

Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future

Peter Burke

Colophon

Peter Burke ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

In the last generation or so the universe of historians has been expanding at a dizzying rate.¹ National history, which was dominant in the nineteenth century, now has to compete for attention with world history and with local history (once left to antiquarians and amateurs). There are many new fields, often supported by specialized journals. Social history, for example, became independent of economic history only to fragment, like some new nation, into historical demography, labour history, urban history, rural history, and so on.

Again, economic history has split into old and new. The new economic history of the 1950s and 1960s (now middle-aged, if not older) is too well-known to need discussion here.² There has also been a shift among economic historians from a concern with production to a concern with consumption, a shift which makes it increasingly difficult to separate economic from social and cultural history. The history of management is a new interest, but one which blurs if it does not dissolve the boundaries between economic and administrative history. Another specialization, the history of advertising, straddles economic history and the history of communication. Today, the very identity of economic history is threatened by a takeover bid from a youthful but ambitious enterprise, the history of the environment, sometimes known as eco-history.

Political history too is divided, not only into the so-called high and low schools, but also between historians concerned with centres of government and those interested in politics at the grassroots. The territory of the political has expanded, in the sense that historians (following theorists such as Michel Foucault) are increasingly inclined to discuss the struggle for power at the level of the factory, the school, or even the family. The price of such expansion, however, is a kind of identity crisis. If politics is everywhere, is there any need for political history?³ A similar problem faces cultural historians, as they turn away from a narrow but precise definition of culture in terms of

art, literature, music etc, towards a more anthropological definition of the field.

In this expanding and fragmenting universe, there is an increasing need for orientation. What is the so-called new history? How new is it? Is it a temporary fashion or a long-term trend? Will it--or should it--replace traditional history, or can the rivals coexist in peace?

It is to answer these questions that the present volume has been designed. A comprehensive survey of the varieties of contemporary history would have left no space for more than a superficial discussion. For this reason the decision was taken to concentrate attention on a few relatively recent movements.⁴ The essays on these movements are concerned with much the same fundamental problems, at least implicitly. It may be useful to confront these problems at the start, and to place them in the context of long-term changes in the writing of history.

What is the New History?

The phrase 'the new history' is best known in France. *La nouvelle histoire* is the title of a collection of essays edited by the distinguished French medievalist Jacques Le Goff. Le Goff has also helped edit a massive three-volume collection of essays, concerned with 'new problems', 'new approaches' and 'new objects'.⁵ In these cases it is clear what the new history is: it is a history 'made in France', the country of *la nouvelle vague* and *le nouveau roman*, not to mention *la nouvelle cuisine*. More exactly, it is the history associated with the so-called *égravécole des Annales*, grouped around the journal *Annales: économie, société, civilisations*.

What is this *nouvelle histoire*? A positive definition is not easy; the movement is united only in what it opposes, and the pages which follow will demonstrate the variety of the new approaches. It is therefore difficult to offer more than a vague description, characterizing the new history as total history (*histoire totale*) or as structural history. Hence there may be a case for imitating medieval theologians faced with the problem of defining God, and opting for a *via negativa*, in other words for defining the new history in terms of what it is not, of what its practitioners oppose.

The new history is history written in deliberate reaction against the traditional 'paradigm', that useful if imprecise terms put into circulation by the American historian of science Thomas Kuhn.⁶ It will be convenient to describe this traditional paradigm as 'Rankean history', after the great German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), although he was less confined by it than his followers were. (Just as Marx was not a Marxist, Ranke was not a Rankean). We might also call this paradigm the common-sense view of history, not to praise it but to make the point that it has often--too often--been assumed to be *the* way of doing history, rather than being perceived as one among

various possible approaches to the past. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, the contrast between old and new history might be summed up in seven points.

1. According to the traditional paradigm, history is essentially concerned with politics. In the confident Victorian phrase of Sir John Seeley, Regius Professor of History at Cambridge, 'History is past politics: politics is present history.' Politics was assumed to be essentially concerned with the state; in other words it was national and international rather than local. However, it did include the history of the Church as an institution and also what the military theorist Karl von Clausewitz defined as 'the continuation of policies by other means', that is, war. Although other kinds of history--the history of art, for example, or the history of science--were not altogether excluded by the traditional paradigm, they were marginalized in the sense of being considered peripheral to the interests of 'real' historians.

The new history, on the other hand, has come to be concerned with virtually every human activity. 'Everything has a history,' as the scientist J. B. S. Haldane once wrote; that is, everything has a past which can in principle be reconstructed and related to the rest of the past.⁷ Hence the slogan 'total history', so dear to the *Annales* historians. The first half of the century witnessed the rise of the history of ideas. In the last thirty years we have seen a number of remarkable histories of topics which had not previously been thought to possess a history, for example, childhood, death, madness, the climate, smells, dirt and cleanliness, gestures, the body (as Roy Porter shows in chapter 10 below), femininity (discussed by Joan Scott in chapter 3), reading (discussed by Robert Darnton in chapter 7), speaking, and even silence.⁸ What had previously been considered as unchanging is now viewed as a 'cultural construction', subject to variation over time as well as in space.

The cultural relativism implicit here deserves to be emphasized. The philosophical foundation of the new history is the idea that reality is socially or culturally constituted. The sharing of this idea, or assumption, by many social historians and social anthropologists helps explain the recent convergence between these two disciplines, referred to more than once in the chapters which follow (pp. 98, 134). This relativism also undermines the traditional distinction between what is central in history and what is peripheral.

2. In the second place, traditional historians think of history as essentially a narrative of events, while the new history is more concerned with the analysis of structures. One of the most famous works of history of our time, Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranean*, dismisses the history of events (*histoire &gravevènementielle*) as no more than the foam on the waves of the sea of history.⁹ According to Braudel, economic and social changes over the long term (*la longue durèe*) and geo-historical changes over the very long term are what really matter. Although there has recently been

something of a reaction against this view (discussed on p. 235 below) and events are no longer dismissed as easily as they used to be, the history of structures of various kinds continues to be taken very seriously.

