Epilogue: Cultural History in Retrospect

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Abstract:

The Epilogue discusses current challenges for cultural historial research. It starts with the devastating fire that confronted the medieval cathedral Notre Dame de Paris in 2019 and explores the fragility of the past. It moves forward to the recent theoretical emphasis on non-human agency and argues that the study of human/non-human entanglements is essential for understanding human-ness. The present prediction of future changes in climate, economy and global sustainability refers to major challenges during the forthcoming decades. For understanding these changes, it remains vital to look back into the past from new perspectives, not only by focussing on things that have been remembered, but also by trying to find territories that have not yet even been conceived in historical terms.

In the evening of 15 April 2019, devastating news spread around the world in a few seconds. The medieval cathedral Notre Dame de Paris, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, known so

well not only to the locals but to millions of travellers from every continent, had caught fire at 6:18 pm local time. Soon its roof and spire were in flames. The fire fighting continued until the next day, when *BBC News* summarized: 'The fire, declared fully extinguished some 15 hours after it began, ravaged the 850-year-old building's roof and caused its spire to collapse. But firefighters who worked through the night managed to save the Paris landmark's main stone structure, including its two towers'.[1] Considering how many irreplaceable works of arts and relics from the past it housed, the Parisian catastrophe could undoubtedly have been worse, but the destruction was still irreparable, since, as the news coverage noted, Notre Dame is 'deeply rooted in France's cultural history'.[2] The 'main stone structure' of the cathedral was preserved, but much was lost, for example, the centuries-old wooden roof structures that had been carved by medieval carpenters. Their cultural legacy, still visible to modern eyes was destroyed by the embrace of the hungry flames.[3]

The fire at Notre Dame was a disaster that started in the attic beneath the cathedral's roof where renovation work was taking place. This was unintentional, but sometimes, the destruction of cultural heritage can be initiated consciously with an intention to cause harm to sites that are valued in order to wound those people who cherish them. In 2015, the ancient city of Palmyra in present-day Syria, a UNESCO World Heritage Site as well, came suddenly into the headlines. ISIS soldiers conquered the city and consciously destroyed the Temple of Baalshamin and many other historic buildings. Only photographs and video recordings, and of course archaeological documentation, of these monuments remain for future generations, but the ancient constructions themselves were eradicated.

Notre Dame de Paris and Palmyra are examples of historical sites that have been valued and were to be preserved for posterity. They represent cultural history in the present turbulent

world. UNESCO began its world heritage programme in 1972, and the agreement has been ratified by 193 nations, but not even international treaties can safeguard remains of the past in the middle of crises, particularly in situations where historic sites are seen as cultural symbols, the destruction of which can have grave political consequences.

The question of how the past lives in the present is always relative. History lives, but it is also fragile and transient by nature. Therefore, it is important to identify means through which the past is present and to analyse the different forms of public history and *Geschichtskultur* (historical culture) around us. It is obvious that many phenomena of the past, artefacts, symbols and practices, are not part of the present horizon. Their existence, or memory, can only be restored through careful research. At the same time, what we understand and define as the past is constantly changing. Therefore, cultural history has to be written again and again. In the case of Notre Dame, for example, the stone structures themselves still stand in the very same place as they have stood since the thirteenth century, but the webs of significance that have surrounded the cathedral have been in constant flux and have undergone significant transformations. Let us only think of how Victor Hugo's novel, *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831), shaped our vision of the monument. In the 1820s, there were thoughts of deconstructing the cathedral because of its state of decay. In his preface for the novel, Hugo pointed out the need to renovate the cathedral and this idea was probably one of the leading motives behind the whole literary enterprise by Hugo.[4] But, of course, this example again turns attention to material remains. There have been countless meetings, ceremonies, gatherings and political activities that, in the end, established the cultural significance of this particular site of memory.

This volume, *The Routledge Companion to Cultural History in the Western World*, portrays cultural historical processes and developments from the thirteenth century to the present. Notre Dame, the wooden structures of which were carved from oak during the thirteenth century, could well represent the continuity that still exists between the medieval past and the present day. It has, obviously, also portrayed discontinuities, phenomena that do not exist today but were significant in their own time. And, to complexify this further, the relationship between past and present is always a question of continuities and ruptures. There are many phenomena that are simultaneously similar and dissimilar. For example, urbanization as a process can be identified throughout human history, and it is a process that has not ended but seems to extend to the uncertain future. Urban centres in the Middle Ages were the foundation of later city structures, as exemplified by such landmarks as Notre Dame. However, the cities of the thirteenth century were quite different from the industrial cities that developed in the nineteenth century. Urbanization has had regional variations that have in many ways been the salt of cultural historian's work. These differences mean that urbanization has unique local meanings and cultural ramifications. In Finland, for example, most citizens lived in cities as late as in 1969, while the majority of people in Britain, France and Germany had been urban dwellers since the nineteenth century. Many urban phenomena were only mediated representations for the rural population of Finland in the early twentieth century. Certainly, the same goes for many other regions in the world, since globally the majority of people have lived in cities only after 2008.[5] Urbanization is a story of cultural continuities, but at the same time, it is obviously full of ruptures and multiple temporalities. Currently, many of the largest cities in the world are in Africa, where urbanization can hardly be understood on the basis of nineteenth-century industrialism. In that sense, our knowledge of the Western development of urban centres in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not

sufficient in itself for understanding the formation of megacities today. One could, therefore, wonder how relevant cultural history, as conceived in this volume, is for the future.

