

E. H. Gombrich, (with Peter Burke) Ernst Gombrich discusses the concept of cultural history with Peter Burke, *The Listener*, 27th December, Vol. 90, 1973, pp.881-883 [Trapp no.1973G.1]

BURKE: Cultural history has as many definitions as culture, and that's a notoriously vague concept. I think it might be convenient, though, to describe cultural history, briefly, as the history of the ideas and artefacts of a given social group, and of the place of those ideas and artefacts in that group's way of life. I think an interest in this kind of history goes back to the later 18th century, but the classic study of cultural history is surely Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, published in 1860. In it, he described the leading attitudes and values of the Renaissance man, with particular emphasis on his individualism. There have been a few outstanding cultural historians since Burckhardt's day, and one was a Dutchman, Johan Huizinga, best-known for his *Waning of the Middle Ages*, a study of the ideals of the upper classes in France and Flanders in the 14th and 15th centuries. Then there was the American historian, Arthur Lovejoy, and the German, Aby Warburg, who was interested, in particular, in the history of the Classical tradition. Warburg founded an institute for the study of cultural history: this institute is now in London and its present director is Sir Ernst Gombrich. Sir Ernst is well-known for the variety of his interests - from the psychology of perception to Neoplatonism. A few years ago, he published a lecture which we might very well take as our starting-point for tonight's discussion: *In Search of Cultural History*. It was a critique of Burckhardt and of Huizinga. Gombrich suggested that cultural history had been built on Hegelian foundations: that it had been built on Hegel's idea that an age or people had a spirit which expressed itself, or objectified itself, in art, in religion, in law and so on, and that these foundations had crumbled. The age doesn't have a spirit, and the argument that it does is circular: the spirit of the Renaissance is first derived from Renaissance art, and then it's used to explain Renaissance art. At the same time, he emphasised that we need cultural history so that we can continue to understand great works of art and great books. Sir Ernst, I'd like to say how strongly I agree with some of the points you made in your lecture and with two in particular. First, the need for cultural history - more than ever today, when, as you say, 'our own past is moving away from us at frightening speed'; and secondly, what you call the chastening insight that no culture can be mapped out in its entirety, while no element of this culture can be understood in isolation. But I'm a bit more optimistic about the future of cultural history than I think you are. I don't think that the cultural historian is condemned to be either a metaphysician or an antiquarian; Burckhardt and Huizinga escaped both dangers. I suppose the cultural historian does need to justify his existence to the specialist art historians, or to the historians of science. To do this, to justify his existence as a kind of historical general practitioner, I don't think he needs the spirit of the age. But he does need to argue that there are some connections between art and literature and religion in a given society. He needs a model, if you like, of mutual interaction between painters, poets and priests.

GOMBRICH: I entirely agree that there are some interactions. Nobody, I think, would ever doubt this. My first question is rather whether the cultural historian should be confined to the topics which you've just mentioned - art, literature and so on - and whether he should be afraid of being called an antiquarian. There are antiquarian topics which I personally find very interesting - the history of implements, the history of certain institutions - which tell us a lot about the way of life of the past, and which do not neatly fit into any of the categories you mentioned. I have the honour of being a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and I think that the antiquarian tradition, particularly in this country, has some very positive sides. If I may quote, not an antiquarian, but a great scientist, J. B. S. Haldane once wrote a book *Everything has a history*; and this seems a very good motto for a budding cultural historian.

BURKE: I think we need some concept like pattern or structure to describe what a traveller sees when he visits an alien culture: not only exotic details, but an alien whole - what you've described as different systems of reference or scales of value.