3. In the third place, traditional history offers a view from above, in the sense that it has always concentrated on the great deeds of great men, statesmen, generals, or occasionally churchmen. The rest of humanity was allocated a minor role in the drama of history. The existence of this rule is revealed by reactions to its transgression. When the great Russian writer Alexander Pushkin was working on an account of a peasant revolt and its leader Pugachev, Tsar Nicholas's comment was that 'such a man has no history.' In the 1950s, when a British historian wrote a thesis about a popular movement in the French Revolution, one of his examiners asked him, 'Why do you bother with these bandits?'" [10](#)

On the other hand (as Jim Sharpe shows in chapter 2), a number of the new historians are concerned with 'history from below', in other words with the views of ordinary people and with their experience of social change. The history of popular culture has received a great deal of attention. Historians of the Church are beginning to examine its history from below as well as from above. [11](#) Intellectual historians too have shifted their attention away from great books, or great ideas--their equivalent of great men--to the history of collective mentalities or to the history of discourses or 'languages', the language of scholasticism, for example, or the language of the common law (cf. Richard Tuck's essay, chapter 9 below). [12](#)

4. In the fourth place, according to the traditional paradigm, history should be based on the documents. One of Ranke's greatest achievements was his exposure of the limitations of narrative sources--let us call them chronicles--and his stress on the need to base written history on official records, emanating from governments and preserved in archives. The price of this achievement was the neglect of other kinds of evidence. The period before the invention of writing was dismissed as 'prehistory'. However, the 'history from below' movement in its turn exposed the limitations of this kind of document. Official records generally express the official point of view. To reconstruct the attitudes of heretics and rebels, such records need to be supplemented by other kinds of source.

In any case, if historians are concerned with a greater variety of human activities than their predecessors, they must examine a greater variety of evidence. Some of this evidence is visual, some of it oral (see Ivan Gaskell and Gwyn Prins in chapters 8 and 6). There is also statistical evidence: trade figures, population figures, voting figures, and so on. The heyday of quantitative history was probably the 1950s and 1960s, when some enthusiasts claimed that only quantitative methods were reliable. There has been a reaction against such claims, and to some extent against the methods as well, but

interest in a more modest quantitative history continues to grow. In Britain, for example, an Association for History and Computing was founded in 1987.

5. According to the traditional paradigm, memorably articulated by the philosopher-historian R. G. Collingwood, 'When an historian asks "Why did Brutus stab Caesar?" he means "What did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?"'¹³ This model of historical explanation has been criticized by more recent historians on a number of grounds, principally because it fails to take account of the variety of historians' questions, often concerned with collective movements as well as individual actions, with trends as well as events.

Why, for example, did prices rise in sixteenth-century Spain? Economic historians do not agree in their answer to this question, but their various responses (in terms of silver imports, population growth and so on) are very far from Collingwood's model. In Fernand Braudel's famous study of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean, first published in 1949, only the third and last part, devoted to the history of events, asks questions remotely like Collingwood's, and even here the author offers a very different kind of answer, emphasising the constraints on his protagonist, King Philip II, and the king's lack of influence on the history of his time.¹⁴

6. According to the traditional paradigm, History is objective. The historian's task is to give readers the facts, or as Ranke put it in a much-quoted phrase, to tell 'how it actually happened'. His modest disclaimer of philosophical intentions was interpreted by posterity as a proud manifesto for history without bias. In a famous letter to his international team of contributors to the Cambridge Modern History, published from 1902 onwards, its editor, Lord Acton, urged them that 'our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, Germans and Dutch alike' and that readers should be unable to tell where one contributor laid down his pen and another took it up.¹⁵

Today, this ideal is generally considered to be unrealistic. However hard we struggle to avoid the prejudices associated with colour, creed, class or gender, we cannot avoid looking at the past from a particular point of view. Cultural relativism obviously applies as much to historical writing itself as to its so-called objects. Our minds do not reflect reality directly. We perceive the world only through a network of conventions, schemata and stereotypes, a network which varies from one culture to another. In this situation, our understanding of conflicts is surely enhanced by a presentation of opposite viewpoints, rather than by an attempt, like Acton's, to articulate a consensus. We have moved from the ideal of the Voice of History to that of heteroglossia, defined as 'varied and opposing voices' (below, p. 239).¹⁶ It is therefore quite appropriate that this volume should itself take the form of a collective work and that its contributors should speak different mother tongues.

Rankean history was the territory of the professionals. The nineteenth century was the time when history became professionalized, with its departments in universities and its trade journals like the *Historische Zeitschrift* and the *English Historical Review*. Most of the leading new historians are also professionals, with the distinguished exception of the late Philippe Ariès, who liked to describe himself as 'a Sunday historian'. One way to describe the achievements of the *Annales* group is to say that they have shown that economic, social and cultural history can meet the exacting professional standards set by Ranke for political history.

All the same, their concern with the whole range of human activity encourages them to be inter-disciplinary in the sense of learning from and collaborating with social anthropologists, economists, literary critics, psychologists, sociologists, and so on. Historians of art, literature and science, who used to pursue their interests more or less in isolation from the main body of historians, are now making more regular contact with them. The history-from-below movement also reflects a new determination to take ordinary people's views of their own past more seriously than professional historians used to do.¹⁷ The same is true for some forms of oral history (below, p. 114). In this sense too heteroglossia is essential to the new history.

How New is the New History?

Who invented--or discovered--the new history? The phrase is sometimes used of developments in the 1970s and 1980s, a period in which the reaction against the traditional paradigm has become worldwide, involving historians in Japan, India, Latin America and elsewhere. The essays in this volume focus on this period in particular. It is clear, however, that many of the changes which have taken place in historical writing in these two decades are part of a longer trend.

