

THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF MODERN BRITAIN: SOME METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

by *Martin J. Wiener*

In recent years a new mode of investigation has begun to show itself in the field of modern British history—the cultural approach. This approach is new only to British history; American historians have been familiar with it for some years (since, at least, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* in 1950).¹ "Cultural history" can have many meanings: our definition will be *the study of distinctive patterns of thought and feeling characteristic of past groups of persons, "styling" behavior, as expressed in ideas, attitudes, and values.* The concept of culture underlying this approach to history derives from the social sciences, particularly anthropology. Cultural history is, in fact, not far from anthropology in much of its outlook and even its procedures; as historians have become more culture-minded, anthropologists have become more historical, and a fruitful interchange has opened up between the disciplines.² Seeking to reconstruct past cultural patterns, cultural history might best be seen as "retrospective anthropology."³

The cultural approach has been taken up by historians of Britain in a number of different periods, most notably the Tudor-Stuart and the Victorian eras. In the former, the influence of the most innovative British historical journal, *Past and Present*, has been crucial. *Past and Present* has published in the last decade numerous studies of early modern popular beliefs, sentiments, and behavior patterns, and has encouraged the writing of others.⁴

In a similar fashion the cultural approach has been applied to the Victorian era in recent years. As in the case of Tudor-Stuart history, Victorian historians have had the stimulus of an innovative journal—an American one, in this case—*Victorian Studies*. This journal, seeking to join the study of history and of literature, has encouraged an interest in Victorian England as a distinct cultural entity.⁵

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What problems particularly confront cultural history? The most fundamental are really age-old philosophical problems: How can we know states of mind other than our own? And even granted that knowledge, how can we establish any connection between states of mind and behavior?

The problem of knowing states of mind has been argued throughout the twentieth century, and even earlier. On the one hand, psychologists have developed various new approaches to this elusive subject, while on the other, positivistic philosophers, sociologists, and behaviorist psychologists have decried the entire effort as hopeless. The issue seems as much ideological as purely scientific: each position is held with ferocity and determination, betraying emotional commitment to one or another view of man and the world. In this confused situation the cultural historian must take refuge in a "common sense" approach to the question of knowing states of mind. In this matter, he must admit, there is no certainty, for states of mind are intangible and unmeasurable in any direct way. Yet he can infer states of mind from more tangible evidence.

Behavior gives clues to states of mind (though from behavior alone we could arrive only at very broad and hypothetical conclusions about states of mind). Less directly, institutions bear the impress of states of mind. However, behavior and institutions are by no means directly functions of states of mind, and reliance on them alone would prevent the historian from studying significant portions of almost any past culture.

The most useful evidence for our purposes is found in *statements*, both written and spoken (not to mention non-verbal statements such as art). Statements have two kinds of content—manifest and latent. By manifest I mean explicit, conscious content—the intended message. By latent I mean implicit, unconscious content—information contained, but not conscious or not intended to be conveyed: this can range from quite precise opinions and knowledge to unstated assumptions and values to feelings and desires.

For the cultural historian to infer from this sort of evidence, there are two conditions: it must be *significant*—not all statements are equally important or revealing—and it must be *representative*. These conditions are not easily met, as we shall see.

The problem of establishing connections between states of mind and behavior has, like the first problem, been argued throughout the twentieth century, indeed since the seventeenth century.⁶ Cultural history, like cultural anthropology, is based on the assumption that there are such connections, and that they are knowable. The subject matter of cultural history (again, like cultural anthropology), strictly speaking, is neither mind nor behavior but this connection itself; the patterns by which states of mind and behavior are together arranged in a society. "Culture" is neither states of mind nor behavior, but what binds them together.⁷

How then are we to solve this problem of establishing connections? First, by remembering that it is not completely soluble. States of mind and behavior are different kinds of phenomena; connecting them is somewhat like comparing apples and oranges; ultimately, it can't be done. Further, "culture" is itself an abstraction, a unifying principle; it is not tangible, not even to the minimal degree that states of mind can be considered so. However, these are ultimate considerations; they do not bar the attainment of the ordinary garden-variety degrees of knowledge which are about all that are open to any historian or, indeed, to almost any student of man in his normal context. What the cultural historian can do is to establish *correlations* between apparent states of mind and behavior, and make inferences from these.

