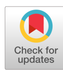

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ARTICLE

Cultural history: an interdisciplinary approach

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Abstract

This article concentrates on what historians have borrowed and adapted from neighbouring disciplines in the last few decades, rather than what they have lent (much more rarely). It discusses the 'social turn' of the 1960s, the movements for historical anthropology and 'psychohistory (drawing on psychoanalysis) in the 1970s, the literary turn of the 1980s (ranging from the poetics of history to the analysis of 'fiction in the archives'), the history of 'social' or 'cultural' memory, the rise of the history of gender, and the 'cultural turn' of the 1990s. In those forty years, historians were often in dialogue with social scientists and with other scholars in the humanities. In the 21st century, by contrast, there has been a rapprochement with experimental psychology and neuroscience (in the case of studies of memory and emotion) and with biology, culminating – so far – in a 'bio-history' concerned with the co-evolution of humans and animals. The famous opposition between 'nature' and 'culture' is melting away.

Keywords: history; interdisciplinarity; neuroscience; biology

Lucien Febvre once wrote (Febvre 1953: 32) in his usual imperative style, 'Historians, be geographers. Be jurists too, and sociologists and psychologists'. Like other historians, he borrowed concepts, models and theories, usually concepts rather than theories in the strict sense of a set of connected propositions. Febvre's concepts of *outillage mental* and *psychologie historique*, for instance, were indebted to the philosopher-anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and the psychologists Charles Blondel and Henri Wallon (he showed no interest in Freud).

It is of course much rarer for historians to lend concepts and models to their neighbours than it is to borrow them. Only three examples come to mind, all of them, curiously enough, from the Anglophone world. The first is the idea of 'moral economy', launched by Edward Thompson (1971) and taken up by anthropologists such as James C. Scott (1976), working on Indonesia, as well as by some economists. The second example is Eric Hobsbawm's 'invention of tradition' (1983). These two open-minded Marxists combined traditional British empiricism with an interest in theory – although Thompson later (1978) wrote a book against theory, more exactly an attack

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on French theory and in particular on Louis Althusser. A third example comes from the history of science. Thomas Kuhn, a physicist turned historian, offered a famous theory of scientific revolutions (1962), generalizing about cycles of change and introducing the concept of 'paradigm', which was taken up by sociologists among others.

What I call 'borrowing' (while Paul Ricoeur and Michel de Certeau described it as 'appropriation'), should of course be treated as problematic. In the first place, it needs to be selective, choosing the tool that fits the job, the concept that fits the question the borrower is asking. In the second place, it needs to be critical (testing rather than simply applying what is borrowed). In the third place, borrowing requires adaptation, a kind of cultural translation. Finally, we have to recognize the limits to borrowing, the possible incommensurability between different disciplines, their contradictory assumptions or aims (Scott 2012). That is why I prefer to think in terms of a dialogue or conversation between neighbouring disciplines. In other words, a two-way relationship, rather than one of simple borrowing.

Who are the neighbours, the neighbouring disciplines? In fact, they have changed over the years. What follows concentrates on the last half century or so, ending by discussing the situation today and speculating about changes in the foreseeable future, the next decade or two. The term *Kulturgeschichte* ('cultural history') goes back to the German-speaking world in the late 18th century. It was conceived as a general history that was defined against 'specialist histories' (*Spezialgeschichten*) such as the history of philosophy, literature, music, art, or science. In the later 19th century, when arguments for and against cultural history were put forward (again, mainly in Germany), some supporters borrowed the idea of cultural evolution from sociology (notably from Herbert Spencer).