For many people, the new history is associated with Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, who founded the journal *Annales* in 1929 to promote their approach, and in the next generation, with Fernand Braudel. It would indeed be difficult to deny the importance of the movement for the renewal of history led by these men. However, they were not alone in their revolt against the Rankeans. In Britain in the 1930s, Lewis Namier and R. H. Tawney both rejected the narrative of events for some kind of structural history. In Germany around the year 1900, Karl Lamprecht made himself unpopular in the profession by his challenge to the traditional paradigm. The contemptuous phrase *histoire èvènementielle*, 'event-centred history', was coined at this time, a generation before the age of Braudel, Bloch and Febvre.¹⁸ It expresses the ideas of a group of scholars centred on the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim and his journal the *Annèe Sociologique*, a journal which helped inspire the *Annales*

Even the phrase 'the new history' has a history of its own. The earliest use of the term known to me dates from 1912, when the American scholar James Harvey Robinson published a book with this title. The contents matched the label. 'History,' wrote Robinson, 'includes every trace and vestige of everything that man has done or thought since first he appeared on the earth.' In other words, he believed in total history. As for method, 'The New History'--I am quoting Robinson again--'will avail itself of all those discoveries that are being made about mankind by anthropologists, economists, psychologists and sociologists.'[19](#) This movement for a new history was not successful in the United States at the time, but the more recent American enthusiasm for *Annales* becomes more intelligible if we remember this local background.

There is no good reason to stop in 1912, or even in 1900. It has been argued recently that the replacement of an old history by a new one (more objective and less literary) is a recurrent theme in the history of historical writing.[20](#) Such claims were made by the school of Ranke in the nineteenth century, by the Benedictine scholar Jean Mabillon, who formulated new methods of source criticism in the seventeenth century, and by the Greek historian Polybius, who denounced some of his colleagues as mere rhetoricians a hundred and fifty years before the birth of Christ. In the first case at least, the claim to novelty was self-conscious. In 1867, the great Dutch historian Robert Fruin published an essay called 'The New Historiography', a defence of scientific, Rankean history.[21](#)

Attempts to write a wider history than that of political events also go back a long way. It was in the later nineteenth century that economic history was established in Germany, Britain and elsewhere as an alternative to the history of the state. In 1860 the Swiss scholar Jacob Burckhardt published a study of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, concentrating on cultural history and describing trends rather than narrating events. The sociologists of the nineteenth century, such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer--not to mention Karl Marx--were extremely interested in history but rather contemptuous of professional historians. They were interested in structures, not events, and 'the new history' owes a debt to them which is not often acknowledged.

They in turn owe a debt to predecessors they did not often recognize, the historians of the Enlightenment, among them Voltaire, Gibbon (despite the remark I quoted earlier), Robertson, Vico, Moser, and others. In the eighteenth century there was an international movement for the writing of a kind of history which would not be confined to military and political events but was concerned with laws, with trade, with the *manière de penser* of a given society, with its manners and customs, with the 'spirit of the age'. In Germany in particular there was a lively interest in world history.[22](#) Studies of the history of women were published by the Scotsman William Alexander and by Christoph Meiners, a professor at the University of Gottingen (a centre of the new social history in the late eighteenth century).[23](#)

Thus the alternative history discussed in this volume has a reasonably long ancestry (even if the great-great-grandparents might not recognize their descendants). What is new is not its existence so much as the fact that its practitioners are now extremely numerous and that they refuse to be marginalized.

Problems of Definition

The purpose of this volume is not to celebrate the new history (despite the agreement of the contributors that at least some kinds of it are worthwhile, indeed necessary) but to assess its strengths and weaknesses. The movement for change has arisen from a widespread sense of the inadequacy of the traditional paradigm. This sense of inadequacy cannot be understood unless we look beyond the historian's craft, at changes in the wider world. Decolonization and feminism, for example, are two movements which have obviously had a great impact on recent historical writing, as the chapters by Henk Wesseling and Joan Scott make abundantly clear. In the future, the ecological movement is likely to have more and more influence on the way in which history is written.

Indeed, it has already inspired a number of studies. Braudel's famous monograph on the Mediterranean attracted attention when it was first published in 1949 by the amount of space it devoted to the physical environment--land and sea, mountains and islands. Today, however, Braudel's picture looks curiously static because the author did not seriously consider the ways in which the environment was modified by the presence of man destroying forests, for example, in order to build the galleys which figure so prominently in the pages of *The Mediterranean*.

A more dynamic eco-history has been offered by a number of writers. William Cronon has written a fine study of colonial New England focused on the effects of the arrival of the Europeans on the plant and animal communities of the region, noting the disappearance of beavers and bears, cedars and white pines and the increasing importance of European grazing animals. On a very different scale, Alfred Crosby has discussed what he calls 'the biological expansion of Europe' between 900 and 1900 and the place of European diseases in clearing the way for the successful establishment of 'Neo-Europes' from New England to New Zealand.[24](#)

For internal and external reasons alike, it is not unreasonable to speak of the crisis of the traditional paradigm of historical writing. However, the new paradigm also has its problems: problems of definition, problems of sources, problems of method, problems of explanation. These problems will recur in specific chapters but it may be worth offering a brief discussion of all of them at this point.

Problems of definition occur because the new historians are pushing into unfamiliar

territory. They begin, as explorers of other cultures usually do, with a sort of negative image of what they are looking for. The history of the Orient has been perceived by occidental historians as the opposite of their own, eliminating differences between the Middle and Far East, China and Japan, and so on.²⁵ As Henk Wesseling points out below (chapter 4), world history has often been viewed--by westerners--as the study of the relations between the west and the rest, ignoring interactions between Asia and Africa, Asia and America, and so on. Again, history from below was originally conceptualized as the inversion of history from above, with 'low' culture in place of high culture. In the course of their research, however, scholars have become increasingly aware of the problems inherent in this dichotomy.

If popular culture, for example, is the culture of 'the people', who are the people? Are they everyone, the poor, the 'subordinate classes', as the Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci used to call them? Are they the illiterate or the uneducated? We cannot assume that economic, political and cultural divisions in a given society necessarily coincide. And what is education? Is it only the training handed out in certain official institutions like schools or universities? Are ordinary people uneducated or do they simply have a different education, a different culture from elites?

