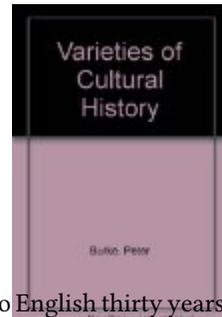


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Peter Burke. *Varieties of Cultural History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997. x + 246 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8492-6; \$57.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3491-4.

Reviewed by Stanislaw G. Pugliese (Hofstra University)
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In the last generation a revolution has occurred in cultural history at least as momentous as the one generated by the Swiss, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Dutch, Johan Huizinga. Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) and Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919; better known by its previous translated title, *Waning of the Middle Ages*) defined a discipline separating cultural history from intellectual history, or the "history of ideas." Raymond Williams, Lynne Hunt, Robert Darnton, Jacques Le Goff, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Zemon Davis and Roger Chartier, among others, can be credited with transforming cultural history. It is no coincidence that many of these scholars are French or work with French history. Students of Italian history are no doubt indebted to Carlo Ginzburg in Italy and John Davis in the United States for their fine work. For thirty years, Peter Burke has been part of this transformation and now scholars recognize that his work has been critical in shaping our views of Renaissance and early modern Italy. Professor of Cultural History at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, his *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy* appeared first in 1972 and *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* followed six years later. Perhaps his most groundbreaking work has been *Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*, published in 1987 with the significant subtitle, "Essays on Perception and Communication." This reflected the turn to cultural anthropology that has since distinguished the best cultural history. The work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), especially his methodology of "thick description," was to have a profound effect on cultural historians. No less significant was an interest in Freud and literary theory; the Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's revolutionary interpretation of Rabelais and

the carnivalesque was translated into English thirty years ago and still functions as a model and strong attraction for scholars.

Varieties of Cultural History is a collection of twelve essays, seven of which have already appeared in other publications, but are revised here. Burke is honest enough to confess in the Preface that the classical model exemplified by Burckhardt and Huizinga has not been replaced by "any new orthodoxy." This is not a disadvantage; the proliferation of various methodologies lends cultural history its exciting tension. While there may be several "schools," none can claim hegemony over the field. These essays are a combination of case studies and theoretical reflections on the craft. Burke reveals a double strategy with a twist: "I shall try to tell a story [the history of cultural history] and at the same time reflect on it and even, perhaps, to undermine it" (p. 3).

Chapter One, "Origins of Cultural History," is the broadest and functions well as an introduction; it is, in effect, a genealogy of cultural history from the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vivre through Francis Bacon, Voltaire, and a whole host of erudite scholars. Burke insists that "cultural history has no essence. It can only be defined in terms of its own history" (p. 1). This is followed by two chapters on the cultural history of dreams and history as social memory, respectively.

Burke argues for a cultural history of dreaming, as opposed to a history of dream interpretation. Certain cultures produce certain dreams and although the interpretation of the manifest content of the dream should be left to psychologists, historians should make note and use of dreams. Dreams often support or reflect the myths (in the Sorelian sense) of a culture; hence they are valuable pieces of evidence in the historian's attempt to recon-

struct a Weltanschauung. “History as Social Memory” reflects on how the relationship between the two has been fundamentally reshaped in the last two decades. We now are much more sensitive to the play of memory and how it can easily distort past events; no one now conceives of the relationship between the two as simple reflection, least of all oral historians. The preservation, transmission and use (or abuse) of social memory is no longer in the hands of a supposedly rigorous and highly-trained class of professional historians; instead, the explosion of information and media in the last fifty years has rendered everyone a potential commentator on the past. Historians must also be aware of a selective use of “social amnesia” as is all-too-evident in Vichy France, Nazi Germany, and the former Soviet bloc.

Following these three chapters are five case-studies devoted to early modern Italy. Readers will be surprised to learn that there is a long tradition of studying the “language of the gesture” in early modern Italy. Likewise the comic tradition has also generated considerable commentary. Cross-cultural (mis)-interpretations abound: particularly humorous is the manner in which proper, north European Protestants despised the wildly gesticulating Italian. The stereotype of the Neapolitan who is amazingly expressive with his hands rests on a real cultural difference. In Italy, even practical jokes, pranks, tricks and antics could be considered works of art or at least artfully contrived, and the onlookers were expected

to acknowledge that fact. Two other chapters are devoted to cultural impressions of the Milanese bourgeoisie and the difference between public and private spheres in Genoa. Burke also devotes some attention to the interplay between popular and learned culture in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy. No one can any longer be surprised to learn that popular culture not only gleaned from the learned traditions, but that learned culture was just as likely to “borrow” from popular culture.

“Chivalry in the New World” and “The Translation of Culture” are devoted to the transplanting of European traditions in the Americas. Chivalry and Carnival are particularly fertile terrain for this project and Burke shows how those practices were transformed by their encounter with African and American traditions.

The book ends with two theoretical pieces: one devoted to the “mentalities” school and the other an ambitious attempt to present an overview of the current state of scholarship. In the latter, Burke is careful enough not to fall between two extremes: one that holds that culture is necessarily fragmented; the other that culture is homogeneous. Revealingly, he leaves the last word to Bakhtin who insisted that cultural history must be “polyphonic.”

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