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Through the bright eyes of Peter Burke

Cultural history and the changing world

Just in between speaking at a PhD-seminar on ‘cultural change’ and a public lecture titled: ‘The Republic of Letters: Four Phases, 1500-2000’, we had the privilege of meeting and talking to the remarkable and world-famous professor of cultural history, Peter Burke. The location of our encounter, one of the hidden rooms of the postmodern Harmony Building, contrasted enormously with the flair Burke brought with him from Cambridge and possibly Brazil. Although being retired for several years now, Burke certainly did not lose his alertness, openness, brightness and especially not his ability to entertain his listeners and himself. Before we could even finish our question or remark, he had his answer ready. Often clear-cut, nuanced if necessary and always illustrated with extensive examples.

Peter Burke, born in 1937 to an Irish catholic family in England, is arguably most well-known for his writings on the sociology of the Renaissance and the ‘fabrication’ of Louis XIV. Nevertheless in recent years he has extended his work to the nineteenth, twentieth and even the twenty-first century. We refrain from any further references to his biography, seeing that we are part of what Burke calls the ‘wikipedia-generation’. We discussed with Burke the position of cultural history, cultural identity and images as sources, while taking into account the everchanging world.

Cultural history

In 1978 you were interviewed on behalf of Groniek by Wessel Krul and Harry Perton and we actually want to start off by asking you one of the questions that they asked you then, to see whether your answer has changed over time. Back then you said to be mainly interested in the ideas of everyone. Does this interest still prevail?

No, it remains a strong interest, but nowadays I suppose I do not even see myself as working entirely on ideas anymore. In those days I had been

teaching intellectual history at [the University of] Sussex for a few years, but that meant not dealing much with material culture and since then I have been trying to deal as much with material culture as with ideas. And I am interested in the interaction between the ideas of the most original people and everybody else. So I think that it is the dialogue between, if you like, high culture and low culture or elite culture or popular culture, whatever we call it, that interests me.

In the same interview you stated that you do not see a real difference between the intellectual historian and the research historian, who goes to the archives while the intellectual historian very often does not. Do you still have the opinion that there is no such a difference?

It is not a difference in principle because it is perfectly possible to do intellectual history from archives, but it happens to be the case that many intellectual historians do not, because you can write a book about somebody by looking at their publications. Still, if they left letters and you are writing a biography of a historian or a physicist, it would truly be a mistake to not go and look at the letters. So, I think whatever your subject, you should look at the greatest variety of relevant sources that you can. But only when you have chosen the project, you can work out which sources you are going to have a look at. I do not think one should start by saying: 'I am going to work on printed sources' or 'I am going to work on manuscripts'. You should not exclude anything. I do not really think that when you have not worked in an archive you are not a real historian, but I knew that so many of my colleagues thought that.

Do you think it is necessary for the content of your research? Or is it only for the form?

No, it was really to stop my more conservative colleagues making remarks, but I do not know why I would care so much because most of my life I have not cared whether they made remarks or not. Also, I needed to find out by experience; did it make such a difference working in the archives?

In your research you have focused mainly on the early modern period, but in recent years you have extended your research. Why?

For forty-two years I was paid to teach the history of Europe (without Britain, because that is the way things are done in Britain) from 1500 to 1700. So I was teaching and that meant I had to read the latest books, partly



Professor Peter Burke. Source: <http://www.kb.nl/dossiers/fellowship/burke.jpg>.

just to tell my students what not to read. So I am in the early modern period and it is natural to go and do research in it. But then, suddenly, I am in retirement and I can do anything I would like to do. Moreover, I am afraid of repeating myself. I have been writing history for more than forty years and I thought: well, would it not be fun to do something a bit different? I had written this book about the social history of knowledge and I had stopped it in 1750, but I always remained curious: how did we get where we are now from 1750? Why would I not research this question? I am used to working on the social history of knowledge. I already did it, but this [the period after 1750] is unfamiliar material and maybe, just maybe, if you come from the past, from the seventeenth century instead of the present, maybe you see things about the modern period that other people do not... So, I am hoping this will be the case.

Will we see a book as a result at the end?

This year I mean to finish the draft, but it will be very rough. We will use 2011 to revise it and 2012, maybe, it will be out.

You have become quite an expert on the field of cultural history. We were wondering how you see the relationship between cultural history in the UK and on the European continent....

