

The past: cultural history/cultural memory

Cultural studies has an even more complicated relation to history than it does to literary studies, sociology or anthropology. Officially, it focusses on contemporary culture, unlike cultural history. Yet if that distinction were solid then it would limit cultural studies' interest in history to the way in which traces and representations of the past enter contemporary culture. Not an interest in witches as they were for instance, but in the way in which witchcraft circulates and is treated today and especially in today's popular culture. While cultural studies often does focus on the past in these terms, such an understanding is a little simplistic. After all, as soon as we want to explain the current state of things we are going to be tempted to tell stories about the past which might reveal how the contemporary came to be the way it is. Such stories (of which there are many in this book) promise more than they can deliver since history never does quite explain the contemporary: it is always too selective and partial for that. But historical narratives and explanations, however reductive, are much better than no sense of the past at all.

Then too, the 'contemporary' is not an unambiguous concept, as we shall see in more detail in section 2.2. Where precisely does the past (cultural history) end and the present (cultural studies) begin? That's a sneakily difficult question, which undoes cultural studies' borders. Furthermore, the various categories that we use to organise academic and non-academic thought about, and representations of, the past are always arbitrary, often implicitly political and cannot be taken as given for critical thought – least of all the concept of 'progress' which overhangs all modern thought about history. Thus this section is concerned to help clarify conceptualisations of the past as well as to provide a brief overview of the past's life in the present.

At one level the present is nothing except an expression of the past – nothing comes from nothing after all, and once we rule God and chance out of our conceptual frame-work, everything is enabled by, and a realisation of, past structures. Ordinary life is saturated in the past: to take an example, think of cooking and food and the ways they are entangled in memory. A recipe is handed down across generations, indelibly associated with a grandmother maybe; table manners structure intergenerational continuities too; a restaurant chain is associated with a particular phase of a life – a work lunch break at an old job say; a food you dislike recalls a time you were forced to eat it by your parents; an ex-lover's favourite food reminds you of him; a Smartie (or an M&M) takes you back to when you were a kid and it was your most favourite thing in the world; the chocolate in that sweet (or candy) is produced in a blood-soaked industry that has helped shape the world and in particular the history of colonisation. And so on.

Every action carries a trace of the past – an unconscious memory of it even. A great deal of contemporary theory analyses the way that the past is carried forward unknowingly into the present. With individuals, one word we use to talk about the unreflective determination of the present by the past is 'habit', and there exist embedded social habits as well. Sometimes too it seems as if old formations suddenly reappear, uncannily, the past flaring into life. Isn't contemporary anti-Islamic paranoia a strange repetition of medieval Christian prejudice, something that once seemed obsolete, and for that reason crammed with unconscious memories?

Yet at least for academic study, the past does not mainly exist as repetitions, social habits or unconscious causal chains, but precisely as history. It is important to understand from the first that 'history' is just one way of conceiving the past. As is often pointed out, the word itself is ambiguous: it refers both to knowledge about the past (and hence to an academic discipline) and to the past as such, and especially to the past as it continues to exist for the present. Indeed there is a sense in which all history belongs to the present. What has no presence in the present has no history; it has simply been forgotten. That ambiguity between history-as-knowledge and history-as-event is a sign that history is a disciplined way of figuring the past. And it is a relatively recent way of figuring the past – which is to say that while history is not a construct of European modernity, the kind of history that was constructed in European modernity has come to dominate our understanding of the past.

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The progressive understanding of history is itself rather ambiguous: it aggrandises humanity as the agent of historical change at the same time as it aggrandises history, which now becomes an ethical standard as well as the basis for social existence. It was by comparison with this kind of temporal order that other, colonisable societies were regarded as lacking 'history' and as belonging fundamentally to the past rather than to the present. History in this sense is haunted by that fundamental break between societies in which inherited models determine practices and those that improvise and invent their own futures. It was in relation to the temporal order of modernity that what (from the historians' perspective) did not change in society, or what did not change in ways that could be related to progressive time, was 'timeless', 'traditional', unhistorical. And it was in relation to that temporal order that institutions and practices (such as hanging, drawing and quartering) which have ceased to exist in the modern world belonged to history in yet another sense: as the repository of dead things.

Societies that continually change, that make their own history, heap up history in this sense too: the ruined and the dated are as characteristic of modernity as the sheen of the new. Dead history creates a particular problem: the past becomes other – as other as other cultures. This poses a methodological challenge. How can we understand the past except in its own terms, terms which we moderns no longer share and which are more or less lost. This way of thinking about the past as fundamentally 'other' is called 'historicism' and is the intimate flip-side of progressivism.