A few daring historians took an interest in the new discipline of psychology at this time, among them the controversial German Karl Lamprecht. Lamprecht, director of the Leipzig Institut für Kultur- und Universalgeschichte (founded in 1909), was attracted by the *Völkerpsychologie* ('psychology of peoples') that was associated with his friend and colleague at the University of Leipzig, Wilhelm Wundt. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga discussed moods, emotions and sensibilities in his famous *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919) – a book that Febvre found inspiring. Huizinga was hostile to the ideas of Freud, but he had studied at Leipzig and was well aware of Lamprecht's work. Two decades later, a major study of historical psychology, *Über den Prozess der Zivilization*, offered a synthesis of the ideas of Huizinga, Freud and the Weber brothers, Alfred as well as Max (Elias 1939). Its author, Norbert Elias, was officially a sociologist and in practice a polymath. Published in Switzerland, in German, on the eve of the Second World War, his book was virtually ignored for thirty years.

I now turn to the relations between cultural historians and their neighbouring disciplines in the more recent past, from the 1960s onwards, attempting to combine the more detached attitude of a historian with the testimony of a witness, indeed a participant in the movements of that period. What follows is organized chronologically, dramatizing the contrasts between decades for the sake of clarity. I shall employ the language of 'turns': social, for instance, anthropological, psychoanalytical, literary, and cultural (Bachmann-Medick 2006).

In the 1960s, the 'social turn' came to include a social history of culture, inspired by Marxism while remaining open to alternative approaches. In Britain, a discussion of the relation between culture and society by a Marxist professor of English Literature,

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Raymond Williams (1958) was influential on historians (on Burke 1972, among others). Edward Thompson's famous study of the making of the working class (1963) was criticized by some fellow-Marxists for what they called its 'culturalism', since it discussed folksongs and urban rituals as well as factories and trade unions (in return, Thompson criticized his critics for 'economism').

The 1970s were the moment of two more turns, one towards anthropology and the other towards psychoanalysis. Historical anthropology was practiced at around this time in Paris by Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, in Princeton by Natalie Davis and Robert Darnton, in Oxford by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane, in Bologna by Carlo Ginzburg and in Moscow by Aron Gurevich. 'Historical anthropology' is of course an oxymoron, since anthropologists define their discipline by a method, fieldwork, which is not available to students of the past. It might have been more exact to speak of 'anthropological history', that is, history inspired by anthropology but following its own methods – except in the case of oral historians, who were able to carry out fieldwork of their own.

The anthropological turn underlay a number of studies of popular culture published at this time (Thomas 1971; Burke 1978; Muchembled 1978). Another neighbouring discipline, folklore (later known as 'ethnology'), which was relegated to the fringe of the academic world in England, was taken more seriously by cultural historians elsewhere, notably in Scandinavia (Löfgren and Frykman 1979). The kind of anthropology inspiring historians varied from individual to individual and even from nation to nation. The French made use of Lévi-Strauss, for instance; the British, of Evans-Pritchard; and the Americans of Clifford Geertz, whose analyses of 'thick description' and 'deep play' have been cited again and again by historians. In contrast, there has been surprising little use by historians of the ideas of Marshall Sahlins, whose model of cultural change deserves to be taken up by historians of the German Reformation, for instance, or the French Revolution. There is a nice irony in an anthropologist recommending historians to take events more seriously in cultural history (Sahlins 1985; Burke 1987; Sewell 2005).

The 1970s were also the time of a gradual turn towards psychoanalysis. In France, building on an older tradition of *psychologie historique*, they included the polymath Michel de Certeau, who joined the seminar of Jacques Lacan, and the Russian specialist Alain Besançon (who later recanted). The ambivalent discussion of psychoanalysis in the work of the polymath Michel Foucault probably encouraged the growth of interest by historians (Besançon 1967; Certeau 1975; Foucault 1976). In the USA, a leader was Peter Gay, a former historian of the Enlightenment who turned to the history of unreason, underwent a training analysis, and later made use of it in a massive cultural history of the nineteenth century (Gay 1984-95).