Well, I recently participated in quite an interesting volume and fortunately it was not a conference which means that the authors of the different national chapters never met. And so Poirrier, who is a twentieth century specialist, thought, he would edit a volume about national styles of cultural history. So, he asked me to write about Britain. I think there were about twelve essays in the volume. In Britain [there was] resistance [to cultural history] for quite a long time. So, I actually wrote this essay and I called it 'No culture please, we are British', saying that our social history was okay, but cultural history? People raised an eyebrow.

Toynbee, most importantly known for his analysis of the rise and fall of civilizations, was not very well received in Britain. Pieter Geyl questioned in a very well-known review article, why the British did not bother with Toynbee. The answer: he was thought of as too much up in the air, too theoretical. I mean: England is a relatively empiricist culture and history is a relatively empiricist discipline. This is to say that a British or English historian has followed this double dose of empiricism and comes out with suspicion of theory in a way that a French cultural historian cannot be

worried about; in fact the French historian might be worried by absence of theory in the works of British historians.

Contrary, Germans are happy with theory. You could start to divide Europe into cultural areas. When going to conferences and listening to how people making their point, I noticed that the Northwestern-Europeans stick together. This results in a divide with on the empiricists side the British, the Dutch and the Scandinavians and the Latins, the Germans and to some degree people speaking Slav language on the opposite side. So, there is an empiricism-theoreticism frontier to cross.

This was actually a question which we wanted to ask you later on, but do you see a change in this division between academic styles due to the higher exchange level of research in the European Union?

First of all, is there a change? Secondly, if so? Why? I do think there has been a change in my time. I think that the British are more open to theory and that they are more open to reading the works of people from other countries than they used to be. Why is this the case? Well, obviously it has got something to do with globalization. It has got something to do, more narrowly, with the European Union and with the educational exchanges that all this is part of. It has got something to do with changing communication: more British historians are being invited to give papers outside their country. This is happening much more and as a result attitudes and mentalities are changing.

Are we advancing to one European academic mentality?

Yes. Well, I think there is still a difference between the more empiricist and the more theoretical approaches. The frontier is not closed.

What we have seen in the last decades is that cultural history has been one of the most innovative disciplines within the science of history. You spoke about the limits of cultural history in earlier interviews, about colonizing and then integrating it into a broader history. Is this already the case?

I suppose I still believe in that ideal that only the French were bold enough to formulate as 'total history'. Because there are so many connections between human activities, we cannot cut ourselves up into the economic part, political part and cultural part. It is a mistake for historians to cut themselves off. You specialize because life is short and you want to do something a bit different from somebody else. However, while specializing, you do not want to lose

touch with the main body. This is the great thing. If cultural history is at the vanguard, it cannot lose touch with everything that is behind it.

Has this colonisation ended yet? Are we seeing the end of the colonizing part of cultural history?

It is certainly much less strong because cultural history is no longer the opposition. Now, it is really in danger of becoming orthodoxy in some areas, but maybe not so much in other areas. I think that if I was starting again, I would not choose the sixteenth or seventeenth century because so much of the interesting cultural history that has been done in the last few years has been in what still is ready for colonisation is nineteenth and twentieth century political history, which needs to be looked at from a cultural point of view, even from an anthropological point of view. So I would like to see a historical anthropology of the diplomatic service, of the law, of the army, of parliaments. It can be done for Britain; it could be done for most European countries.

But that is not what people are doing; people who go into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tend to have narrower interests, even those in France who say they are cultural historians. They are not asking those questions which their colleagues in the Middle Ages or the sixteenth century are asking. So there is an area which is still ripe for exploration and colonisation. Scholars are very thin on the ground; it would be relatively easy to go in and do something quite original, whereas it has got much harder in the early modern period if you want to adopt this approach.

Cultural identity in a globalizing world

In the academic world we have seen since the 1970s a turn to cultural history and in society the word culture has become omnipresent. On the other hand there is globalisation, Americanisation, or homogenisation of our world. Do you see a link between globalisation and the cultural turn in society and the academic world?

I see links and I see oppositions, because I think very often in the same period and in the same geographical area you can have opposite trends taking place; we see both globalisation and localisation. To some degree the localization is a reaction to and against globalisation. For example, some of these nationalist movements are regional or regionalist movements – when it is a small area it is hard to know which terms to use; why did former



Professor Peter Burke. Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/79/Peter_Burke.jpg.

