

The Subjects and Objects of Cultural History

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No true historical analysis is possible without the constant interpretation of meaning. In order to begin an analysis, there must already be a synthesis present in the mind. A conception of ordered coherence is an indispensable precondition even to the preliminary labor of digging and hewing.

—Johan Huizinga, “The Task of Cultural History”

While, as men of a definite epoch, we must inevitably pay our passive tribute to historical life, we must at the same time approach it in a spirit of contemplation.

—Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*

Cultural history conjures up different ideas about the objects of its study. One can look at art, dance, music, furniture, architecture, myth, religion, books, clothing, pottery, or jewelry to understand a facet of this enigmatic word we call “culture,” yet this would only provide a fragment of an otherwise greater whole. To these material objects we must also add the immaterial: theology, philosophy, literature, poetry, and politics, to name a few. Still, the material objects and immaterial objects (what we call the “thought”) of an epoch are not separate from each other: religion mirrors theology, music mirrors philosophy, art and architecture mirror both theology and philosophy. None of these areas of thought is self-sufficient, for they rely on the others to form themselves: politics and philosophy; theology and philosophy; art, literature, and philosophy—all of them have a symbiotic relationship with infinite permutations. What results is a web of connections between the material and immaterial elements of culture that demonstrate the intricacy, but also the complexity, of culture.

A reasonable implication from this statement is that to truly understand any one of these facets of culture we need to understand the others. Culture, after all, encompasses a totality. Cultural history, then, is not just the study of an individual feature of culture, helpful and important as that may be, but it aims to grasp a comprehensive understanding of a time and place. This is not to say that specific analysis is to be avoided within cultural history for the sake of broad-stroke analysis. Quite the contrary: it is only from specific study that we can come to infer things about the whole; yet, we are not often compelled to study a particle of history for its own sake, rather we have an idea of something greater in

our mind to which this particle speaks. Cultural history aims to teach about a time and place to others who are far removed from it. No task could be more difficult for the researcher and professor who is confronted with such an endeavor, but no task is greater at testing his skills as both researcher and professor while demanding humility and open-mindedness as he enters a foreign world from his own. And here we come to an unavoidable element: the irremovable presence of *meaning* within culture and history.

Meaning conveys the importance of culture because both are forms of understanding that frame something overarching within the context of something specific. Meaning, just as culture, must be personal, experiential, memorable, and palpable. When meaning and culture are preserved in an object, material or immaterial, we can only appreciate and understand it through an historical study that entails *contemplation*. As opposed to *thinking* or *analyzing*, contemplation taps into our imagination as much as it does our reasoning faculties and encourages an action that is seldom appreciated in academic study: sympathizing. In his 1904 work *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, a study of medieval art and philosophy in France, Henry Adams averred “Truth, indeed, may not exist; science avers it to be only a relation; but what men took for truth stares one everywhere in the eye and begs for sympathy.” A haunting line if ever I saw one.

What good is sympathy in our academic studies? Rousseau may have defended sympathy in politics, and sympathy may be a tenet of ethics that allows us to connect with another person, but what is the effect of sympathy in historical analysis? We must first understand that Adams was not referring to sympathy purely as an emotion provoked by pity. Adams is not asking us to lament the past. He is asking us to *understand* it. Understanding, as we now conceive of the word, means simply to know, to comprehend. It implies a type of epistemic awareness that originates in our internal minds’ processes. The etymology of the Old English *understandan* provides a slightly different definition that is based on our physical position. Rather than “beneath,” *under-* in Old English (derivative from Proto-Germanic) meant “between,” “amidst,” or “among”—like the Latin *inter* or Sanskrit *antar* which mean the same. In this sense, *understandan* means literally to “stand among” or “amidst” something. To *understand*, then, means *to stand in the midst of*. It is similar to the Greek verb *epistanai*, which means “to know” or “to understand” but literally means “to stand on.”

This literal translation from the etymology of the word *understand* clarifies Adams’ point. The process of *understanding* history is less about cognitive or critical reasoning, and more about positional *proximity* to the object (or objects) among which we seek to “stand.” It is an immersive endeavour. In other words, one cannot fully understand medieval art by reading books about it from the comforts of a San Francisco library. One must also *see* it in person to complete the picture. Of course, this is not always possible—many objects that we study no longer exist or are locked away in remote locations. Here, the concept of *standing among* and having *positional proximity* turns figurative but retains its values, hence the need for *contemplation and imagination* in cultural historical study. Seeking proximity to the objects of our study entails a frame of mind (facilitated through contemplation and imagination) that aims to discover and learn about the object without imposed judgment or presentist concerns; it entails respect for contextual conditions, and deep intention to make a concerted effort to familiarize oneself with those conditions almost as if to enter another paradigm, difficult as that may be. To wit, in Adams’ apt word choice, it entails *sympathy*.