The lay psychoanalyst Lloyd deMause tried to launch what he called 'The New Psychohistory' at this time, a movement to which his exaggerated claims gave a bad name. Equally exaggerated, though, was the notorious attack on psychohistory launched by the French-American historian Jacques Barzun (1974). Barzun concluded his critique with the hope that 'in any new vale which the muses may elect for their abode, Clio will again be found among them, *virgo intacta*' (Barzun 1974: 38), a suggestion that itself demands a Freudian analysis.

In the 1980s, a turn towards literature became visible, preceded of course by Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973) with its provocative description of historical writing as a

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form of fiction and its creative borrowing of the concept of 'emplotment' (or as Paul Ricoeur called it, *mise en intrigue*). White's ideas took some time to be digested by professional historians, to the extent that they have been digested at all. What was noticeable in the 1980s, in anthropology as well as in cultural history, was a new interest in close reading, in viewing the documents found in archives as literary artefacts with their own form of rhetoric, as well as a revival of interest in narrative on the part of historians themselves. Among studies of this kind the work of Natalie Davis (1987) stands out. Some leading historians, among them the Englishman Lawrence Stone (1979), criticized this 'revival of narrative'. Others viewed it as a new kind of narrative created in response to new challenges, a 'thick' Geertzian narrative that would encompass cultural and social change as well as the traditional history of battles and political events (Burke 1991).

On the literary side, a rapprochement with history was part of the programme of the American movement known as 'the New Historicism', which both preached and practiced attention to social and cultural contexts. A centre of interest in the group was the English Renaissance (Greenblatt 1980). When the New Historicists borrowed concepts, those concepts tended to come from theorists such as Foucault, Bourdieu and Erving Goffman rather than from historians, but the two groups collaborated in the foundation of the journal *Representations* in 1983.

The same landmark year saw the publication of two books destined to exert a long influence over both social and cultural studies, *Imagined Communities*, by the political scientist Benedict Anderson, and the *Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. The idea of cultural 'invention', launched by the polymath Michel de Certeau in his *Invention du quotidien*, would echo through the 1980s and 1990s, with books on the invention of Athens, Paraguay, the people, George Washington, Africa, and so on.

Meanwhile, in Germany, a scholarly couple, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1988, 1997) and his wife Aleida (1993, 1999), who teaches English literature, were launching the concept of 'cultural memory', which was rapidly taken up by historians. Other historians preferred the concept of 'social memory', borrowed from the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs 1952; Fentress and Wickham 1992).

The 1980s was also the time when the history of women was transformed into gender history by making use of gender theory. One of the leaders in this endeavour was the American Joan Scott, whose article on gender as a useful category of historical analysis has often been cited. Scott is unusual among Anglophone historians in making use of the ideas of Jacques Derrida, notably his concept of the 'supplement' (Scott 1986, 2010). Later studies of gender by historians, at least in the Anglophone world, have drawn in particular on the ideas of the American philosopher Judith Butler (1990).

The 1990s were the age of the cultural turn, inaugurated by Roger Chartier's essays on cultural history (1988) and Daniel Roche's study (1989) of the culture of clothes in the following year, the date of a collective volume on *The New Cultural History* (Hunt 1989). The political historians finally joined the conversation at this time. The concept of 'political culture', borrowed from North American political science, was regularly employed in historical studies, cultural histories of diplomacy and war made their appearance, while some political scientists discovered the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz (Chabal and Deloz 2006). Some economic historians turned from their traditional focus on production towards a concern with consumption, making an

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alliance with cultural historians, as in the case of the collective volume *Consumption and the World of Goods* (Brewer and Porter 1993), inspired by the earlier work of a British anthropologist, Mary Douglas (Douglas and Isherwood 1979).

This was also a time when some cultural historians were turning – or returning – to sociology. They were inspired in particular by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his concepts of 'symbolic capital' (Griessinger 1981), 'distinction' (Clunas 1991), and 'habitus' (Füssel 2007). On the frontier between social, intellectual and cultural history, the study of intellectuals by Christophe Charle (1990) stayed particularly close to Bourdieu's analysis of 'fields'. Norbert Elias (whose *Civilizing Process* had finally appeared in French in 1973-75 and in English in 1978-82) was also rediscovered at this time.