Yugoslavia fragment into those bits? Why is it so important for the Croats to be different from the Slovenians on the one side and the Serbs on the other? Could it be that this is a reaction against the fear of homogenization? And one could focus this a bit more exactly, following a Dutch friend of mine, an anthropologist called Anton Blok, when he picked up this Freudian idea about the narcissism of small differences.¹

The added point that I think Bourdieu made, was that Freud just saw it as a permanent feature of life. Bourdieu and after him Anton, were saying that there were some moments when all this is much more acute, because you feel your identity is threatened. You feel that you may simply be swallowed up by this globalizing world and you protest. There are other reasons too, because, globalization is not only cultural, it is economics. So when in Millau, in the south of France, the farmers smash the windows of McDonalds, they were doing several different things. They were protesting against economic competition because McDonalds was bringing the meat for its hamburgers from somewhere else and not from their farms. At the same time they were saying something about French identity and that they did not want to be overwhelmed by American fast-food. So an individual incident can be explained in a number of different ways; I think complementary rather than contradictory.

To come back to your question, then, these big trends can be operative at the same time and there can even be an interaction between them; so something global is localized. This morning [at the PhD seminar] I was

1 Anton Blok, 'Het narcisme van kleine verschillen', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 24.2 (1997) 159-180.

giving an example that McDonalds itself, when it is exported to different countries becomes different at two levels. The owners of McDonalds know that you cannot succeed in every country in the world if you produce a homogenous product. In India they will make burgers out of lamb and there are even special names now for what they sell in Japan and what they sell in Uruguay and so on. The consumers, at another level, treat the experience of going to McDonalds in different ways. In some countries it is more middle class, in others it is fast-food for relatively poor people. In China or Japan or Brazil it is much more middle class and what they are interested in, you might say, is feeling modern. They are buying themselves a slice of modernity. They may not actually like the hamburger very much, but they feel this is what you are supposed to do because it is Western, it is modern. So ironically they are doing it because it is global, but in so doing they are localizing it.

But can we still speak of the culture or identity of one nation or one country?

We can even speak of smaller parts of people. Thanks to tourism being such a big industry selling a locality becomes important, which means exaggerating what makes Groningen different from whatever the place down the road is. So there is lots of that going on.

However on the other side you have multiculturalism. Let us turn to Brazil; in a former interview you mentioned that you hoped that more countries, especially in Europe, are going to look more like Brazil. Is this already happening and why do you want this?

Apart from anything else, there will be a lot less conflict and violence if people get more mixed up, which people are in Britain. There are interesting statistics showing that the numbers of so-called mixed marriages between people from different ethnic groups are increasing. That is a way to avoid ethnic conflict which otherwise seems to be a real danger in England, the Netherlands and elsewhere.

But there is always a price to pay; you always lose a part of your identity as a nation, as a group. How far will this go?

It is easier for a big country. The Brazilians have been defining their identity as mixed since the 1930s and they are unusual in the contemporary world. Brazil seems perfectly happy with the indefinite amounts of immigrants.

It is a huge country and lots of it is almost empty. Since about 1870 there was the old mix of people, which was Portuguese and Amerindian and western central African and on top of that came the Italian migration and the Japanese migration in quite large numbers, and lots of other groups. Immigration has not stopped. But I can see that in a small country, especially if it is faced with a large wave of immigrants in a short period people feel much more threatened. But once they are there it is hard to think of a better solution to the problem than intermarriage.

Have you heard of the discussion in the Netherlands about our identity? We seem to have an identity crisis in this country. Is it still possible for us to have our own identity in this world?

I believe in the resilience of cultural traditions. It takes a great deal to make changes in a cultural tradition, for better or worse. So in the foreseeable future – let us say the next fifty or sixty years – it seems unlikely that Dutch identity would or even could change very much. If you would ask what will it be in 300 years' time; then I do not know. It is not practical for either historians or sociologists to imagine a future which is a couple of generations away. We just do not know how the world will be after that. But, big cultural changes just do not happen fast.

You stated before, in the interview you had with Remieg Aerts, that a comparative approach and world history is needed to teach history. Have you seen an improvement in this since your statement?