It should not of course be assumed that all ordinary people have the same experiences, and the importance of distinguishing women's history from that of men is underlined by Joan Scott in chapter 3. In some parts of the world, from Italy to Brazil, people's history is often called the history of the 'vanquished', thus assimilating the experiences of the subordinate classes in the west to those of the colonized.²⁶ However, differences between these experiences also need to be discussed.

The phrase 'history from below' seems to offer an escape from these difficulties, but it generates problems of its own. It changes its meaning in different contexts. Should a political history from below discuss the views and actions of everyone who is excluded from power, or should it deal with politics at a local or grass-roots' level? Should a history of the Church from below look at religion from the point of view of the laity, whatever their social status? Should a history of medicine from below concern itself with folk-healers as opposed to professional physicians, or with the patients' experiences and diagnoses of illness?²⁷ Should a military history from below deal with the ordinary soldier's Agincourt or Waterloo, as John Keegan has done so memorably, or should it concentrate on the civilian experience of war?²⁸ Should a history of education from below turn from the ministers and theorists of education to the ordinary teachers, as Jacques Ozouf has done, for example, or should it present schools from the point of view of the pupils?²⁹ Should an economic history from below focus on the small trader or the small consumer?

One reason for the difficulty of defining the history of popular culture is that the notion

of 'culture' is if anything even more difficult to pin down than the notion of 'popular'. The so-called 'opera-house' definition of culture (as high art, literature, music and so on) was narrow but at least it was precise. A wide notion of culture is central to the new history.³⁰ The state, social groups, and even gender or society itself are considered to be culturally constructed. If we use the term in a wide sense, however, we have at least to ask ourselves, what does not count as culture?

Another example of a new approach which has run into problems of definition is the history of everyday life, *Alltagsgeschichte* as the Germans call it. The phrase itself is not new: *la vie quotidienne* was the title of a series launched by the French publishers Hachette in the 1930s. What is new is the importance given to everyday life in contemporary historical writing, especially since the publication of Braudel's famous study of 'material civilization' in 1967.³¹ Once dismissed as trivial, the history of everyday life is now viewed by some historians as the only real history, the centre to which everything else must be related. The everyday is also at the crossroads of recent approaches in sociology (from Michel de Certeau to Erving Goffman), and philosophy (whether Marxist or phenomenological).³²

What these approaches have in common is their concern with the world of ordinary experience (rather than society in the abstract) as their point of departure, together with an attempt to view daily life as problematic, in the sense of showing that behaviour or values which are taken for granted in one society are dismissed as self-evidently absurd in another. Historians, like social anthropologists, now try to uncover the latent rules of daily life (the 'poetics' of the everyday, as the Russian semiotician Juri Lotman puts it) and to show their readers how to be a father or a daughter, a ruler or a saint, in a given culture.³³ At this point social and cultural history seem to be dissolving into one another. Some practitioners describe themselves as 'new' cultural historians, others as 'socio-cultural' historians.³⁴ In any case, the impact of cultural relativism on historical writing seems inescapable.

However, as the sociologist Norbert Elias has pointed out in an important essay, the notion of the everyday is less precise and more complicated than it looks. Elias distinguishes eight current meanings of the term, from private life to the world of ordinary people.³⁵ The everyday includes actions--Braudel defines it as the realm of routine--and also attitudes, which we might call mental habits. It may even include ritual. Ritual, a marker of special occasions in the life of individuals and communities, is often defined in opposition to the everyday. On the other hand, foreign visitors frequently notice everyday rituals in the life of every society--ways of eating, forms of greeting, and so on--which the locals fail to perceive as rituals at all

Equally difficult to describe or analyse is the relation between everyday structures and change. From within the everyday seems timeless. The challenge for the social

historians is how it is in fact part of history, to relate everyday life to great events like the Reformation or the French Revolution, or to long-term trends like westernization or the rise of capitalism. The famous sociologist Max Weber coined a famous term which may be useful here: 'routinization' (*Veralltaglichung*, literally 'quotidianization'). One focus of attention for social historians might be the process of interaction between major events and trends on one side and the structures of everyday life on the other. To what extent, by what means, and over what period did the French or the Russian Revolution (say) penetrate the daily life of different social groups, to what extent and how successfully was it resisted?

Problems of Sources

The greatest problems for the new historians, however, are surely those of sources and methods. It has already been suggested that when historians began to ask new kinds of questions about the past, to choose new objects of research, they had to look for new kinds of sources to supplement official documents. Some turned to oral history, discussed in chapter 6; others to the evidence of images (chapter 8); others to statistics. It has also proved possible to re-read certain kinds of official records in new ways. Historians of popular culture, for example, have made great use of judicial records, especially the interrogations of suspects. Two famous studies of history from below are based on inquisition records. Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975), discussed in chapter 2, and Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1986).

However, all these sources raise awkward problems. Historians of popular culture try to reconstruct ordinary, everyday assumptions on the basis of the records of what were extraordinary events in the lives of the accused: interrogations and trials. They try to reconstruct what ordinary people thought on the basis of what the accused, who may not have been a typical group, were prepared to say in the unusual (not to say terrifying) situation in which they found themselves. It is therefore necessary to read the documents between the lines. There is nothing wrong with trying to read between the lines, particularly when the attempt is made by historians with the finesse of a Ginzburg or a Le Roy Ladurie.