Let us now move on to the subjects of cultural history. What kind of person undertakes this form of study? Thinking back on our college years, none of us have probably ever met a cultural historian. In truth, the wide-ranging demands of cultural history are less valued in an age of hyper-specialization within academia. More seriously, the *premises* of cultural history are doubted if not outright rejected. The idea that a time and place could have anything “comprehensive” about it is absurd, we’d say, for when we look at society all we can see is difference, variety, and plurality in all the elements, material and immaterial, mentioned above. We have various types of art, different religions, many poetic traditions, etc. The very thought of unity—of anything that ties our disparate lives and minds together—is considered an illusion.

Perhaps it is our conception of unity that renders it so illusory. Contextual particularity and an overarching unity in history seem like two elements that are difficult to reconcile. But the form of unity of which I speak in cultural history, and the one visible in the essays featured in this edition, pertains to the uni-

ty that arises from approaching historical studies sympathetically: it produces an attitude that constantly seeks synthesis because it views the world as connected across time and place. It therefore treats its cultural subject matter as an extension of our own humanity. Sympathy and understanding cultivate unity in their process, which is also a collective enterprise—the product of historians and those interested in reading their work. Synthesis, then, will never be absolute, but it will be a constant effort in the mind of the cultural historian that is worked and reworked over the years.

Historical study is pursued to help resolve our own issues. Cultural history still has these aims, though it circumvents the direct relation of presentist approaches to history by leaving the window for resolution open to future discovery whenever it may come, if it comes at all. While some historians study the past with the belief that in so doing we will immediately learn something of practical application for our own age, the cultural historian does not require immediate gratification for his study. Some of the best-known cultural historians, which include Jacob Burckhardt, Johan Huizinga, Fustel de Coulanges, and Henry Adams, lack a direct normative agenda in their works. Of course, we must acknowledge that their interest and desire to go back in time, as it were, and understand a foreign age is not a casual and involuntary choice. Burckhardt studied Renaissance Italy, Huizinga the Middle Ages in France and the Netherlands, de Coulanges ancient Rome and Athens, and Adams the Middle Ages in France. These are not random or accidental choices. All these thinkers had their reason to study the periods of their choosing; there were questions pressing on their minds that led them to their studies. Many of these questions and reasons, moreover, had a relation to their present day, for it is said that if we want to understand ourselves, we must understand our past. But cultural historians warn against hastily drawing a linear relationship between our studies of the past and the present day. Consider de Coulanges' statement in the introduction to his magnum opus, *The Ancient City* (1864/2022, 18-19):

Our current forms of education, which teach us to live from childhood among stories of the Greeks and Romans, lead us to compare ourselves to them constantly, to judge their history according to ours, and to explain our revolutions by theirs... We have difficulty considering them foreign. Almost always we see *us* in *them*... Nothing in modern times looks like them. Nothing in the future will resemble them. To explore the patterns by which these societies were governed is to see that the same patterns can no longer govern humanity... If the patterns of human association are no longer what they were in antiquity, this because something has changed in people.

From this text we can see how cultural history often entwines itself with the history of ideas. To understand the “foreignness” of the past, we must look at the changes in people’s minds that render it foreign in the first place. We must study ideas in their own paradigm, as de Coulanges tells us in an argument not dissimilar to Thomas Kuhn’s idea of incommensurability between ages.

Now, I am aware there might be an apparent contradiction with what I’ve written so far. If synthesis and unity is so central to cultural history, why cite a historian who appears to be saying the exact opposite? Yes, all history is foreign, and studying it properly requires understanding its fundamental difference from our own age. That said, this distance that we must keep between ourselves and the times we study does not inhibit our immersion to *understand* (stand amidst) their different paradigm; in fact, it makes for a more effective immersion because recognizing the fundamental differences between another age and ours is what allows us to enter the mind of another era without carrying the biases from our own. Indeed, this is precisely what de Coulanges does in his study of religion and the family in ancient Greece and Rome. The synthesis and unity that emerges because of this distance—not despite it—is the natural consequence of closely studying any time period with sympathy.