I might still go along with that on the grounds that historians claim to be interested in what is specific to a certain place in time. You can never decide what is specific without making comparisons and contrasts with somewhere else. It is an empirical matter, what is going on in a certain place in time you cannot assume, you have to show it. But what we have to do, is to find a comparison that is not just pushing the experiences of the whole world into Western categories. I think we could learn a lot from the story of the attempt to compare feudalism.

This was a Western model of feudalism, which people tried to apply to a lot of countries and then found out that they did not fit very well since it was defined in a way that fitted Western history. Indeed Western history not so much as northern French history because to some degree Spain, England, Russia and Scandinavia did not fit the classical model of feudalism either. So ideally we should find ways of comparing which did

not originate in the West. I would say we could think in terms of rotation and take concepts from the history of different parts of the world and try them out on European history.

Are we doing this sufficiently at this point?

No, I think we can and should do it, but so far historically we have not done it very much.

Image as source

Let us turn to the last topic: historical sources. In your book Eyewitnessing,² you tried to get more attention from historians for images as sources. We were wondering why you think images are important as historical source and what can they add to the textual sources which have been used more often?

I think we should use every possible source. If you only rely on one source, you are running all sorts of risks. Different kinds of sources, if you ask the same questions to them, act as a sort of check upon the other. I am not sure that everything can be said in language and of course there are greater problems reading images than reading texts, but still we need to try to do it. Funnily enough some people read my book as a warning against using images. It says first of all, we have to do it [use images], but secondly we have to learn source criticism, which is precisely what we have learned to do when we read official documents. The thing is: the rules were laid down and everybody learned them while they were in graduate school, but we have not got an equivalent for criticizing images.

So I thought I might try my hand, but it is a very rash thing to do because after all, images have been produced for so many thousand years. I was quite amused when someone accused me of dealing with too short a time span, which is only twothousand years. But the problem with prehistoric art is that there is no other source to check against it, so there is always the danger of circularity. In an ideal situation you have more sources to use to check on each other so that is the deepest reason why I think that historians should take images on board.

Most historians still do not pay much attention to images as sources.

They are doing it more than they used to. I think it has something to do

2 Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing, The uses of images as historical sources* (Ithaca 2001).

with their greater exposure to images when they are younger. My generation did not watch television. The first time I saw a television was for the coronation of Queen Elisabeth the Second in 1953. I never watched it at home, because my parents did not have a television, so I was twenty-one and effectively never watched the screen. Professors of my generation are always complaining about how students do not read books anymore, do not know how to write and so on. But there is something positive about the television generations, which is that they are more image-sensitive. Once we did a test on historical magazines about how many images were in them. *Past & Present* had no illustrations until the 60s, occasional in the 70s, but every decade since then, there are more pictures. The same goes for *Annales*. You could try *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* and you could probably check in ten minutes and see if I am right or wrong. So I think now one can say that the younger historians are making more use of images. But if they are, it is absolutely crucial to find out how to criticise the sources.

Textual sources are sometimes considered to be more reliable than images.

Well the thing is that no source is completely reliable, because every source is a human product and they may generally not be answering historical questions anyway. So we always have to handle them with care. To say that you could be misled by a source does not mean that you should not use the source, but that you have to think harder how to use it. Or else we could not use any source.

Students do not get a lot of training in source criticism when it comes to images. Do you think that could be the reason why it still is not that big a part of research?

That would make sense, but the last five or six PhD students I had, almost all used pictures. It does seem to me that the barriers are breaking down. PhD students are less nervous than they used to be, some of them may even think that their examiners are less used to handling images than they are, meaning they have got the advantage. When you know you are going to have a two hour viva,³ you want to have some advantage over those older people who are examining you. Anyway, I have noticed a trend of more and more pictures being used, and not only as decoration, but as part of the argument. Which is the crucial thing that when you see illustrations in a PhD thesis. You want to satisfy yourself that the pictures ought to be there.

So you think your goal with Eyewitnessing of getting images more involved in research has succeeded?

Well I think it is coming. You can see this in the number of studies that have appeared since the book came out. I went to two conferences in the last couple of years which were about all this. At the conference I was trying to talk about if I would do the book exactly the same now and why? In the book I even formulated ten commandments for historians wanting to use images. The last rule is that there are not any rules. Before that I formulated nine rules.

3 Viva is an oral examination PhD-students have to do.