This book describes numerous forms of sociability and community, families and nations, sects and religious orders, local and transregional groups, emotional bonds and standards, and those communities that have been constructed by media and through oral and printed knowledge transmission to the era of digital cultures. The book pays close attention to those transborder flows and forces that, since the Middle Ages, have in various ways not only positioned these communities in relation to each other, but also opened them and set them into new contexts. The book showcases the *situatedness* of cultural history and the need to understand past phenomena in the specific contexts where they appeared. Therefore, urbanization as a global megatrend can also be viewed and analysed in those specific circumstances. In this sense, cultural history has currency as an intellectual enterprise, although there is an increasing need for comparative, transregional and global research settings.

Today, cultural studies and other heirs of the so-called 'cultural turn' are also challenged by the recent theoretical emphasis on non-human agency. In his 1991 compelling book, *We Have Never Been Modern* (*Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*), Bruno Latour began his exploration with the chapter, "Proliferation of Hybrids", a newspaper description of the world around us. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the world was in turmoil, not only in the aftermath of the Cold War, but particularly because nature and culture seemed to be more deeply intertwined than ever before. In a newspaper, 'The same article ties together chemical reactions and political reactions'.[6] Human and non-human factors seemed inseparable, like in

Latour's observations on the threat of the widening hole in the ozone layer. Nature was not something to be externalized outside human behaviour and culture.

Latour's observation decades ago did not actually question or undermine cultural studies as such. It is evident that, in order to understand phenomena like the threat of the increasing hole in the ozone layer in the 1990s, it was necessary to emphasize those cultural practices that, in the end, have contributed to the success of aerosol products. In a similar vein, the present question of microplastics can be historicized by exploring how the consumption of plastics has expanded and how plastics have been woven into the fabric of the modern world. This poses two critical questions for cultural historians. On the one hand, the question is whether cultural historians define and frame their research problems in a way that meets current concerns. On the other hand, it raises the question of whether historians aim to find those kinds of forms of research cooperation where the observations of cultural studies can encounter those of natural sciences or interdisciplinary research in general.

During recent decades, post-humanist theory has presented considerable criticism towards the 'anthropocentrism' of humanities and social sciences. Cultural history can be seen as human-centred by default, the human condition having been its major source of inspiration and renewal. Predominantly, the history of the past has been written in a human-sized manner, from the perspective of individuals and communities, with an emphasis on meaning-making and webs of significance. In his book, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Manuel DeLanda stressed the idea that human culture should not be seen as a separate sphere of reality but should be explored as an integral part of non-human flows.[7] Conceptually, DeLanda draws on the ontological ideas of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, according to whom reality is never stable but always in a constant state of flux.

Everything flows – people, populations, genetic material, capital, raw materials, wastes, viruses. Therefore, the perspective on the past cannot derive only from human beings. The philosopher of history Ewa Domanska has answered this post-humanist challenge and emphasized the urgent need for historians to consider the critique on anthropocentrism and pay serious attention to the role of non-human agency in history.[8] In fact, this challenge, often called 'more-than-human history', has already been addressed by historians who work in such areas as animal studies, technology and digital culture.[9]

The critique against the supposed anthropocentrism of cultural studies does not necessarily mean that the concepts of culture and culturality should be abandoned or that these concepts have lost their explanatory power. However, it is reasonable and timely to revisit the basic premises of research and interests of knowledge. There are many possible avenues for fruitful insights for future research. In humanities, the critique of athropocentrism offers an impetus to consider the boundaries of what is 'human'. The study of human/non-human entanglements is essential for understanding human-ness in the first place. Another intriguing aspect is that 'culture' has often been defined only in terms of human history, but recent scholarship in animal studies points out that non-human animals can also pass their experiences to the next generation and, in that sense, have culture too, which therefore cannot be owned only by us humans.

Despite the discussion above, it is obvious that the need for critically studying human communities, identities, emotions, gender systems and their historical development will be an essential agenda in the future. The cases of Notre Dame and Palmyra illustrate that history has profound weight in the construction of communities. Cultural history is not only retrospective, it is social engagement with issues that continue to be critical. The present

prediction of future changes in climate, economy and global sustainability refers to major challenges during the forthcoming decades. For understanding these changes, and for encountering things to come, cultural history offers an approach that continues to be appealing. It remains vital to look back into the past from new perspectives, not only by focussing on things that have been remembered or trying to identify things forgotten, but also by trying to find territories that have not yet even been conceived in historical terms.

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[1] 'Notre-Dame fire: Millions pledged to rebuild cathedral', *BBC News,* 16 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47943705> (accessed 5 July 2019).

[2] 'Notre Dame Cathedral is deeply rooted in France's cultural history: Raheem Kassam', *Fox Business,* 17 April 2019, <https://video.foxbusiness.com/v/6027304503001/#sp=show-clips> (accessed 5 July 2019).

[3] This was pointed out, for example, by the architect and historian Panu Savolainen in the newspaper *Turun Sanomat,* 19 April 2019.

[4] For further details, see F. Bandarin and R. van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing Heritage in an Urban Century*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

[5] 'UN says half the world's population will live in urban areas by end of 2008', *International Herald Tribune*, 26 February 2008.

[6] B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

[7] M. DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History,* New York, NY: Zone Books, 1997.

[8] E. Domanska, 'Beyond Anthropocentrism in Historical Studies', *Historein. A Review of the Past and Other Stories* 10, 2010: 122.

[9] On animal history, see for example, É. Baratay, *La Société des animaux de la Révolution à la Libération*, Paris: La Martinière, 2008; É. Baratay, *Le Point de vue animal: Une autre version de l'histoire*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012; S. Nance (ed.), *The Historical Animal*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015; S. Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010. On technology and digital history, see for example, A. Nivala, H. Salmi and J. Sarjala, 'History and Virtual Topology: The Nineteenth-Century Press as Material Flow', *Historein* 17.2, 2018.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12681/historein.14612; J. Winters, 'Digital History, in M. Tamm and P. Burke (eds.),

Debating New Approaches to History, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.