The question of unity in history is not yet fully answered. The final component of this concept of unity is elucidated by Friedrich Nietzsche. Although a critic of cultural history, we must turn to him to understand this final component. Nietzsche’s famous essay, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874) in his *Untimely Meditations*. Nietzsche describes most history as “a costly superfluity and luxury”

that deserves our hatred. Juxtaposing *history* with *life*—what has to do with the past with what has to do with the present and future—Nietzsche’s essay criticizes two main forms of history, monumental and antiquarian, for their tendency to inhibit cultural development in the present through their emphasis on the past. Writing almost a decade after Fustel de Coulanges, Nietzsche (1997, 61) is identifying a continuing 19th century concern that revolves around questions over the use of history, the acquisition of historical knowledge, and the proper method for historical study. The curse of remembrance that he identifies throughout his essay, which beckons us to look to the past as a source of knowledge, is an affliction that needs to be overcome:

Man...braces him self against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden which he can sometimes appear to disown and which in traffic with his fellow men he is only too glad to disown, so as to excite their envy.

Nietzsche’s criticism of historical knowledge is connected to culture. Of the three types of historical studies he identifies—monumental, antiquarian, and critical—the first two inhibit the development and creation of new culture because, so he argues, they direct our attention to culture in the past. Critical history, instead, offers a way out of this predicament. Although he is writing largely in response to Hegel’s philosophy of history, Nietzsche manages to raise several important questions in this essay: can an excessive attention to the past (if there is even such a thing) inhibit creation and development in the present? Can a culture ever stifle or remain idle? One of Nietzsche’s criticisms against the German culture of his day is that it lacked vigor because it was so caught up in the past.

Nietzsche’s piercing questions can be addressed by the two cultural historians whose epigraphs frame this introduction, Jacob Burckhardt and Johan Huizinga. Nietzsche actually had correspondence with Burckhardt, which reveals his complex relationship with the Swiss historian. Nietzsche viewed Burckhardt as the paradigmatic historian, calling him “*unser grosser grösster Lehrer*”—our great greatest teacher (Large 2000). He attended Burckhardt’s lectures, and wrote about him in his *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* when he describes a historian as “a man ... who, in contrast to the metaphysicians, is happy to harbor in himself, not ‘an immortal soul,’ but many mortal souls” (quoted in Large 2000, 6). Here, Nietzsche understands the role of the cultural historian not as someone who seeks something transcendent or immortal in history, but is rather capable of capturing, preserving, and presenting that which is mortal across the ages. In another work, *David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer* (1873), Nietzsche wrote that “Culture is, above all, unity of style in all the expressions of the life of a people” (quoted in Large 2000, 12). Large rightly summarizes this statement:

Culture, in other words, is an organic, collective work of art, and this, I would argue, is the concept of culture (*Kultur als Kunstwerk*) that Nietzsche ‘inherits’ from Burckhardt. Strictly speaking, culture is a meta-artwork that encompasses all the otherwise disparate art forms and transcends them. Culture, if you like, is—like life itself—an emergent property, except that it is not a property; culture is not something you have or can acquire, like a material possession, it is something you are (and without knowing it; a self-reflexive culture is a contradiction in terms). (Large 2000, 12-13).

The unity that arises from historical studies of culture is the unity that the historian can identify as the synthesis of a culture’s many visual and intellectual (material and immaterial) objects. For this reason, the concept of cultural history in Burckhardt and Adams’ works has been described as “a commitment to a method of research that presumes that there is an interconnectedness that binds together the personalities, events, monuments, and so forth, of a certain time and place” (Holly 1988, 210). We can certainly add Huizinga to this list of people who understood cultural history in this way. Huizinga’s own essay “The Task

of Cultural History,” published in 1929, makes two key observations. One, that historical study requires interdisciplinary knowledge: “in the historical discipline, with its necessarily unsystematical character, currents in thoughts are constantly moving in divergent directions. Only a very few of all these studies seem to point toward a central core of knowledge” (Huizinga 2018, 4). It also requires collaboration between historians, for no one is self-sufficient: “In every intellectual period there is an actual homogeneity of historical thought, though that homogeneity is not realized in the brain of any one thinker” (Huizinga 2018, 8).

From these two observations, Huizinga is able to offer a direct refutation of Nietzsche’s critique of cultural history that is best read in his own words:

If, then, one recognizes the existence of a discipline of history as an objective spirit, a form of understanding the world which exists only in the minds of countless persons taken together, and of which even the greatest scholar has, to speak in the language of the old mystics, received “only a spark” that leads to a heartening consequence. Such a recognition implies the rehabilitation of the antiquarian interest spurned disdainfully by Nietzsche as an inferior form of history. The direct, spontaneous, naïve zeal for antiquated things of earlier days which animates the dilettante of local history and the genealogist is not only a primary form of the urge to historical knowledge but also a full-bodied one. It is the impulse toward the past.