How the cultural historian proceeds, in practice, to deal with these two fundamental problems, and with other less profound difficulties, can best be shown by looking at a specific subject within the field. The rest of this paper will focus on one such specific (though vast) subject: British responses to industrialization, technology, and urbanization—the major, related phenomena making up economic modernization. The subject of modernization is undeniably an important one, and one in which the British have played a unique role. The industrialization of the world began in Britain, and yet today the British lag behind more and more of their former imitators. The British have become almost as clear a model of laggard modernization as they once were of modernization itself.⁸ British social and economic behavior has undergone sharp changes in the past several centuries. What light can cultural history throw on these changes? And what can this study reveal about the opportunities and the difficulties of cultural history?⁹

One approach to this subject is to examine "high culture" for patterns of belief and sentiment. By "high culture" I mean the realm of art, literature, and philosophy that is commonly thought of by the term "culture." More exactly, it can be seen as the "culture" (in the broader, anthropological sense) of a creative and articulate elite. This approach was impressively demonstrated by Walter Houghton in his book, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, probably the most important single work of modern British cultural history.¹⁰ An example of Houghton's type of history that deals with my particular subject is Herbert Sussman's *Victorians and the Machine*.¹¹ Sussman studies in depth the response of seven Victorian writers to technology, and argues that the machine touched the most sensitive philosophic and imaginative nerves of thoughtful Victorians. This is an approach pioneered in American history, in the "American Studies" movement in particular. It relies on close analysis of selected texts, and on sensitivity to such intangibles as mood, tensions, undertones—the implicit emotive content. Ideally, this mode of investigation seeks to grasp a cultural system as a whole, by examining topics

which involve decisive relationships. Leo Marx, one of the leading practitioners of "American Studies," has noted that much of the interesting work in the field has concentrated upon points of intersection between existential reality, the collective consciousness, and individual products of mind.¹² When it approximates this intention, this approach can be marvelously suggestive and illuminating; Marx's own brilliant book, *The Machine in the Garden*, is a witness to the potential of the method.

However, this approach often, indeed nearly always to some degree, falls short of its ideal. It typically rests on a small number of sources, or on a single facet of a larger number of sources. In this kind of highly selective endeavor, the author's preconceptions can have a dramatic (although implicit) influence on the results. For example, Sussman's choice of seven Victorian writers is open to challenge—why those and not others? He might answer that these seven—Carlyle, Dickens, Ruskin, Morris, Butler, Wells, and Kipling—were those who most clearly responded to the new prominence of technology. Yet for this very reason—their explicitness—they may not be at all representative of Victorian consciousness.

Furthermore, the reliance of Sussman and other writers in this genre on "high literary" sources implies the assumption that the imaginative work of great minds has a higher historical value than that—imaginative or factual—of ordinary minds. As Charles Sanford noted about Marx's *Machine in the Garden*, "it creates the impression that because the problem [of the tensions brought by machine culture] is manifest in the works [of high culture] which he examines . . . a majority of Americans felt similarly pressed and pinched between the dilemma's horns." Sanford vigorously disagreed.¹³ Clearly we need to supplement this approach with others having wider social range.

There have been several efforts, all very recent, to examine British attitudes towards industrialization and related phenomena by using a broad spectrum of sources below the plane of high culture. T. H. E. Travers, in a recent doctoral dissertation, has studied the Victorian work-ethic chiefly through the career of the popular moralist, Samuel Smiles.¹⁴ But he has gone beyond intellectual biography and set Smiles in his cultural context through an exploration of much other Victorian writing on work and success. This "sub-literature," as he appropriately calls it, is various: it comprises sermons and other exhortatory works by clergymen, popular novels, "self-improvement" guides, and etiquette handbooks among other sources, all of which poured forth in unprecedented abundance in the nineteenth century. This widened scope of investigation enables the British cultural historian to escape from confinement within the "charmed circle" of high culture. Victorian attitudes towards work

can now be seen, thanks to Travers, in a vastly wider setting than that of Thomas Carlyle, Dr. Arnold, and a few other great men. In a similar fashion, we need to follow up Sussman's work on a broader scale examining Victorian (and twentieth century) "sub-literature" for responses to technology.

Cultural history can be still wider in scope than even Travers's foray. An economist, A.L. Levine, has made a valuable contribution to British cultural history in his recent monograph, *Industrial Retardation in Britain 1880-1914*.¹⁵ Much of his book is devoted to an examination of attitudes towards technological innovation and industrial efficiency as revealed in business and trade union journals, in testimony at Government inquiries, and in general periodicals and newspapers. Levine concludes that the technical and organizational backwardness that appeared in the British economy towards the close of the nineteenth century cannot be explained solely by economic causes. The chief immediate cause seems to be the weakness and passivity of entrepreneurial responses, and the ultimate source of this weakness the particularly conservative nature of British society. Levine documents attitudes throughout a wide spectrum of society—management, unions, journalists, as well as the more commonly cited social theorists—resistant to technical innovation and increased efficiency. The picture that emerges is of a culture already noticeably altered from that of the early stages of industrialization, when it was a commonplace among Europeans to remark upon British work-compulsion and entrepreneurial boldness,¹⁶ or even from the mid-century heyday of Samuel Smiles and his gospel of work.