In historicism the past helps us understand the present mainly through the seduction of narrative and the pleasures of defamiliarisation since the forces which structure the present have only a tenuous relation to the past, even though they necessarily come out of it. The past can teach us most not because we share its world, but because it reminds us that there are other ways of doing things. Thus even where the past would seem to provide

useful lessons (for instance, when it tells us of the repeated failures of orthodox economics that aim to extend market relations as widely as possible through society) those lessons are neglected. And an intimate knowledge of the past is no longer regarded as useful in helping us predict the future as it routinely was until the end of the eighteenth century when history was still more providential than secular. Rather, for modern thought, history can help account for the present, although these are explanations which lack the force either of scientific explanation or of explanations where for instance we make sense of a person's actions by reference to their intentions.

At the same time, because the past is thought of as other and vanishing, efforts to preserve it become more and more strenuous. It is museumified, the object of

planned preservation and display. It is important to note that this mode of history, which monumentalises the past and which implies and carries with it the values and protocols of European modernity, has come under strong criticism from postcolonial critical historians, notably Dipesh Chakrabarty, determined to respect non-Occidental and non-historical ways of treating the past (see Chakrabarty 1992). In fact, although historicism and progressivism do dominate modern Western thought about the past and there is a sense in which secular and critical thought is centred on them, they by no means monopolise even Western culture. History retains very particular and close connections to conservatism, and that is one reason that the relation of cultural studies to history is problematic.

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Let us turn to the ways in which the past is represented and used in contemporary leisure culture. We live in a society in which the present is said to dominate the past to an unprecedented degree, and yet in which the past is everywhere. At the most abstract level this turn to the past in everyday life can be read in two main ways: reactively, as a retreat from the difficult, uncertain present; or positively, as an investment of large resources of time and money in preserving the past, primarily in the interests of leisure culture. And, of course, the past often retains its presence in the contemporary without undergoing formal historicisation at all. One thinks of music sampling (and especially the citation of old songs in hip hop); golden-oldie stations; television reruns; and the presence of old movies on television. These kinds of objects exist in some ill-defined zone between the contemporary and the historical where the past (while marked as the past) is not museumified or academicised: it is simply made available for consumption.

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For others history is a form of more passive entertainment, in particular as is provided by television documentaries. These have become increasingly commercialised – see the A&E cable network's History Channel which (like the similar Biography Channel) is disseminated internationally and which is able to produce what the company itself markets as 'global programming events' such as 2000's pathbreaking Modern Marvels Boy Toys Week, a ten-hour programme on the history of gadgets and toys designed specifically for men who are still boys at heart. History and especially historical biography is a core genre for the publishing industry too, books on such topics being especially popular as gifts for men who aren't really 'book people'. In Britain the periodical History Today has been a surprising success. As entertainment, history is of course often fictionalised: the era of historical fiction, which was inaugurated by the Scottish novelist Walter Scott at the beginning of the nineteenth century, is by no means over (Scott's project was to reconcile progressive historicism with Burkean conservatism by developing fiction's capacity for rewarding characters, shaped by historical forces, who reconciled themselves to the slow onset of modernity).

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Amateur relations to history merge into what is often called at the level of official institutions 'the heritage industry' and, at the level of the community itself, 'cultural memory'. These terms are linked because they both refer to those elements of the past that remain current beyond formal and specialised scholarship. Furthermore, cultural memories have become increasingly bureaucratised and commercialised, that is drawn into the heritage industry. After all, the past that we remember is, to a large degree, the past that organised, and mainly commercial, interests present to us to be remembered. Indeed history as taught in non-research educational institutions is entering into increasingly close relations with the heritage industry too, as schools in particular seek to interest students in history via its commercialised modes of presentation. The

heritage industry covers those forms of historical entertainment that we have just been discussing but extends into a wider range of practices and institutions, including museums, urban planning and industry self-memorialisation (such as the USA's non-profit Steel Industry Heritage Corporation committed to conserving remnants of old steel technologies and sites) as well as tourism.

Within cultural studies, debates about the meaning and effects of the heritage industry continue. From one point of view, the emphasis on heritage as it emerged in the UK during the eighties, for instance, can be interpreted as part of an effort to deflect attention from current social difficulties, in particular the increase in economic inequity which followed Thatcherite neo-liberalism (Hewison 1987). From another, the heritage industry has a popular (albeit mainly middle-class) base, and is much less elitist than older forms of cultural memory and historiography (Samuel 1994). The passions around this debate probably assume that the past is more important than it really is. It is incontrovertible that many heritage industry attractions simplify the past, often into the most stripped-back and sentimental of stereotypes; it is also incontrovertible however that many such attractions do in fact inform visitors about the past. <...>

Similar tensions exist when the category 'heritage' becomes regulative, as it so often does. Laws against the demolition or even the alteration of old buildings are passed in its name, sometimes in the interests of preserving important and attractive constructions, but other times as the expression of anti-contemporary philistinism. Here the tension is, once again, between conservatism as resistance to change and historical continuity as a ground of (in this case, aesthetic) value.