You see, while Nietzsche describes these three forms of historical studies as separate methods or attitudes towards history, Huizinga understands that they are connected and, perhaps more importantly, that they *build on one another*. What Nietzsche dismisses as insignificant “antiquarian” history is in reality the “primary form of the urge to historical knowledge,” which is “the impulse toward the past.” All historians begin with some form of interest that we can label as antiquarian insofar as it takes place in the past and its relevance for our own times is unclear. However, Huizinga (2018, 12) does agree with Nietzsche that historical study as pure re-creation of the past is not possible, nor is it salutary. Consider the following remarks by Huizinga:

Even the best and most complete tradition is in itself amorphous and mute. It only yields history once questions have been put to it. And it is not enough of a question to approach it with a general desire to know *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, how it really was. Ranke’s famous phrase—misunderstood and misused, for it has been lifted out of the context in which the master used it in passing and has been interpreted as an adage—has obtained the tone of a program, which from time to time threatens us to reduce it to a false slogan for sterile historical research...In the same way, the *es* in *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, if it is to have “meaning,” must be determined beforehand by a conception of a certain historical and logical unity one is attempting to delineate more precisely. That unity can never lie in an arbitrary slice of past reality itself. The mind selects from tradition certain elements it synthesizes into a historically coherent image, which was not realized in the past as it was lived.

Huizinga and Nietzsche would both be considered critics of any hyper contextualist historical study that would produce “sterile” historical research. However, Huizinga is not espousing the type of critical history that Nietzsche proposes as the solution for the proper use of history. The type of critical history that Nietzsche describes is meant to take the past, deconstruct it—through the dividing and choosing of elements that are “useful” versus “not”—and bring it to contemporary relevance through this deconstruction. Instead, Huizinga agrees with Ranke’s misunderstood adage about the purpose of history being rooted in the desire to know “how it really was” in a certain time and place, but he emphasizes the importance of the “it”—of the object—that we are aiming to study. In order for this object to have *meaning*, we must engage in this historical study with a preconceived notion, even if imprecise, of some form of unity in history that guides and orients our thinking about the past. If we are too contextualist, Huizinga adds in the penulti-

mate sentence, then we lose sight of the biggest picture, since “unity can never lie in an arbitrary slice of past reality itself.” The last sentence in Huizinga’s observation above mimics Burckhardt’s idea of culture as a work of art (*Kunstwerk*) when he writes that our minds select certain elements from tradition—form history—and synthesizes them into “a historically coherent image.” Huizinga tells us, moreover, that the validity of such a process lies in the fact that no age can be so self-aware as to know the things that tie it together; it is the job of historians who come after those ages to look back and synthesize the seemingly disparate facts of our ages; just as we have done with Classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance—and *continue to do*. Without a doubt, the same will be done with our own age.

Given the importance of cultural history, why focus on its political lessons for this edition? Burckhardt considered culture to be one of the three great powers of civilizations, alongside the state and religion (Burckhardt 1979). Culture, in other words, often finds itself connected to questions of politics. Those who study the history of political thought, as I do, will know well that the entire canon of our field is replete with thinkers whose thought often considers culture and religion as inextricable elements of anything we might call “political.” Any sound political thinker must be aware of the culture in which he or she is writing, whether they affirm it or whether they criticize it. Huizinga raised the cultural over the political, however, insofar as “it concentrates on deeper, general themes” (Huizinga 2018). He contrasts cultural history to political and economic history, for example, because “the state and commerce exist as configurations, but also in their details. Culture exists only as a configuration. The details of cultural history belong to the realm of morals, customs, folklore, antiquities, and easily degenerate into curios” (Huizinga 2018, 14). This is the reason why culture must always be studied with some preconception of synthesis or unity. In showcasing several excellent essays that discuss cultural history in relation to political lessons that we can draw from it, it is my hope that the importance of culture will protrude by virtue of its relevance to the pressing political questions that all of these papers raise. At the very least, if cultural history seems too broad and foreign of a field, perhaps opening the door through its connection to political thought will beckon some curious readers.

