

REVIEWS

Alessandro Arcangeli (2012), *Cultural History: A Concise Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge.

Alessandro Arcangeli has written an excellent introduction to cultural history. The book, originally published in 2007, is a slightly reworked and updated translation from the Italian.¹ In its original version, it carried the title ‘What is cultural history?’ (*Che cos’è la storia culturale?*), a question that directly aimed at an Italian rather than at an English speaking public. To an English speaking public, an introduction to cultural history with the same title – ‘What is cultural history?’ – had already been written in 2004 by Peter Burke. Hence a change of title for Arcangeli’s English version made sense.² In my view, the new title not only expresses what the book actually is, but also how it could best be regarded by its new, English speaking public: that is, as a *concise* introduction to cultural history.

Cultural History: A Concise Introduction by Alessandro Arcangeli is only one of many introductions to cultural history in recent historiography. Since 2000, circa twenty introductory works on cultural history have appeared in a variety of languages, ranging from the French to the German, and from the English to the Romanian.³ To all of these introductions, Arcangeli’s ‘concise introduction’ is nonetheless a very welcome addition. It is an up-to-date and knowledgeable piece of work. It is an accessible book, moreover, with a convincing conception of cultural history. Most importantly, however, the book is handsomely concise and straightforward, positively distinguishing this introduction from all the others.

Arcangeli divides his book into four chapters, each of which is equally well-structured and rich in analyses and examples. Chapter One searches for a definition of cultural history. According to the

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author, cultural history is about 'a mode of approach, rather than a specific range of objects' (p. 50). By analysing a nineteenth and twentieth-century transformation from a 'history of culture' (in which an *object* – culture – was central) to that of today's 'cultural history' (in which an *approach* towards a whole range of objects is central), the author develops that argument. Essentially, cultural history, the author writes, is about the way in which historians use the cultural viewpoint to approach the whole of history, ranging from colonial history to the history of food and fashion, and from business history to the history of the First World War. True, cultural history, with its contemporary interest in popular culture, is close to what was once defined, and is still known, as social history. However, social history is more concerned with structures and institutions. By contrast, Arcangeli writes, cultural history is 'history from the viewpoint of the *motives and meanings* [italics mine] that individual and collective historical agents from the past gave to whatever they were doing, and to the contexts in which they operated.' The current success of cultural history, the author adds, is 'due partly to the effective employment, in interpreting past civilizations, of concepts and methods originating in other social sciences, and in particular in anthropological discourse' (p. 16).

Chapter Two retraces some 'characteristics of the way history has been conceived and practiced by writers and schools from a less recent past' (p. 18). Going back to Vico and Voltaire, amongst others, Arcangeli shows how attention to the cultural in historical research developed, especially since the late nineteenth century, in opposition to political history, on the one hand, and in relation to a mix of idealist and materialist notions about society and culture, on the other. Gradually, a socio-cultural perspective emerged in the twentieth century, with ever-greater attention, moreover, to the subjective and symbolic rather than the structural order of things, especially since the second half of that century. In addition, a linguistic turn led to a 'renewed sensitivity towards the history of language ... and [to] consciousness of the rhetorical aspects of sources' (p. 28), further contributing to the development of cultural history from a rather marginal into a – if not: *the* – main historical field in the 1980s and 1990s.

Chapter Three then moves to a selection of significant developments and 'fields' of cultural history: intellectual history and the history of ideas and concepts; the history of mentalities; the history of symbols and representations; and that of discourse and language. Although the four 'different research directions' are 'relatively distinguishable, they have also repeatedly intertwined with each other' (p. 30). Hence the author speaks of 'interwoven paths'.

In the fourth chapter, finally, attention shifts to some of the thematic areas and types of sources that have been stimulated by cultural history, and that are often also identified with it: gender, family and sexuality; the body; material culture and consumption; media and communication; and the reading of images and the growing attention to the visual.

In a few ways, the current version of the book differs from its original, Italian version. For example, each chapter is now provided with a summary at the end, useful to students. Also, slight additions and variations to the content and order of the original text have been made, especially in chapters Three and Four, which have strengthened the original text. Moreover, an appendix of short biographies of relevant scholars in the field of cultural history has now been added to the book. The names of these scholars have also been made bold in the text of the book itself. Not all of these scholars are, as the author points out, cultural historians, but they all played (and play) a pivotal role, both directly and indirectly, in the development of what we today call cultural history. Names included are those of historians, such as Natalie Zemon Davis, Peter Burke, Keith Thomas, Robert Darnton and Raymond Williams, and those of anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz, and philosophers, such as Michel Foucault. Some names that were absent in the original book, for example Peter Gay, Theodor Zeldin and Joan Scott, are now included as well. Also, more explicit reference is made, both in the appendix and in the book itself, to Michael Bakhtin and Michel de Certeau. Myself, I would have liked to also find the names of a few other scholars, particularly Joanna Bourke, Jay Winter, Michael Roper, Carl E. Schorske, and George L. Mosse, all of whom have done path-breaking research in, and for, cultural history. Still, a selection remains a selection. Overall, Arcangeli gives a fair and balanced overview of relevant cultural historians and theorists.

In addition, in his new, updated and reworked introduction to cultural history, Arcangeli pays relatively more attention to the influence of psychology on cultural history, to the significance of the history of memory, and to that of the growing diversification of sources in cultural history. He also pays more explicit attention to the role of human agency in cultural history (as opposed to determinism in classical socio-economic and Marxist history). Unlike in the original version, moreover, the author explores the possible future for cultural history. According to him, in an age of globalisation, we can expect more attention to global or world history. The author also points to the growing interest in pre-civilisation history and environmental history, where, paradoxically, attention shifts from human agency to biology

and the question of natural evolution. To what extent this development is compatible with ‘a culturalist approach that has put emphasis on human agency and symbolic language ... remains to be seen’ (p. 80).

Overall, Arcangeli has written an up-to-date and lucid introduction to cultural history. The scope of the book, and the variety of approaches and orientations included, is impressive, even more so when taking into account the very concise character of the book. The book is also well translated; in this respect, the editors of Routledge are to be credited.

Cultural History: A Concise Introduction is a welcome contribution to the current state of literature on cultural history. I recommend the book to anyone interested in cultural history, yet especially to teachers of undergraduate courses who would like to acquaint their students with basic though accurate knowledge of cultural history.

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Notes

1. Arcangeli, Alessandro (2007), *Che cos'è la storia culturale?*, Roma: Carrocci editore.
2. Burke, Peter [2004] (2008), *What is Cultural History?*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
3. See also, Burke, Peter (2012), ‘Strengths and Weaknesses of Cultural History’, *Cultural History* 1:1, pp. 1–13.

Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011), *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham: Duke University Press.

More than a decade ago, in his *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Mirzoeff expressed his plan to ‘mark out a broad trajectory for the emergence of contemporary visibility.’ From the outset he made it clear that he envisaged not so much a historical reconstruction of visual culture than a Foucaultian-type genealogy which aimed at a ‘strategic reinterpretation of the history of modern visual media understood collectively, rather than fragmented into disciplinary units such as film, television, art and video’.¹ These few sentences indicate well the magnitude of Mirzoeff’s ambitions while also aptly describing the breadth and nature of the critical ‘genealogy’ that *The Right to Look* offers. The qualification ‘strategic’ accurately suggests a grand-scale project that is global in scope, eminently transgeneric and