All the same, the principles underlying such reading are not always clear. It is only fair to admit that to portray the socially invisible (working women, for example) or to listen to the inarticulate, the silent majority of the dead (however necessary as part of total history) is an enterprise more hazardous than is usually the case with traditional history. This is not always the case. The political history of the age of Charlemagne, for example, is based on sources at least as sparse and as unreliable as the history of popular culture in the sixteenth century.[36](#)

A good deal of attention has been given to oral evidence, some of it by historians of

Africa, such as Jan Vansina, concerned with the reliability of oral traditions over centuries, and some of it by contemporary historians such as Paul Thompson, reconstructing the experience of life in the Edwardian era. The problem of the influence of the historian-interviewer and of the interview situation on the testimony of the witness has been discussed.³⁷ Yet it is only fair to admit that the criticism of oral testimonies has not yet reached the sophistication of the critique of documents, which historians have been practicing for centuries. Some idea of the distance travelled in a quarter of a century--and of the long way still to go--may be gained by comparing the first edition of Vansina's study of oral tradition, first published in 1961, with the completely rewritten version of 1985.³⁸

The situation is rather similar in the case of photographs, images and more generally the evidence of material culture. Recent work on photography (including film) has unmasked the assumption that the camera is an objective record of reality, emphasizing not only the selection made by photographers according to their interests, beliefs, values, prejudices and so on, but also their debt, conscious or unconscious, to pictorial conventions. If some Victorian photographs of rural life resemble seventeenth-century Dutch landscapes, this may well be because the photographers knew the paintings and posed their figures accordingly in order to produce, as Thomas Hardy put it in the subtitle to *Under the Greenwood Tree*, 'a painting of the Dutch school'. Like historians, photographers offer not reflections of reality but representations of it. Some important steps have been taken toward the source-criticism of photographic images, but here too there is still a long way to go.³⁹

In the case of pictorial images, discussed below by Ivan Gaskell, the climate of enthusiasm for the decoding of their iconography or iconology in the middle of the twentieth century, the age of such virtuosos as Erwin Panofsky and Edgar Wind, has been succeeded by an ice age of relative scepticism. The criteria for the interpretation of latent meanings in particular are difficult indeed to formulate.⁴⁰ The problems of iconography become even more awkward when historians of other topics try to use pictures for their own purposes, as evidence of religious or political attitudes. It is all too easy to argue in a circle, reading an image by Albrecht Durer (say) as a symptom of a spiritual crisis, and then presenting the image as an argument for the existence of the crisis.⁴¹

Material culture is of course the traditional province of the archaeologists, studying periods for which no written records exist. However, there is no good reason to restrict archaeological methods to prehistory, and archaeologists have in fact moved on to study the Middle Ages, the early Industrial Revolution, and more recently a wider range of periods, from colonial America to the consumer society of today.⁴²

Historians are beginning to emulate them, if not by digging up the past (Versailles and

other major buildings of the early modern period are happily in no need of excavation), then at least by paying more attention to physical objects. Arguments about the rise of individualism and privacy in the early modern period are now based not only on the evidence of diary-keeping, but also on such changes as the rise of individual cups (in place of communal bowls) and chairs (in place of communal benches) and the development of specialized bedrooms.[43](#)

In this instance, however, it is difficult not to wonder whether material culture is being utilized to do anything more than confirm a hypothesis founded in the first instance on literary evidence. Can the archaeology of the period since 1500 (in the West at least) aspire to anything more? The late Sir Moses Finley once suggested that 'certain kinds of documentation render archaeology more or less unnecessary,' sweeping industrial archaeology into the waste-basket in a single phrase.[44](#) His challenge deserves a serious response, but a thorough assessment of the value of the evidence of material culture for post-medieval history remains to be made.

Ironically enough, the history of material culture, an area which has attracted a great deal of interest in the last few years, is based less on the study of the artifacts themselves than on literary sources. Historians concerned with what has been called 'the social life of things'--or more exactly with the social life of groups as revealed by their use of things--rely heavily on such evidence as descriptions by travellers (which tell us much about the location and the functions of particular objects) or inventories of possessions, which are amenable to analysis by quantitative methods.[45](#)

The greatest--and the most controversial--innovation in method in the last generation has surely been the rise and spread of quantitative methods, sometimes described ironically as 'Cliometrics', in other words the vital statistics of the goddess of history. The approach is of course one of long standing among economic historians and historical demographers. What is or was new was its spread in the 1960s and 1970s to other kinds of history. In the United States, for example, there is a 'new political history' whose practitioners count votes, whether cast in elections or in parliaments.[46](#) [In France, 'serial history' \(*histoire serielle*\), so-called because the data are arranged in series over time, has gradually been extended from the study of prices \(in the 1930s\) to the study of population \(in the 1950s\) to the so-called 'third level' of the history of religious or secular mentalities.](#)[47](#) One famous study of the so-called 'dechristianization' of modern France draws the bulk of its evidence from the declining figures for Easter communion. Another, focused on Provence in the eighteenth century, studies changing attitudes to death as they are revealed in trends in the formulae of some 30,000 wills, noting the decline in references to the 'court of heaven', or in bequests for elaborate funerals or for masses for the dead.[48](#)

In recent years statistics, aided by computers, have even invaded the citadel of Rankean

history, the archives. The American National Archives, for example, now have a 'Machine-Readable Data Division', and archivists are beginning to worry about the conservation and storage of punched tapes as well as manuscripts. As a result, historians are more and more inclined to see earlier archives, such as the archives of the Inquisition, as 'data banks' which can be exploited by quantitative methods.[49](#)

The introduction into historical discourse of large numbers of statistics has tended to polarize the profession into supporters and opponents. Both sides have tended to exaggerate the novelty of the problems posed by the use of figures. Statistics can be faked, but so can texts. Statistics are easy to misinterpret, but so are texts. Machine-readable data are not user-friendly, but the same goes for many manuscripts, written in almost illegible hands or on the verge of disintegration. What is needed is an aid to discrimination, to discovering what sorts of statistics are most reliable, to what extent and for what purposes. The notion of the series, fundamental to serial history, needs to be treated as problematic, especially when changes are studied over the long term. The longer the period, the less likely it is that the units in the series--wills, records of Easter communions, or whatever--are homogeneous. But if they are subject to change themselves, how can they be used as measures of other changes?