Looking backwards, the 1980s and 1990s appear a kind of golden age of cultural history. By the end of the century, a volume had appeared entitled *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Bonnell and Hunt 1999), but this was not sufficient to stem the flow. Turning now to the promise and the problems of the 21st century, I should like to point to two trends. One might be described as a renewed rapprochement between history and psychology (or more exactly different psychologies) and the other as a 'natural turn'.

Their shared interest in memory has introduced some cultural historians to experimental psychologists such as Ulrich Neisser, who studies the construction or reconstruction of memories. A collective volume brings together psychologists, anthropologists and cultural historians such as Jay Winter (Boyer and Wertsch 2009). A meeting-point between oral historians and psychologists is a common interest in schemata. Like miners digging a tunnel from both ends and meeting in the middle, individuals in both disciplines made the discovery that what we remember is shaped by the stories that we already know (Thomson 1990; Wertsch 2008).

Some scholars working in departments of English literature have been studying remembering in England at the time of the Reformation, contrasting the means by which Catholics learned religious doctrine, through images and other appeals to the senses, with the Protestant emphasis on the word: on reading the Bible, singing hymns and listening to sermons. To describe and explain the contrast, this group of scholars has adopted concepts from cognitive psychology, notably 'cognitive ecology', 'distributed cognition', and 'extended mind', including objects in the environment of individuals (Tribble and Keene 2011).

In France, a group of younger historians has become interested in what they call (following the examples of Lucien Febvre and Alain Corbin) 'sensibilities'. A new journal, *Sensibilités*, founded in 2017, devotes each issue to a theme that ranges from dreaming to 'paroxysms' (Mazurel 2014), linking the history of sensibilities to the history of emotions, which – like memory studies in earlier decades – has been undergoing a boom since the year 2000. Unlike other historians of emotions, the group suggest that what they study is not so much a separate topic as a category of analysis (Deluermoz et al. 2013).

Whether they accept or reject the idea, historians of the emotions have to engage with the argument put forward by the psychologist Paul Ekman (1980), who was listed by *Time* magazine in 2009 as one of the hundred most influential people in the world. According to Ekman, a fixed number of 'basic emotions' can be found in all cultures and in all periods. These basic emotions include anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise.

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Some historians, like the anthropologists, rejected the idea of basic emotions, arguing that different cultures have different emotional 'regimes', with emotions associated with different objects, managed in different ways, and expressed or constructed by local words such as *saudade*, words that are not exactly translatable into other languages.

The problem here is that most historians are ill-qualified to express an opinion in a field they have not studied formally. William Reddy, one of the leaders in this new field, is an exception, since he spent a postdoctoral year at Harvard studying developmental psychology (like Michel de Certeau and Peter Gay in the case of psychoanalysis).

In the case of the recent turn to neuro-history, the problem is even more acute, as in other examples of a trend that might be described as the 'natural turn'.

The Natural Turn

Although some French anthropologists such as Philippe Descola have recently been undermining the famous distinction between nature and culture emphasized by their former colleague Lévi-Strauss, the phrase 'natural turn' may remain of some use as a way of linking three recent trends in historical thought and writing, all of which involve interaction with new neighbours, in particular with ecology, neuroscience, and biology.

The history of the environment has been established for some decades now. One of the pioneers in this field was the Brazilian scholar Gilberto Freyre, whose study of his native region of Pernambuco was published over 80 years ago (1937). However, the field has been growing in importance in the 21st century, attracting young scholars for obvious reasons. Historians of the environment obviously require a knowledge of ecology, but they also need to know about geology, botany, climatology, and other disciplines from the so-called 'hard' sciences.