GOMBRICH: I agree that there are sometimes patterns, but they needn't necessarily be all-pervasive. But maybe every culture has its overriding distinctions. There are societies of the past, not always long extinct, where hierarchical patterns - who is on top and who is below - play a much greater part than happily is the case today. There are other cultures - for instance, the Indian one - where the idea of purity or pollution seems to be of overriding importance. In our society, for good or ill, a distinction between right and left, between progressives and reactionaries, plays a great role, and this is a distinction which a 14th-century Florentine wouldn't have understood. In other words, I don't doubt for a moment that in the history of ideas, or culture, there are distinctions which many members of the community share, and which are therefore important for those who study the civilisation. On the other hand, you would agree that even today, if you went into a village in this country and wanted to know whether a particular person felt that he was progressive or reactionary, you might find he had no answer to the question: but he would still belong to our culture.

BURKE: I don't know why you say 'even today', because I think in 20th-century Britain we live in a plurality of sub-cultures. It's not totally without analogy to the past, but there's probably a less obvious cultural pattern in Britain in the 20th century than there was, say, in Florence in the 15th.

GOMBRICH: Don't you think that is due to a difference in perspective, that we are simply closer to our own contemporaries? We feel variety more clearly because we know very little about those in the 14th century who didn't write or who didn't talk.

BURKE: I suppose what convinces me of this is the work of anthropologists, working in some tribal societies: where there might only be twenty to thirty thousand people in a given culture, yet they really do seem to share a wider range of attitudes and values than anything I've experienced in 20th-century Britain. I'd be inclined to situate 15th-century Florence somewhere in-between.

GOMBRICH: You may well be right. But I do suspect many cultural anthropologists of Hegelianism and holism. In other words, I believe that the patterns they describe for us are also partly a product of their own abstraction. We know - and some anthropologists have stressed this - that there are always outsiders, scoffers, who are not easily taken in by the religion of the tribe. The idea of a completely monolithic culture doesn't apply even to small tribal societies.

BURKE: But perhaps there is a difference between the culture with deviants and what we can only describe as a conglomeration of sub-cultures, which is something like what I think we have now. But can I move on, move back rather, to this question of analogies between art and literature. I wonder if we'd agree so much if we took a specific example. One that impressed me very much, maybe too much, was to discover that Grotius had written epigrams on bedpans, on a pair of skates. This calls up irresistibly the idea of the Dutch still-life: in fact, it was Huizinga who pointed out that this parallel existed. Isn't it tempting to say that Dutch culture had this particular fascination with objects in everyday life, which distinguished it to some extent from a number of other cultures?

GOMBRICH: I haven't read these epigrams by Grotius, but the collected works of Grotius are very large, and so are the works of other authors of the 17th century. It would be very surprising indeed if somewhere in these pages there wasn't some neat parallel to some aspect of Dutch painting. I don't think we should be too impressed by such parallels.

BURKE: This raises the enormous problem of how we decide whether the parallel is true, but not terribly significant, or whether it really matters very much. I suppose one of the criteria is going to be how often a particular pattern or parallel appears in a given culture. Do you think that there's a future for quantitative methods in culture history?

GOMBRICH: That depends very much on the problems you are trying to investigate. I think some of the quantitative analysis you have attempted in your book on the Italian Renaissance, and in other papers I have read, is certainly interesting, but, of course, the sample remains very small compared to the number of people who milled around in the cities you are describing. That is not your fault: it's a matter of the accident of preservation, which compels you to be satisfied with a very small section of the community. I always tell my students that history is like a Swiss cheese, full of holes. There are tremendous gaps in our knowledge, and the problem of how to fill these gaps will never be answered completely satisfactorily. Burckhardt or Huizinga were artists: their portraits of a given society or period were not scientific, they were based on intuition. And the impression I have of you, or of my friends, is also based on intuition and not on quantitative analysis. In fact, I would hardly know how to deal with quantitative analysis in trying to assess a character or a friend. In human situations, in other words, we must rely on the instrument we have, which is our individual sensibility. You get the feel of a period by reading a lot. You don't know everything that happened in the past, but you develop a sensitivity for what might not have happened, for what is impossible within that period. This intuition may be wrong. You may find when you turn the next page that what you thought was impossible in the 15th century did happen. But you have certain reasons for your confidence.