Levine's work is important for the cultural historian of modern Britain on several counts. First, it reminds us that no field of history, nor any social science, is without relevance for cultural history. The cultural historian, since his subject matter includes, in a sense, everything, can learn from all other specialties. Second, as an economist, Levine is chiefly concerned with *behavior*, not with attitudes or values in themselves. His work links economic attitudes both with the world of action—the outcome of attitudes—and with the world of social structure and institutions—the shaper, or at least conditioner, of attitudes. With work like Levine's in mind, the cultural historian will not fall into the limbo of taking his subject matter as self-contained, but will always be seeking its connections with behavior and with institutions.

These connections are always in the forefront of the work of perhaps the leading current historian of British economic and social values, Edward Thompson. The value system whose flowering Travers describes has been charted in its origins by Thompson in two seminal articles. These articles, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," and "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," both attempt not only to establish patterns of attitudes, but to link them with behavior.¹⁷ The

former article, most germane to my theme, examines the changing sense of time between the late Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution, and how it affected labor discipline and the sensibilities of working people. Thompson traces the shift in work patterns in England from the "task-orientation" typical of "traditional" societies to modern timed labor, and the correlative internal shift in the apprehension of time.

His overriding concern is to look at English culture as a whole, refusing to rely only on those sources usually thought of as particularly "cultural." He makes use of every kind of source that might yield information about social attitudes and values—indeed, his range of sources is probably as wide as that of any historian of Britain. Thompson draws evidence from high culture—from Chaucer, Marlowe, Sterne, Wordsworth—but that for him is no more than an opening wedge. From high culture he moves on to popular songs and verse, folklore, sermons and social commentary, popular "improvement" guides (the eighteenth century forerunners of those studied by Travers), diaries, school and factory rule books, farmers' account books, guild records, petitions to Parliament, legislation, and economic statistics of watch and clock production and of taxation. In the brief compass of an article, he gives a breathtaking demonstration of the variety of material from which important information about past culture can be mined.

Thompson's essay is a model of how to fuse historical specialties to achieve the fullest possible picture of past culture. He is an intellectual historian, tracing changing conceptions of time; an economic historian, observing the growth of capitalism and industrialism; an historian of technology, examining the development of timepieces; a social historian, noting changing structures and institutions. But all of these particular approaches are joined in the overriding aim of grasping the momentous change in English culture that culminated in the Industrial Revolution and Victorianism.

Thompson draws upon not only a vast array of sources, not only a variety of historical specialties, but also the relevant work of social scientists.¹⁸ Clearly, great insight into traditional Western society can be gained from the body of knowledge of traditional societies throughout the world built up by several generations of anthropologists.¹⁹ Further, to study the transition from "tradition" to "modernity" in Western society while ignoring the vast literature on the subject being put forth by sociologists and political scientists examining development in the non-Western world would be plain obstinacy.

Yet even Thompson's work ultimately comes up against the limitations of "qualitative" history: it is difficult to be sure that his sources are representative, or that his interpretations of them are fair. It is hard, as well, to pin down the changes in attitudes he describes to any more precise timescale than a century. All of these difficulties are at least potentially remediable if it is possible to quantify his evidence and to make more aspects of his research and theory

explicit.

Is it possible to quantify the sources of cultural history? Attitudes and values are among the most elusive forms of historical evidence, but there *is* one kind of method which may help: content analysis. Content analysis was developed twenty years ago by political scientists, and has only begun to be used by historians in the past few years. As yet, it has not been used by historians of Britain.

Content analysis has been defined as "the systematic tabulation of the frequency with which certain predetermined symbols or other variables appear in a given body of data."²⁰ It is not a single method, but rather an approach, a family of particular procedures sharing some basic features. As Ole Holsti, one of the leaders in its development, has recently put it, "content analysis is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages."²¹

Can content analysis be of use to the cultural historian? I think it can; not as a panacea, but as a supplement, widening and deepening the range of knowledge. Content analysis can take the task of establishing patterns of past attitudes a step further than otherwise possible; and it can help to connect these mental phenomena to behavior.

How can content analysis help to ascertain attitudes? By establishing ways to measure the use of words. Words, and groups of words, are symbols standing for the attitudes of those who use them; they are the most tangible representation of attitudes. By selecting those words which best stand for the attitudes whose presence or absence he wishes to detect and describe, and doing this in a large number of cases, the historian can to some degree give those attitudes a measurable form.

The most successful example of this is Richard Merritt's study of the emergence of American nationalism.²² Merritt examined the use of collective "self-referent symbols" in colonial newspapers: references by colonists to themselves as colonists and British subjects or as Americans. He selected a representative range of newspapers, and a random but extensive sampling of issues over a long period of time. Merritt achieved statistically significant results indicating a clear and novel pattern of growth in American national consciousness. Prior to Merritt's work, American nationalism was portrayed as either appearing at a single crucial moment, such as the Stamp Act Crisis, or developing very gradually, over many years. The pattern Merritt found was not that of either of these pictures; or rather, it resembled elements of both. He found that national consciousness developed over the half-century prior to the Revolution, but this growth was punctuated by a series of sharp upsurges, followed by partial declines, culminating in the outbreak of the Revolution.

