

HISTORICAL CULTURE¹

The concept of Historical Culture and its cognates in other languages (such as *cultura histórica*, *Geschichtskultur*, *Culture historique*) expresses a new way of approaching and understanding the effective and affective relationship that a human group has with the past, with *its own* past. It is an area of study that aims to embrace a broader field than that of *historiography*, since it is not only limited to the analysis of academic historical literature. The scope of *historical culture* is to advocate the examination of all the layers and processes of social historical consciousness, paying attention to the agents who create it, the media by means of which it is disseminated, the representations that it popularizes and the creative reception on the part of citizens.

If culture is the way in which a society interprets, transmits and transforms reality, *historical culture* is the specific and particular way in which a society relates to its past. When we study *historical culture*, we investigate the social production of historical experience and its objective manifestation in a community's life. This production is usually carried out by different social agents, often at one and the same time, by means of different media.

It is impossible to gain access to the past exactly as it happened. In order to approach it, we have to represent it, make it part of the present through a creative synthesis that reconstructs it. For this reason, knowledge of the past and its use in the present are always framed within certain social practices for interpreting and reproducing history. The historical awareness of each individual is thus created at the heart of a social and communicative system of interpretation, objectification and public use of the past, that is to say, at the heart of a *historical culture*.

Theoretical reflection on the concept of *historical culture* has taken place since the 1980s and 1990s, by means of works that either include this exact term in their titles, such as those by Jörn Rüsen, Maria Grever or Bernd Schönemann, or employ other closely related expressions². Among the latter contributions, the influential research on the forms

¹ Translation of the "Historical Culture" Spanish text into English by Philip Banks.

² Among the works by Jörn Rüsen, the one entitled "Was ist Geschichtskultur?. Überlegungen zu einer neuen Art, über Geschichte nachzudenken", in K. Füssmann / H. T. Grütter/ J. Rüsen (Hg./Eds.): *Historische Faszination. Geschichtskultur heute*. Cologne, 1994, 3-26, is of particular importance. Maria Grever's concept of *Historical Culture* can be found in, among other places, the presentation of the *Center for Historical Culture* at the University of Rotterdam, which she has promoted. Bernd Schönemann has considered genealogy and the meaning of this concept in articles such as: "Geschichtsdidaktik, Geschichtskultur, Geschichtswissenschaft," in Hilke Günther-Arndt (ed.): *Geschichtsdidaktik. Praxisbandbuch Für Die Sekundarstufe I Und II*. Berlin, Cornelsen Verlag, 2003, 11-22. Although with a far more restrictive meaning, the term *culture historique* had already been used by the researcher into medieval historiography Bernard Guenée in 1980 in his important work *Histoire et Culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval*. Paris, 1980.

and transformations of cultural memory (*Kulturelles Gedächtniss* published by Jan and Aleida Assmann), among which historical memory should be included, stand out³. More recently, representations of the past that proliferate in the media have been referred to by the term public history⁴. To a certain extent, the socio-cultural rapprochement to historiography proposed by Ch.-O. Carbonell in the late 1970s, which was close to the history of mentalities, can be envisaged as a link between the history of historiography, understood as a noble aspect of intellectual history, and the present concept of *historical culture*⁵.

The notion of *historical culture* arises, with a degree of theoretical tension and undeniable philosophical implications, as a heuristic and interpretative concept to understand and to investigate how certain relatively coherent and socially applicable images of the past, in which the historical consciousness of a human community is objectified and articulated, are created, disseminated and transformed. This same human community, this “collective subject”, can be marked out, although not hermetically enclosed, according to many criteria: nationality, language, religion, gender, class, a generation sharing formative experiences or a culture that is based on a common material and symbolic legacy.

The somewhat cognitive connotations of the term *historical culture*, although this approach does not spurn the aesthetic dimension, indicate a difference in focus, with greater emphasis being placed on experiential and unconscious aspects associated with studies in the field of memory. However, as both A. Assmann and Fernando Catroga have advocated, it is not appropriate to define a distinct contrast between history and memory; the two should overlap and discipline each other⁶. A cold distant form of history would be socially lifeless and have almost no impact. It would be close to sterile academic erudition.

³ Assmann, Jan: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. Munich, Beck, 1992 (6th ed., 2007). Assmann, Aleida: *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München, 1999 (3rd ed, 2006). The term *Erinnerungsräume* (spaces of memory or of remembrance) refers to the monumental seminal work published some years before under the direction of Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, 1984-1992.

⁴ Cf. Bodnar, John: *Remaking America. Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 13.

⁵ The need to broaden the horizons of the history of historiography was considered by G. Iggers in “Cómo reescribiría hoy mi libro sobre historiografía del siglo XX”, in *Pedralbes. Revista d'Història Moderna* 21, p. 11-26. This broadening of horizons, which brings historiography closer to cultural history and cultural perspectives, has recently been given expression in a new book entitled: *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, Harlow 2009, written by G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang (with contributions from Supriya Mukherjee).

⁶ Assmann, A.: *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, 2006, p. 51; Catroga, F.: *Memoria, historia e historiografia*, Coimbra, 2001, p. 63-64. This same attitude predominates in the work by Philippe Joutard, “Memoria e historia: ¿Cómo superar el conflicto?”, in *Historia, Antropología y Fuente Oral*, I, 38, 115-122. For my part, I have proposed that “science-history” and “memory-history” should complement and balance each other in “Memory-History vs. Science-History? The Attractiveness and Risks of an historiographical Trend”, *Storia della Storiografia*, 48, 117-129.

Such a confused and partisan expression of memory would offer little more than blind praise for the collective.