BURKE: In your lecture, you were most preoccupied with one kind of cultural history: as context or background to great books, great works of art. And I would want to say, though I doubt if you'd disagree with this, that there's another kind of cultural history which is also enormously important: the cultural history which deals with popular culture, which deals with what the French call the history of mentalities, with what ordinary people are thinking at a particular period, if this can be recovered. In this area there's rather more value in quantitative methods than if one's trying to work out the iconography of Botticelli.

GOMBRICH: I suppose that as far as such mentalities are recoverable or can even be described, you are entirely right, but I never quite know how this should be done. I couldn't really describe the mentality of the people in the street in which I live: this seems to me a very elusive thing. I myself have had to change cultures, as it were, and languages. I have a certain feel for the difference between the atmosphere of the Vienna in which I grew up and the atmosphere of the London in which I live, but when it comes to describing this feel, or pointing to particular instances, I find I'm rather at a loss. The only thing I can say is that what I read about pre-war Vienna always strikes me as wildly wrong, I just don't recognise the city in which I lived. It is a very difficult thing to pin down this atmosphere. These are features one takes for granted. They are part of the background. What methods one should use to bring them into the foreground, and how far one may falsify them by doing so, is one of the problems we are confronting.

BURKE: But still, when one reads texts written several centuries ago, one feels a need for some concept like mentality.

GOMBRICH: I would not deny that mentality is a useful term, but I think it is also true that people change their mentalities. I'm rather attracted by the sociological concept of role-playing in this respect. If you get into another group, you may feel that your mentality is changing: let us say, as an extreme example, the Army, or another group where everybody seems to act and to think and to speak in a

different way, and this reacts back on your own responses to a rather surprising degree. Language is the best guide to mentality in this way. I don't know if you know the very interesting results of Liam Hudson with schoolboys. In his book *Frames of Mind* he has shown that boys who consider themselves to be on the science side give dry matter-of-fact answers, which seem to prove that they are quite unimaginative. But if you tell them, 'Imagine that you are a poet and now answer,' they suddenly become very imaginative. The role is not the person, and we are all many persons. Years ago I took part in experiments about the interpretation of facial expressions in news photographs. This turned out to be almost impossible unless you were also given the context: but there was an exception. You easily recognised the expression which was 'put on' to proclaim a public role - as when a Nazi storm-trooper modelled his bearing on his Führer. Membership of such a movement stamps a man much more than, say, membership of a ping-pong club.

BURKE: May I ask you what you think of Freud? Burckhardt didn't have the advantage of being able to read Freud. Huizinga knew about him but didn't approve.

GOMBRICH: One can always learn a lot from a great man such as Freud, but the Swiss cheese problem comes in there, because we just do not know enough about individuals in the past for any attempt to psychoanalyse them to make sense.

BURKE: I'm sure we can't psychoanalyse the dead, and yet there's a problem once more. Historians can't do without some kind of psychology: you can't write about things in the past without attributing some kinds of motive. There Freud seems to me to be terribly helpful in suggesting far more alternative motivations, so that one can at least ask in dealing with, say, a messianic movement: to what extent are people identifying with a good father who is the leader of their movement, while the bad father is the leader of the other side, as Norman Cohn pointed out in describing millenarian movements of the 15th and 16th centuries.

GOMBRICH: Yes, though in this particular case, you haven't really explained the phenomenon very much by using Freudian terminology. But we have certainly learnt a great deal about human reactions from Freud and his disciples. Not all their intuitions have been borne out by subsequent research, but it is enough that some have.

BURKE: Sometimes it's a little bit more than description. An essay by Richard Hoffstadter on the paranoid style of American politics impressed me very much. He was talking about groups of Americans, anti-Masonic, anti-Catholic, and saying, first of all, that they believed in the conspiracy against the nation in the way that paranoiacs believe in conspiracies, and then going on to say that they attributed all sorts of things to the Masons, for example, such as sexual licence, and that this might very well be a projection of unconscious desires on their part.