In other words, what is required (as in the case of photographs and other new sources discussed already) is a new 'diplomatic'. This was the term used by the Benedictine scholar Jean Mabillon in his guide to the use of charters, at a time (the late seventeenth century) when the appeal to this sort of evidence was novel and aroused the suspicion of more traditional historians.[50](#) Who will be the Mabillon of statistics, photographs or oral history?

Problems of Explanation

It has already been suggested that the expansion of the historian's field entails rethinking historical explanation, since cultural and social trends cannot be analysed in the same way as political events. They require more structural explanation. Whether they like it or not, historians are having to concern themselves with questions which have long interested sociologists and other social scientists. Who are the true agents in history, individuals or groups? Can they successfully resist the pressures of social, political or cultural structures? Are these structures merely constraints on freedom of action, or do they enable agents to make more choices?[51](#)

In the 1950s and 1960s, economic and social historians were attracted by more or less determinist models of historical explanation, whether they gave primacy to economic factors, like the Marxists, to geography, like Braudel, or to population movements (as in the case of the so-called 'Malthusian model' of social change). Today, however, as Giovanni Levi suggests in his chapter on microhistory, the most attractive models are

those which emphasize the freedom of choice of ordinary people, their strategies, their capacity to exploit the inconsistencies or incoherences of social and political systems, to find loopholes through which they can wriggle or interstices in which they can survive (cf. pp. 93 ff., below).

The expansion of the historical universe has had repercussions on political history as well, for political events too may be explained in various ways. Historians who study the French Revolution, say, from below, are likely to give it a rather different kind of explanation from those who concentrate on the actions and intentions of the leaders. Even the scholars who concentrate on leaders sometimes diverge from traditional models of historical explanation by invoking their unconscious as well as their conscious motives, on the grounds that these models overestimate the importance of consciousness and rationality.

For example, a group of so-called psychohistorians, most of them living in the United States (where psychoanalysis has penetrated the culture more deeply than elsewhere) have tried to incorporate the insights of Freud into historical practice. They range from the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who caused something of a sensation in the 1950s with his study of the identity problems of 'Young Man Luther', to the historian Peter Gay, who both preaches and practices psychohistory. It is scarcely surprising to find that their approach has stirred up controversy and that they have been accused of 'shrinking history', in other words of reducing the complexities of an individual adult (or a conflict between adults) to the relationship of an infant with his parents.[52](#)

To illustrate current controversies over historical explanation, it may be useful to take the example of Hitler. Earlier debates, such as the one between H. R. Trevor-Roper and A. J. P. Taylor about the relative importance of Hitler's long-term and short-term aims, assumed the validity of the traditional model of historical explanation in terms of conscious intentions. More recently, however, the debate has widened. In the first place, a few historians, such as Robert Waite, have offered interpretations of Hitler in terms of unconscious intentions and even of psychopathology, stressing his abnormal sexuality, the trauma of his mother's death (after treatment by a Jewish doctor), and so on.[53](#)

Another group of historians dismiss what they call 'intentionalism' altogether, in the sense that they treat the problem of Hitler's motives or drives as relatively marginal. According to these 'functionalists', as they have been called ('structural historians', as I would prefer to describe them), historical explanations of the policies of the Third Reich need to concentrate on the men around Hitler, on the machinery of government and the decision-making process, and on Nazism as a social movement.[54](#) There are also historians who combine structural with psychohistorical approaches, and concentrate on explaining what it was in the Nazis which attracted them to Hitler.[55](#)

What is at once exciting and confusing about the Hitler debate--like many other historical debates in recent years--is that it is no longer conducted according to the rules. The traditional agreement about what constitutes a good historical explanation has broken down. Is this a passing phase, to be replaced by a new consensus, or is it the way in which historical debates will in future be conducted?

If there is to be such a consensus, then the area of what may be called 'historical psychology' (collective psychology) is likely to be of particular importance, linking as it does the debates on conscious and unconscious motivation with those on individual and collective explanations. It is encouraging to see an increasing interest in this area. A recent cluster of monographs centre on the history of ambition, anger, anxiety, fear, guilt, hypocrisy, love, pride, security, and other emotions. All the same, the problems of method involved in the pursuit of these elusive objects of study are far from having been resolved.[56](#)

In attempting to avoid psychological anachronism, in other words the assumption that people in the past thought and felt just like ourselves, there is a danger of going to the other extreme and 'defamiliarizing' the past so thoroughly that it becomes unintelligible. Historians face a dilemma. If they explain differences in social behaviour in different periods by differences in conscious attitudes or social conventions, they risk superficiality. On the other hand, if they explain differences in behaviour by differences in the deep structure of the social character, they run the risk of denying the freedom and the flexibility of individual actors in the past.

A possible way out of the difficulty is to utilize the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus of a particular social group. By the 'habitus' of a group, Bourdieu means the propensity of its members to select responses from a particular cultural repertoire according to the demands of a particular situation or field. Unlike the concept of rules, habitus has the great advantage of allowing its users to recognize the extent of individual freedom within certain limits set by the culture.[57](#)

All the same, problems remain. In my view, the new historians--from Edward Thompson to Roger Chartier--have been largely successful in revealing the inadequacies of traditional materialist and determinist explanations of individual and collective behaviour over the short term and in showing that in everyday life and in moments of crisis alike, it is culture that counts.[58](#) On the other hand, they have done little to challenge the importance of material factors, of the physical environment and its resources, over the long term. It still seems useful to regard these material factors as setting the agenda, the problems to which individuals, groups and, metaphorically speaking, cultures try to adapt or respond.

Problems of Synthesis

Although the expansion of the historian's universe and the increasing dialogue with other disciplines, from geography to literary theory, are surely to be welcomed, these developments have their price. The discipline of history is now more fragmented than ever before. Economic historians are able to speak the language of economists, intellectual historians the language of philosophers, and social historians the dialects of sociologists and social anthropologists, but, these groups of historians are finding it harder and harder to talk to one another. Do we have to endure this situation, or is there hope for a synthesis?

