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Cultural history I: what's in a name?

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Cultural history is not to be defined by a set of rules or a distinct subject matter. It is not just, what the German term *Kulturgeschichte* denotes, a study of the activities within the sphere of 'high culture'; nor is it exclusively to be seen as an exercise in interpretation of symbolic acts and rituals of people in the past. Some observers have been frustrated with cultural history that seems at times to be the 'history of everything', not without reason. There is more than a grain of truth in the view that cultural history can be exercised in every field of activity: politics, economics, kinship, gender, religion and all their interlocking and overlapping domains.

So, for example, alongside a [demographic historian](#) who calculates the historical movements of the size of family, or age at marriage, cultural historians probe the ideas about family, obligation, conjugality, with all the contradictions and points of pressure and conflict which they induced in people's lives. Or, alongside the study of doctrine, theology and ecclesiastical structures – areas long studied by [historians of religion](#) – cultural historians seek out the practices through which religion was disseminated, experienced, interpreted and applied. This has meant that cultural historians have often also been innovators in the search for sound and viable ways of approaching and identifying ways into the daily lives of people who did not generate a great deal of documentation. Yet, it is wrong to think of cultural history as a 'people's history' alone; its operations are as illuminating when applied to courts, politics and armies; to the art and clothing, literature, grammar and music of the few and privileged.

Before cultural history became so important to the work of historians, some time in the late 1980s, the 'new history' of the 1960s and 1970s had produced a great deal of pioneering and exciting information about social relations and structures. The lives of workers, working-class politics, peasant economies, demographics of plantations and slave-owning economies, levels of literacy, all these became visible, and often for the first time. The work was often inspired by acquaintance with Marx's theories of class conflict, and in France by an indigenous version of a history situated within a geographical, physical frame.

[E. P. Thompson](#), Natalie Zemon Davis and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie showed that peasants and artisans could be studied historically, and that historians could try to understand their ideas and aspirations, the words that comforted or excited them, the symbols they cherished or rejected. The Chartist movement, for example, was first studied as an expression of class aspirations in the plenitude of its mobilisation and political effect; but an analysis of its language revealed that its main concerns were not based on class solidarity but with inclusion and exclusion from the polity. The study of social relations led the most inspired historians to seek meaning beyond structure, and subjectivity beyond class formation and adherence.

The most formative impact in urging historians towards the 'cultural' – the domain of representation, the struggle over meaning – was the advent of interest in women and then gender, and this impact has not been sufficiently understood or appreciated by historians and those who observe them.

Although there are a few examples from earlier periods of history, and indeed a trickle of studies throughout the early 20th century, the field of [women's history](#) within academia emerged in the 1970s, in complex yet undeniable relation to the Women's Movements throughout the world. Many feminists expected – and in the UK many feminists were Marxists – that women would gain alongside workers, people of colour and colonised people. The history similarly tended to situate women within peasant households and working-class families, and elite women – in some sense the class 'enemy' – attracted little attention. The historical strategies which illuminated the lives of workers – hitherto hidden from history – were used to discover women: in factories, in bread riots, during religious wars and among the destitute poor.

Yet, it soon became clear to the historians of women that women operated not only under the systems of economics that made them poor peasants or poor factory workers – capitalism – but also under a set of assumptions and expectations and within roles – patriarchy – which structured their lives within the family and community too. Moreover, 'patriarchy' equally, through differently, structured the lives of women of different social locations: noblewoman, rich merchant's wife, privileged nun or academic. Social structure alone could not capture the lives of women, and once this was realised, many historians of women sought to develop concepts and practices – the field we now call gender – adequate to the task of understanding the complex realities of relations between and among men and women.

What began as a stage in the development of women's history became a veritable revolution in all areas of historical practice. Joan Wallach Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History*(2) is as much an essay on the history of gender as it is on cultural history, and history in general. The categories 'male' and 'female' are shown to be words freighted with meaning far beyond the mere biological difference that we all find easiest to identify. There are strings of assumptions and associations about them that far outstrip physical capacity and are deeply grounded in history and language: and so in the Middle Ages to the feminine was often aligned morbidity (a tendency to fall ill), weak moral judgement, dissimulation, credulity, lower life expectancy, weak powers of reasoning and more.

These were meanings beyond any observable reality, and they were disseminated powerfully through the constitutive language practices, rituals and representations that surrounded medieval people – not without variation or change – from cradle to grave. This is the domain of 'culture.'

Guided by the examples of excellent historians the 'cultural' turn began to affect a wide range of reinterpretations of historical moments as well as long-term processes. The German Reformation, for example, so long studied by historians and theologians deeply entrenched in confessional warfare, has produced a rigid map of 'confessions' in Europe, of regions each adhering to a set of theological tenets, and their related political and social practices. All this changed with the advent of R. W. Scribner's studies of the Reformation in the 1980s as a clash of attitudes to authority and the sacred, represented by the symbols and rhythms of daily life.(3) Scribner identified change alongside long continuities, and this complicated matters considerably, as much cultural history does: for he found that Lutherans created a 'cult' around miraculous and incombustible 'images' of Luther.

Scholars inspired by Scribner have travelled new terrains, true pioneers. Lyndal Roper has shown the powerful convergence between the system of gender and Lutheran practices of family life;(4) these came together in reinforcing the authority of fathers within the workshop-households of Protestant Augsburg. Philip Soergel has unearthed complex polemical interplay over Bavarian shrines,(5) which continued to mean a great deal to Catholics and Protestants too. A third generation is now at work, like Bridget Heal, who shows strong trends towards continuity and adaptation in early modern Germany around the figure of the Virgin Mary,(6) so powerful a symbol that few people were willing to reject outright.

Gender was a conduit of the cultural turn in medieval studies too. Through its operation in the influential work of Caroline Walker Bynum (7) practices which had been dismissed as 'neurotic' or simply bizarre – above all the devotional practices of religious women – are now much better understood, and moreover, are seen as central to mainstream religious practices. Theirs was a world aware of the visual and the visionary – to use Jeffrey Hamburger's apt phrase(8) – and so a field rich with cross-disciplinary possibilities was identified and worked by art historians, historians of devotional literature and cultural historians.

Cross-disciplinary practice is indeed the hallmark of much cultural history. The desire to embrace the plenitude of interlocking experiences has meant that cultural historians work hard, often collaboratively, with experts in other fields of history and disciplines. A good example is Colin Jones's work on the European smile – first depicted in portraits around the mid 18th century – which brings together not only artistic practices, but notions of self, and very crucially, the history of dentistry, for to smile is to show one's teeth to the world!(9)

From incombustible images of Luther to the teeth of the French *bourgeoisie* cultural history continues to be a field of innovation. In my next section I shall discuss the rhetoric of cultural history and its global aspirations.

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- 1 Edward P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), 76–136; several essays in Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Palo Alto, CA, 1975); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc* (Paris, 1966).↗
- 2 Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).↗
- 3 Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge, 1981); *The German Reformation* (London, 1986); *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London, 1987).↗
- 4 Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1991).↗
- 5 Philip M. Soergel, *Wondrous in his Saints: Counter-Reformation Propaganda in Bavaria* (Berkeley, CA, 1993).↗
- 6 Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500–1648* (Cambridge, 2007).↗
- 7 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991).↗
- 8 F. Hamburger, 'To make women weep: ugly art as feminine and the origins of modern aesthetics', *Res*, 31 (1997), 9–34.↗
- 9 Some ideas associated with this current project are presented in Colin Jones, 'The French smile revolution', *Cabinet*, 17 (2005), 97–100.↗

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