GOMBRICH: Certainly this concept of projection, and even of the mechanisms of paranoia, are very illuminating, though it is an ironic moment to talk about a paranoid style which suspects conspiracies in American politics, because such conspiracies have been revealed to exist.

BURKE: I'm sure historians have often fallen into the trap of psychologism, of giving psychological explanations where social ones are more relevant. So perhaps I can ask you what you think of the social history of culture, and how far that's going to be a fruitful method in the future.

GOMBRICH: I'm not yet quite sure what you mean by the social history of culture. If you mean by that that you are interested in the distribution of certain cultural interests or activities, as I know you are, I

think it is indeed most important to clarify what section of the population was really involved. I recently had a discussion with some young painters who complained that the numerical proportion of people who actually ever look at paintings must be tremendously small, and I was sceptical. Thinking it over, I came to the conclusion that they were probably right, and that the proportion in percentages would be exiguous. This would be a social fact which it would be interesting to evaluate. We could easily do it because it happens to apply to the present rather than the past. But if you mean by social history some kind of centre of causation for all culture through the structure of society, I would be a little more sceptical. Certain attitudes, achievements, inventions, can be passed on from one type of society to another without thereby losing their value or their interest.

BURKE: I think there's yet another kind of social approach which strikes me as extremely valuable, and this is looking for the social function of objects and ideas. Here the historians are running a long way behind the anthropologists. There was a marvellous pioneering essay by Malinowski in, I think, 1930, about the stick. The stick used in the given culture may be a digging stick, a walking-stick, a sceptre: once you know what it's associated with, you've got a cultural context and can begin to understand the object. Shouldn't we be doing this with paintings? Asking whether a given Italian painting was intended as a form of magic, or whether it was just to delight the beholder, or whether, because it was a picture of a criminal, it had the function of some kind of 'wanted' poster?

GOMBRICH: I, too, am convinced that the most important task for the future of the history of art is to clarify this matter of function. But one of the things we have learnt from psychoanalysis is that what is successful in society will have many functions at the same time. The picture of the criminal was not so much a 'wanted' poster as a magic imprecation, and it may also have been a display of the skill of Leonardo or Botticelli, who actually painted criminals hanging on the wall of the town hall. Most things in society, including sticks, fulfil many functions. The number of specialised tools is very small, and art certainly belongs to those institutions which meet many demands at the same time.

BURKE: What's emerging from the discussion is a sense that cultural history does need some new methods, but that what we don't need is a totally new cultural history. One might compare cultural history itself to a cultural tradition: it assimilates innovations without changing fundamentally.

GOMBRICH: Yes, except that you may underrate the conservative character of our academic life. I've just read a book by Otto Koenig called *Kultur und Verhaltensforschung* in which the evolution of military uniforms is compared with that of certain markings and displays in the animal world. I never thought I would be interested in uniforms, but I was fascinated by the demonstration that many military insignia evolved from a utilitarian function. This is something I would like to teach in one form or another, but tell me tell me the course into which it would fit - given the academic tradition of departments. But here we come back to the whole problem of how one identifies a pattern. I think we are all agreed that unitary patterns, which explain everything through race or through society, through the processes of production, or through climate perhaps, are all very misleading. There must always be a great host of variables interacting.

BURKE: Yes. But we need a model for the interaction. We can't do without one, even though we may be condemned simply to invent one - one that deals less violently with the facts than others do.

GOMBRICH: Do we? In hydrodynamics there comes a state called turbulence, when no engineer would wish to predict where the different eddies will go. I learnt that when I worked on Leonardo's studies of water movements. You cannot map out in advance how exactly the currents of water in a

narrow will flow. And the same is probably true of the movements of the mind. There is such a thing as turbulence. But it doesn't mean that there are no currents.

Radio 3