It is impossible to offer more than a partial, personal view of the problem. My own can be summed up into two opposite points, complementary rather than contradictory. In the first place, the proliferation of sub-disciplines is virtually inevitable. This movement is not confined to history. The historical profession simply offers one example among many of the increasing division of labour in our late industrial (or post-industrial) society. The proliferation has its advantages: it adds to human knowledge, and it encourages more rigorous methods, more professional standards.

There are costs as well as benefits, but we can do something to keep those intellectual costs as low as possible. Non-communication between disciplines or sub-disciplines is not inevitable. In the specific case of history, there are some encouraging signs of *rapprochement*, if not of synthesis.

It is true that, in the first flush of enthusiasm for structural history, the history of events was very nearly thrown overboard. In a similar way, the discovery of social history was sometimes associated with a contempt for political history, an inversion of the prejudice of traditional political historians. New fields such as women's history and the history of popular culture were sometimes treated as if they were independent from (or even opposed to) the history of learned culture and the history of men. Microhistory and the history of everyday life were reactions against the study of grand social trends, society without a human face.

In all the cases I have quoted, it is now possible to observe a reaction against this reaction, a search for the centre. Historians of popular culture are increasingly concerned to describe and analyse the changing relations between the high and the low, 'the intersection of popular culture and the culture of educated people'.⁵⁹ Historians of women have widened their interests to include gender relations in general and the historical construction of masculinity as well as femininity.⁶⁰ The traditional opposition between events and structures is being replaced by a concern for their interrelationship, and a few historians are experimenting with narrative forms of analysis or analytical forms of narrative (see below, pp. 233 ff.).

Most important of all, perhaps, the long-standing opposition between political and non-political historians is finally dissolving. G. M. Trevelyan's notorious definition of social history as 'history with the politics left out' is now rejected by almost everyone. Instead we find concern with the social element in politics and the political element in society. On one side, political historians no longer confine themselves to high politics, to leaders, to elites. They discuss the geography and sociology of elections and 'the republic in the village'.⁶¹ They examine 'political cultures', the assumptions about politics which form part of everyday life but differ widely from one period or region to another. On the other side, society and culture are now viewed as arenas for decision-making, and historians discuss 'the politics of the family', 'the politics of language', or the ways in which ritual can express or even in some sense create power.⁶² The American historian Michael Kammen may well be right in his suggestion that the concept of 'culture', in its wide, anthropological sense, may serve as 'a possible basis' for the reintegration' of different approaches to history.⁶³

We are still a long way away from the 'total history' advocated by Braudel. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to believe that this goal could ever be attained--but a few more steps have been taken towards it.

NOTES

1 This essay owes a great deal to discussions with Raphael Samuel over many years; to Gwyn Prins and several generations of students at Emmanuel College Cambridge; and more recently to Nilo Odalia and the lively audience at my lectures at the Universidade Estadual de Sao Paulo at Araraquara in 1989.

2 For a famous (and debatable) example, see R. W. Fogel and S. Engerman, *Time on the Cross* (Boston, 1974). There is a judicious assessment of the position of economic history today in D. C. Coleman, *History and the Economic Past* (Oxford, 1987).

3 J. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party* (London, 1966).

4 Other varieties are surveyed in *What is History Today?* ed. J. Gardiner (London. 1988).

5 J. Le Goff, (ed.), *La nouvelle histoire* (Paris, 1978); J. Le Goff and P. Nora (eds), *Faire de l'histoire* (3 vols, Paris, 1974). Some of the essays in this collection are available in English: J. Le Goff and P. Nora, (eds), *Constructing*

***the Past* (Cambridge, 1985).**

6 T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (New York, 1961).

7 J. B. S. Haldane, *Everything has a History* (London, 1951).

8 P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* tr. R. Baldick (London, 1962); P. Aries, *The Hour of Our Death* tr. H. Weaver (London, 1981); M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, tr. R. Howard (London, 1967); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine* tr. B. Bray (New York, 1971); A. Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, translation (Leamington, 1986); G. Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness*, translation (Cambridge. 1988); J.-C. Schmitt, (ed.), *Gestures*, special issue, *History and Anthropology* 1 (1984); R. Bauman, *Let Your Words be Few* (Cambridge. 1984).

9 F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, tr. S. Reynolds, 2nd edn (2 vols, London 1972-3).

10 The examiner's name was Lewis Namier. R. Cobb. *The Police and the People*. (Oxford. 1970), p. 81.

11 E. Hoornaert et al., *Historia da Igreja no Brasil: ensaio de interpretacao a partir do povo*, Petropolis, 1977.

12 J. G. A. Pocock, 'The Concept of a Language', in *The Language of Political Theory*, (ed.) A. Pagden (Cambridge, 1987). Cf. D. Kelley, 'Horizons of Intellectual History', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987), pp. 143-69, and 'What is Happening to the History of Ideas?' *Journal of the History of Ideas?* *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51 (1990), pp. 3-25.

13 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford, 1946), pp. 213ff.

14 Braudel (1949)

15 Quoted in *Varieties of History*, ed. F. Stern (New York, 1956), p. 249.

16 I take the term from the famous Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, in his *Dialogic Imagination*, tr. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin, 1981), pp. xix, 49, 55, 263, 273. Cf. M. de Certeau. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, tr. B. Massumi (Minneapolis, 1986).

17 See almost any issue of the *History Workshop Journal*.

18 Cf. P. Burke, *The French Historical Revolution*, (Cambridge, 1990), p. 113.

19 J. H. Robinson, *The New History* (New York, 1912); cf. J. R. Pole, 'The New History and the Sense of Social Purpose in American Historical Writing' (1973, reprinted in his *Paths to the American Past* (New York, 1979, pp. 271-98).

20 L. Orr, 'The Revenge of Literature', *New Literary History* 18 (1986), pp. 1-22.

21 R. Fruin, 'De nieuwe historiographie', reprinted in his *Verspreide Geschriften* 9 (The Hague, 1904), pp. 410- 18.

22 M. Harbsmeier, 'World Histories before Domestication' *Culture and History* 5 (1989) pp. 93-131.

23 W. Alexander, *The History of Women* (London, 1779); C. Meiners, *Geschichte des weiblichen Geschlechts* (4 vols, Hanover, 1788-1800).