The collection of images, names and values, which, with a greater or lesser degree of coherence, make up the view of the past held by a society is not exclusively, nor even perhaps predominantly, today the consequence of contributions made by professional or academic historians. Nowadays, historical novels and films, popular magazines dealing with history and cultural heritage, television series, school textbooks, commemorative exhibitions and the recreations of important events carried out by public institutions, associations and theme parks have a greater direct impact on the creation, dissemination and reception of these representations of the past. For this reason, some recent studies by T. Morris-Suzuki on the “construction” of the past, place considerable prominence on previously such inconceivable formats (spaces of memory, in the broadest sense) in a history of historiography as some *manga* accounts⁷.

It is also important to mention that *historical culture* is never a fossilised system of representing the past. It is rather a dynamic process of social dialogue, through which interpretations of the past are disseminated, negotiated and debated⁸. The *historical culture* of a society therefore includes multiple narratives and different focuses, which strive to impose themselves in social terms. Social debates on the past are extremely important because not only is mere erudite knowledge of history at stake in them, but also self-understanding of the community in both the present and its future projection. Listening to social negotiation of the past leads to an understanding of the social dilemmas of the present and reveals which of them are the political and axiological questions currently in the public eye. History is the arena in which the present and future identity of the community is debated.

In the last decade, *historical culture* has also come to be a term to refer to a whole range of socio-humanistic studies that specific university undergraduate or postgraduate subjects or programmes and research centres are devoted to. Studies on *historical culture* and on memory have become a prolific interdisciplinary sphere in which philosophers, historians, literary theorists, sociologists and anthropologists come together. Hence it is not surprising that some specific journals should have made their appearance in this field, reviews such as *History and Memory*, nor that this should have been born in a country (Israel) that is particularly concerned about a great twentieth-century trauma: the *Shoah*. *History and Memory*, together with the earlier *Theory and History* and *Storia della Storiografia*, are undoubtedly the main journals that scholars of *historical culture* refer to.

⁷ Morris-Suzuki, T.: *The Past within Us. History, Memory and Media*. London, 2005.

⁸ The importance of the communicative perspective in order to gain a correct understanding of the mechanisms of collective memory and historical culture has been highlighted by Wulf Kansteiner in particular: “Finding Meaning in Memory: a Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies”, in *History and Theory*, May 2002, p. 179-197. Kansteiner proposes using theory categories and analysing communicative action in order to understand the workings of social memory properly.

A number of valuable Master's Degree programmes, such as the one offered by the University of Rotterdam, are basically research oriented. Others, such as the one called *Cultura histórica y Comunicación* – Historical Culture and Communication (which is taught at the University of Barcelona), place greater emphasis on students of the humanities acquiring professional skills so that they can play an active part following rigorous criteria in the creation and dissemination of material that satisfies the enormous fascination that past experiences awaken nowadays. This fascination has given rise to a new phenomenon, new at least on its current scale, which has been dubbed, by means of a term that is both debatable yet also clearly understandable, the consumption of history⁹.

To close this introductory note, I will allude to certain dimensions of the concept of *historical culture* that in-depth studies of this field of knowledge cannot neglect, or at least should take into account. Reflection upon *historical culture* (on the articulated presence of the past in the life of a society) inevitably leads one to consider certain fundamental questions relating to the theory or philosophy of history. Among these, we might mention the crucial question of the perception of reality and the projection of the knowing subject in the representation of the past (presented in theoretical terms by P. Ricoeur in masterly fashion), the simultaneousness of what is not simultaneous and radical reflection on time (much beloved by R. Koselleck), the inter-relation between limit or traumatic experiences and historical awareness (one of F. Ankersmit's favourite subjects) or even to what extent the concept of collective memory can be considered to be valid. This concept has recently been re-examined by several scholars, following on from the now classic works of M. Halwachs, discussion of which has been re-launched by such influential figures as Pierre Nora, the creator of another key term, *lieux de mémoire* (spaces or points of reference, not only physical ones, of memory)¹⁰. For this reason, it is with great pleasure that we will include here some leading works in these fields.

In addition to the largely cognitive and existential dimension (knowledge of the past and orientation in time), *historical culture* possesses other no less significant ones, such as , for example, its aesthetic manifestation and its artistic objectification. On the other hand, a degree of political tension is also usually to be found embedded in any *historical culture*. Effectively, the *historical culture* of a society can often be analysed from the viewpoint of political discourse, and for this purpose it is essential to investigate the key agencies and powers that intervene in the production and dissemination of the symbolic constructs that shape it. The reasons for these interventions, whether they aim to strengthen the identity, provide cohesion to a group or legitimize a person's or an institution's rule, together with the central messages that seek to achieve these goals, can be analysed both from the general theoretical perspective and by means of studying relevant examples. Both contributions are

⁹ *Consuming History. Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, is the title of a very recent work by Jerome de Groot (London / New York, 2009).

¹⁰ An intelligent methodological critique of certain studies on collective memory can be found in Kanstteiner, W.: "Finding Meaning in History: A methodological critique of collective memory studies", *History and Theory* 41, 179-197.

of interest to us. And as regards the latter, this web may be a suitable medium to make certain important works known; also for those produced within the subject of Creation of Historical Culture forming part of the abovementioned UB Master's degree programme.

On the inauguration of this web portal dedicated to the study of *historical culture*, I sincerely hope that it will become a suitable framework in which the works that various scholars have been producing for a number of years find ample diffusion. I hope it also encourages new reflections and contributions, and that it will be an open forum in which all of us that feel passionately about the subject will be able to meet each other and discuss different aspects of history. For history is not and cannot be a dead file; instead, it is a time dimension that continues to impregnate and orient the present and future steps of our global society.

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