

Introduction

The New Cultural History and Urban History: Intersections

Alan Gordon

The theme of this issue of the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* is "The New Cultural History and Urban History," a theme intended to answer a question about the place of the city in a recent trend in historical research. The aim of this issue is to demonstrate where the new cultural history offers insights for urban history. The articles in this issue demonstrate this potential, each in its own way. Yet, at the same time, each also suggests to cultural historians that studies grounded in the urban past help illuminate many of the broader questions that interest them. Among the basic assumptions underlying this issue is the belief that, for much of Western civilization in the 20th century, the city has been more than a scene for cultural expression. That is, the culture of modernity, a culture involving rapid social change, commodification, mass society, and fragmentation, did not just develop *in* the city. It is a culture of the city. This, I suggest, has been a missing element in the explosion of new research into such topics as historical memory, consumerism, and ritual, grouped together loosely as the "New Cultural History."¹

Of course, it is difficult to nail a definition of the new cultural history to the wall. The new cultural history is neither a school nor a movement. It is not a single approach and it does not encapsulate a specific methodology. Rather, the new cultural history represents a change in focus from looking for historical causation to exploring the meanings of things and events. It examines culture as a series of signifiers and, following Clifford Geertz, claims "the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."² New cultural historians, then, see their work as a way of understanding the past that emphasizes the ways that groups and individuals, in competition with one another, construct the meanings that guide their interpretations of the material world. Moreover, competition suggests that meaning is constructed in a plurality of ways and that there can be more than one meaning ascribed to the same event. No cultural event or artifact in this understanding has a monolithic meaning. This is an understanding of history that celebrates plurality within human societies and therefore embraces many different views of culture.

None of this suggests, as François Furet has proposed, that the new cultural history is nothing more than an unending pursuit of new topics.³ True, new cultural historians have opened the door to an increasing array of subjects for historical research. And some might complain that this has simply been a scramble to find new cultural practices to describe, be they cat massacres, carnivals, commemorations, or snacking. But behind this lies one of the great insights of the new cultural history: the banal, the everyday experience, the day-to-day actions of ordinary people, are seen not only as historically constructed, but as important to the understanding of power relations in human societies. Culture is an integral part of struggle and power. Following from the pioneering works of Michel Foucault, historians have begun to look for hidden clues to power relationships in the ways that categories of knowledge are constructed. The

new cultural history pushes Foucault's interest in prisons and asylums further into the mainstream of society, and develops his insights in an increasingly historicized context. Thus, the new cultural history is new in the sense that it represents a different way of thinking about certain questions. In particular, it questions power relationships as they are played out in everyday lives, usually of everyday people.

While it is difficult to pin down a single definition of the new cultural history, it is even harder to find a single origin for this turn in cultural history. Anthropologists, sociologists, literary theorists, architectural historians, Annalists, Marxists, Gramscians, and more can take credit (or accept blame) for the development of cultural history in the past decade and more. Much as it has an eclectic understanding of "culture" and the methodologies of historical study, this way of seeing the past takes inspiration from an eclectic set of precursors. It is now almost trite to trace the origins of the cultural turn to the Annales school, especially over a decade after Lynn Hunt's introduction to *The New Cultural History* drew that link for us.⁴ A more precise lineage would tie the new cultural history to the third generation of Annalists who came into their own in the 1970s, and whose conscious rejection of Fernand Braudel's *histoire totale* favoured the unusual and the marginal in recognition of the fragmentation of historical knowledge. This third generation, including Michel Vovelle, the later Philippe Ariès, and especially Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, began to focus increasingly on the idea of *mentalités*, a notion rooted in the origins of the Annales school. The founding Annalists, Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, in turn examined the possibilities of unbelief in the 16th century and belief in the miraculous, attempting to understand the relationships between the economy, society, and mass belief systems.⁵ Some might protest that *mentalité* is not uniquely Annaliste, but can be traced through the earlier works of Johan Huizinga and even Jacob Burckhardt.⁶ *Mentalité* itself offers no definition that will be satisfactory to everyone. However, for the new cultural history, it suggests focus on collective, rather than individual attitudes, the thought of ordinary people as well as educated people, and the structures of belief, the study of how people think about subjects as much as what they think about them. *Mentalité* is as much a Durkheimian notion as it is an Annaliste one.

It is perhaps ironic that, in the days of Febvre and Bloch, Marxist scholars rejected *mentalités*, complaining that they appeared to be unconnected to material reality. Following Marx directly led some to conclude that culture was but "superstructure," grafted on to the mode of production, twice removed. Yet, for the English-speaking world, the new cultural history owes its emergence to the work of ex-Marxists, neo-Marxists, or at the very least scholars who found some aspects of Marxism attractive. The new social history of the 1960s and 1970s, through influential journals such as *Past and Present*, introduced many of these Continental concepts to the English-speaking world. For traditionalists, this might seem odd. The new cultural history