In a second example of the natural turn, history meets neuroscience. Just as an interest in memory led some historians into dialogue with experimental psychologists, an interest in the history of emotions has led others to conversations with neuroscientists. One such historian is Daniel Smail, author of a controversial book (2008) on what he calls 'deep history'. Smail stresses what he calls 'psychotropy', 'mood-altering practices' such as fasting, dancing, ingesting alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, and so on.

Another historian in dialogue with neuroscientists is Lynn Hunt, moving on from an earlier interest in psychoanalysis. Studying the increasing interest in human rights at the end of the 18th century, Hunt explained it by the rise of empathy with people different from oneself. Taking a step back, she explained the rise of empathy by the rise of novel-reading in the same period. According to Hunt, the link between empathy and novels, especially epistolary novels that describe the inner world of the characters, can be found in changes in the neurons in the brain. More generally, she has urged 'a reconceptualization of individual experience based on perspectives derived from recent research in neuroscience' (Hunt 2009: 682).

A third example of the natural turn is the rise of 'bio-history', centred on the idea of the co-evolution of humans and animals (Russell 2014). Of course an interest in the history of animals is no new idea: think of the historians who wrote in the 1980s about the use of horses in public transport, in warfare and so on. Again, historians of plague have long been aware of the importance of rats and fleas as carriers of the disease.

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What is new is the emphasis on the agency of animals and even microbes as part of what is known as 'non-human history'.

The term 'co-evolution' is a reminder of the recent revival of interest in the idea of evolution among historians and sociologists. A leading British sociologist, Gary Runciman (2009) has argued that 'the process by which societies evolve is analogous… to natural selection', emphasizing what he calls the 'competitive selection of practices'. This implies a kind of survival of the fittest, although it is not easy to specify what the term 'fittest' means in this context (Runciman 2009: 78, 149 and passim).

Finally, at the level of synthesis rather than that of monographs, the recent rise of 'Big History' (Christian 2004) is encouraging historians to draw on astronomy, geology, and other hard sciences by extending the old term of 'universal history' from the history of the world to that of the universe, beginning with the 'Big Bang'.

Conclusion

Are all these innovations to be welcomed? I must confess that as a member of an older generation, long accustomed to dialogue with anthropologists and sociologists, it is difficult to adjust to the idea of switching partners. The natural turn in particular poses a challenge to scholars whose culture is humanistic rather than scientific. The important point, though, concerns results.

In some of the examples mentioned earlier, I wonder whether the results are both new and useful in the study of the past. Take the case of the relevance of cognitive psychology to the English Reformation. Historians had already discussed the different religious experiences of Catholics and Protestants, linked to changes in the media of communication. As far as I can see, concepts such as 'distributed mind' simply re-describe what was already known.

Again, in the case of Lynn Hunt's argument about the invention of human rights, the idea of the connection between the rise of novel-reading and the rise of empathy seems a plausible one. On the other hand, re-describing this connection in the language of neuroscience does not seem to me to add anything of value to the historical argument. In these cases, what we seem to be borrowing from the neighbouring disciplines is something we already have at home.

There are other problems. One is insensitive borrowing, without paying sufficient attention to differences between disciplines in both aims and methods, thanks to what Joan Scott, writing about psychoanalysis and history, has called the 'incommensurability' between the two.

Another serious problem, in my view at least, is the increasing fragmentation of historical studies. This fragmentation is the dark side of a positive trend, the escape from what Fernand Braudel called the walled garden of history.

The problem is that some historians become so much absorbed in their dialogue with scholars in another discipline that they lose touch with the main body of historical studies. In this respect they resemble neighbours who gossip over the fence and neglect what is going on in their own house.

As so often happens, the solution to a problem sooner or later generates problems of its own. The alternation of problems and solutions is a more realistic vision of the history of history, or the history of knowledge in general than the rival visions of accelerating progress and inevitable decline. In the case of the natural turn, the story is only beginning.

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