24 W. Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (New York, 1983); A. W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism* (Cambridge. 1986).

25 There are some sharp comments on this problem in E. Said, *Orientalism* (London 1978).

26 E. De Decca, *1930: o silencio dos vencidos* (Sao Paulo, 1981).

27 Cf. R. Porter, 'The Patient's View: Doing Medical History from Below', *Theory and Society* 14 (1985), pp. 175-98.

28 On the ordinary soldiers, see J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London, 1976).

29 J. Ozouf, (ed.), *Nous les maitres d'ecole* (Paris, 1967) examines the experience of elementary school-teachers c.1914.

30 L. Hunt, (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989).

31 F. Braudel, *Civilisation materielle et capitalisme* (Paris, 1967); revised ed. *Les structures du quotidien* (Paris, 1979); *The Structures of Everyday Life*, tr. M. Kochan (London, 1981). Cf. J. Kuczynski, *Geschichte des Alltags des Deutschen Volkes* (4 vols. Berlin, 1980-2).

32 M. de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien* (Paris, 1980); E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, 1959) H. Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (3 vols, Paris, 1946-81). Cf. F. Mackie, *The Status of Everyday Life* (London, 1985).

- 33 J. Lotman, 'The Poetics of Every day Behaviour in Russian Eighteenth-Century Culture', in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* ed. J. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskii (Ann Arbor, 1984), pp. 231-56. A fuller discussion of the problem of writing the history of cultural rules is in P. Burke, *Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 5ff, 21ff.
- 34 L. Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989)
- 35 N. Elias, 'Zum Begriff des Alltags' in *Materiellen zur Soziologie des Alltags*, ed. K. Hammerich and M. Klein (Opladen, 1978), pp. 22-9.
- 36 Cf. P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), chapter 3.
- 37 R. Samuel and P. Thompson, (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London, 1990).
- 38 P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* 1978; revised ed., Oxford, 1988); J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, tr. H.M. Wright (London, 1965) and *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985).
- 39 P. Smith, (ed.), *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge, 1976); A. Trachtenberg, 'Albums of War', *Representations* 9 (1985) pp. 1-32; J. Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst, 1988).
- 40 E. Panofsky, *Essays in Iconology* (New York, 1939); E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London, 1958). A more sceptical point of view is expressed by E. H. Gombrich, 'Aims and Limits of Iconology' in his *Symbolic Images* (London, 1972), pp. 1-22.
- 41 C. Ginzburg, 'Da Aby Warburg a E. H. Gombrich', *Studi medievali* 8 (1966) pp. 1015-65. His criticism was directed against Fritz Saxl in particular. On iconography for historians of mentalities see, M. Vovelle (ed.) *Iconographie et histoire des mentalites* (Aix, 1979).
- 42 K. Hudson, *The Archaeology of the Consumer Society* (London, 1983).
- 43 J. Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: the Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York, 1977).
- 44 M.I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History* (London, 1975), p. 101.
- 45 A. Appadurai, (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge, 1986).
- 46 W. Aydelotte, *Quantification in History* (Reading, Mass., 1971); A. Bogue,

***Clio and the Bitch Goddess: Quantification in American Political History* (Beverly Hills, 1983).**

47 P. Chaunu, 'Le quantitatif au 3e niveau' (1973: reprinted in his *Histoire quantitatif, histoire serielle* (Paris 1978).

48 G. Le Bras, *Etudes de sociologic religieuse* (2 vols, Paris 1955-6):, M. Vovelle, *Piete baroque et dechristianisation* (Paris, 1973).

49 G. Henningsen, 'El "Banco de datos" del Santo Oficio', *Boletin de la Real Academia de Historia* 174 (1977). pp. 547-70.

50 J. Mabillon, *De re diplomatica* (Paris, 1681).

51 C. Lloyd. *Explanation in Social History* (Oxford, 1986) offers a general survey. More accessible to non- philosophers is S. James, *The Content of Social Explanation* (Cambridge, 1984).

52 E. Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York, 1958); P. Gay, *Freud for Historians* (New York, 1985); D. Stannard, *Shrinking History* (New York, 1980).

53 R. G. L. Waite, *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler* (New York, 1977).

54 I take the distinction between 'intentionalists' and 'functionalists' from T. Mason, 'Intention and Explanation' in *The Fuhrer State, Myth and Reality*, ed. G. Hirschfeld and L. Kettenacker (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 23-40. My thanks to Ian Kershaw for bringing this article to my attention.

55 P. Lowenberg, 'The Psychohistorical Origins of the Nazi Youth Cohort' *American Historical Review* 76 (1971), pp. 1457-502.

56 J. Delumeau, *La peur en occident* (Paris, 1978); and *Rassurer et proteger* (Paris, 1989); P. N. and C. Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology', *American Historical Review* 90 (1986), pp. 813-36; C. Z. and P. N. Stearns, *Anger* (Chicago, 1986); T. Zeldin, *France 1848-1945* (2 vols, Oxford 1973-7).

57 P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, tr. R. Nice (Cambridge, 1977).

58 The argument is unusually explicit in G. Sider. *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History* (Cambridge and Paris, 1986).

59 A. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture*, tr. J. M. Bak and P. A Hollingsworth (Cambridge, 1988).

60 Editorial collective. 'Why Gender and History?' *Gender and History* 1 (1989) pp. 1-6.

61 M. Agulhon, *The Republic in the Village*, tr. J. Lloyd (Cambridge, 1982).

62 M. Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family*, tr. S. Matthews (Cambridge, 1983); O. Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791-1815* (Oxford, 1984); D. Cannadine and S. Price, (eds) *Rituals of Royalty* (Cambridge, 1987).

63 M.: Kammen, 'Extending the Reach of American Cultural History' *American Studies* 29 (1984), pp. 19-42.