The papers featured in this guest edition discuss or treat the topic of cultural history and its connection to political thought in different ways. Ferenc Hörcher’s piece, “Cultural History as Political Thought: Johan Huizinga’s Engagement with the Dutch Townscape” provides a helpful discussion of Huizinga’s relationship to cultural history and expands on what has already been said in this introduction. Hörcher tells us from the outset that cultural history’s connection to political thought is often overlooked; he focuses on the role of the Dutch cityscape in Huizinga’s historical writing to show how his political thinking was significantly shaped by his cultural studies. Something as prevalent as the spaces that we inhabit daily—their layout, aesthetic, function, etc.—shape our own thinking and, the more we reflect on them, offer us an opportunity to understand our relationship to them. Hörcher also elaborates on a facet of Huizinga that we often seek to explain as historians or students of major figures: that is, the connection or link between a figure’s professional studies and their concerns about the political events of their time. Is there any connection between Huizinga’s work on the Middle Ages and the politics of his own day? Hörcher’s paper provides several observations about Huizinga’s life that help to answer this question, which also expand the scope of the purpose of cultural history.

Luke Phillips’ essay, “The Unionist Paradigm and the American Civil Religion: Two Heuristics on American Nationhood in Historical Imagination” brings the conversation of cultural history to the United States context. The question of identifying the subjects and objects of cultural history helps Phillips consider some pressing questions in modern history that are still relevant to our own politics and socio-cultural debates: What is a nation? What is nationhood? What does it mean to identify the “culture” of a nation, and what are the implications? Using the United States as a prime example of the complexities and challenges of answering such questions, Phillips points to American history and its influence on American identity to posit an answer which requires understanding the role of cultural history for the ongoing process of identifying the evolving process of “nationhood” and the culture within it.

The topic of nationalism is also treated by Tomáš Nikodym in the context of the Czech Republic. He posits that the persistence of Czech nationalism can be explained by its relationship to cultural history. Nikodym also raises an important point through his treatment of the connection between culture and nationalism: culture narrowly understood as material products eventually develop into culture broadly understood as the way of life of a nation. The relationship between “narrow” culture and “broad” culture, then, is one of close dependence. In other words, similar to Huizinga’s argument, Nikodym’s paper articulates why historians must pay attention to the weight of cultural objects like folk art, literature, science, etc., to understand their bearing on the more abstract elements of national culture that we describe as “values” or “habits” and “traditions”—concepts that are much more difficult to define if we don’t understand their components.

An observation of Phillips and Nikodym’s essays is in order: it is not a coincidence, it seems to me, that a call for papers on the topic of “cultural history and its political lessons” should produce papers on the topic of nationalism, for nationalism is a term riddled with cultural and political associations whose connotations we cannot yet fully agree on. Nations and nationhood, both essential components of identity, are connected to culture and history, but the point at which they become connected to a “political” stance—the sovereignty of a nation, the right to self-determination of peoples, the prioritization of the nation over other places, etc.—it becomes a topic that taints our understanding of culture by politicizing it. Both papers treat this predicament that is the *politicization of culture*—which is distinct from *using culture to elucidate politics*—with necessary nuance. There is an important distinction to be made here, and all of the papers in this edition positively convey the proper side of this distinction, which is that there is a fundamental difference between studying the past *politically* (i.e., intentionally framing our historical and cultural study around a political question) and recognizing the *political significance* of studying the past (i.e., studying the past for its own sake without imposing any of our own political biases, and using the information we have to deepen our own understanding of politics).

Which leads us to the final featured essay in this edition. Ishaan Jajodia’s essay, “Artefacts of Culture: The Constitutional Theories of Edmund Burke and Benjamin Disraeli” looks at the ways in which the English constitution, as a particular cultural artefact, and its theoretical strand of constitutionalism prioritize the role of culture and history in politics in a way that other intellectual traditions like Enlightenment rationalism and utilitarianism do not. The abstract rights and principles of these other intellectual traditions, Jajodia argues, “disavow the impact of the particular development of politics and their peoples.” He wits, “one cannot understand the constitution of a country without recourse to the constitution of its peoples, and thus cultural history becomes more than a simple flourish on top of long political struggle.” Central to Jajodia’s analysis is the view that culture turns into something politically concrete, such as a constitution, that embodies those traditions. Jajodia’s essay provides an additional account, still connected to the other three papers, of how culture impacts politics: It is not just the effect that culture has on our minds that shapes how we think about political questions, but it is also the case that culture is *already* embedded in many of our political institutions and documents in ways that we cannot ignore or ever fully remove from them.

All of these papers posit distinct, though connected, answers to the questions that this edition set out to explore: How does the study of cultural history help us “politically”? How practical are the lessons that reading cultural history imparts? Or, is it the case that cultural history serves no purpose beyond sustaining a collective recollection of a bygone age? It was a pleasure to engage with such different essays and to now put them in conversation with each other on this topic of cultural history and its political lessons. Most important are the readers, whose interest in this topic does not go unappreciated.

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