is the university's remarkably intense relationship with literacy, usually within the context of largely illiterate broader contexts. Orality, to be sure, also played (and plays) special roles within the university community; not just what is said, but to whom, by whom, how, when, and where, are all basic questions of anthropological origin and import, and which await detailed ethnographic attention.

5. Precisely if one adopts such an ethnographic point of view, he or she is surely likely to see the university as a political system—that is, a system of power—highly controlled by ritual behavior. It seems to me that one of the most significant cultural characteristics of universities is their existence as one of the most self-consciously traditionalist institutions in society. Within this traditionalism myth, or more particularly a sort of extremely localized folklore, winds up playing unusually visible roles. A cultural history of the university would obviously wish to historicize such behavior, asking how far all this goes back, and speculating as to the sources and reasons for it, along the lines of the fruitful examination of the «invention of tradition» launched some fifteen years ago¹⁶. To cite one example, changes in pedagogic procedures and in all sorts of academic ritual may prove to be a highly sensitive barometer of changes in, among other things, the relations of power within the university, and in the university's relations with the rest of society.

The final word may be reserved for the sources of such a study. Evidently, they are many and varied. The newer variants of cultural history tend to prefer sources that could be called phenomenological. By this I mean those that replicate the point of view, and especially the specific language and forms of expression, of social actors

¹⁶ I refer of course to E.J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), a work which has yet to appear in Spanish, although note the 1988 Catalan translation, *L'invent de la tradició*, published by EUMO, Vic.

themselves. Hence the predilection for autobiographical and other first-person documents and texts, along with other sources in which a broad range of historical subjects manage to speak for themselves, as in, for instance, depositions before courts. Anthropologically-minded cultural historians also show a strong preference for the analysis of representations of social and political relations, such as the symbolism of formal display and ceremonial. Literature would also be a natural locus of representations of university life; think, for example, of the rich depiction of the underside of student subsistence in seventeenth-century Salamanca in the *Buscón*.

Whichever sources one chooses, however, I for one would think that the special condition of the university as an institution of formal learning would oblige the new cultural historian always to keep the old cultural history in sight. Without the history of ideas, one will probably understand little of the cultural, or any other dimensions of the university's past. Which is another way of suggesting that the new cultural history is better off seeking to accompany the older intellectual history, rather than to replace it. New cultural historians have much to offer us all. The best of them wind up enriching older approaches to history through a broader contextualization and deeper conceptualization. Both of these build on the strengths, while attempting to shore up some of weak points, of older cultural histories. That we have much to learn from them all is something I trust all of us can agree on.

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