Another example of the use of content analysis to provide some measure

of past attitudes is the current work of Louis Galambos, an American economic historian. Galambos's work is particularly relevant to the subject of cultural adaptation to technology and industrialization: he has been studying, largely through farm and labor journals, popular attitudes in America towards the growth of large corporations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Galambos has found beginning in the early nineties a longrun trend toward more favorable attitudes.²³

If content analysis can help establish general states of mind, it can also help to establish causal connections between these states of mind and behavior. Historians have not yet ventured here, but we may learn from other disciplines. The prominent social psychologist David McClelland and his associates at Harvard have spent the last two decades drawing connections between "achievement motivation" and economic behavior.²⁴ They have measured achievement motivation of groups and nations, largely by content analysis of many kinds of sources, and then correlated this, through a variety of methods, with economic performance, with intriguing and often striking results. There is no reason why historians cannot make use of some of McClelland's approaches, especially since McClelland and his associates themselves often venture into history. Galambos has made a start in this direction by attempting to relate popular attitudes towards the growth of large corporations to changes occurring in the economy and polity.

Content analysis can enable historians of attitudes and values to escape from the narrowness of sources, by allowing a greater number and variety of sources to be tapped; and to limit the bias of these sources, by adopting a systematic pattern of selection. An attitude or value can in some cases be reduced to a "message unit" which can be counted, measured, and compared; in such a case, content analysis is a promising tool.

It is a tool not without serious drawbacks, however: content analysis poses almost as many problems as it solves. For one thing, the materials selected for analysis are not automatically representative any more than those selected for more traditional study. For another, the sources chosen may not accurately reflect the attitudes or values the historian is interested in; statements in colonial newspapers, for example, may not be a reliable index of American national self-image.²⁵ Still another difficulty peculiar to the historian is that words change their meaning over time; thus, the basic units of study may not mean what they do for us today, and, further, may not mean the same throughout the period studied, and therefore not be directly comparable. These problems—and others—mean that content analysis is certainly no panacea, no shortcut through the dilemmas and uncertainties that have always beset the historian. Yet

it should not be dismissed, either; all approaches and methods have their limitations; our task is to understand and compensate for these problems, while exploiting the strength of new techniques.

Cultural history can benefit from a wide variety of methods, both "qualitative" and "quantitative." Such an elusive subject as culture yields itself up more fully to a combination of approaches than to any single one. Cultural history ought not to limit itself to high culture, nor to literary or other conventionally "cultural" works, but ought to seek out anything that gives witness to the spirit and values of a time and place. It can never be as quantified as some "harder" areas of history (such as economic history), but it still can make use of quantification. Cultural historians can never dispense with intuition and empathy, but they do not have to disdain more systematic and objective methods. A kind of "uncertainty principle" applies here as in physics: the quest for precision and objectivity through quantification, if pushed too far, sacrifices significance and clarity; conversely, the rush to significance through intuition and empathy leads to subjectivity and imprecision. Obviously, what cultural history—and other kinds of history, as well—needs is to combine the virtues of quantitative and qualitative history, using each kind of approach to check the vices the other is prey to. This is of course an ideal, of which all practical efforts will fall short; but a discipline needs ideals to measure itself by. Properly directed by such an ideal, cultural history promises to illuminate broad areas of the British past still obscure to present-day historians.

NOTES

1. One outstanding work of British cultural history before the concept was formulated is R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, (London, 1926); indeed, the entire "Protestant Ethic" controversy, beginning with Max Weber, was essentially an issue of cultural history.

2. For the historians, see Keith Thomas, "History and Anthropology," *Past and Present* 24 (April 1963), 3-24; H. Stuart Hughes, "History, the Humanities, and Anthropological Change," in *History as Art and as Science* (New York, 1964), pp. 22-41. On the anthropological side, see W. C. Sturtevant, "Anthropology, History and Ethnohistory," in James Clifton, ed., *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (Boston, 1967), pp. 450-475.

3. For recent discussions of cultural history, see John William Ward, "History and the Concept of Culture," in Ward, *Red, White and Blue: Men, Books and Ideas in American Culture* (New York, 1969), pp. 3-17; and Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner, "Culture, History and the History of Culture," in Coben and Ratner, eds., *The Development of an American Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), pp. 1-11.

4. Some outstanding examples are Lawrence Stone, "The Educational Revolution in England 1560-1640," 28 (July 1964), 41-80; H. F. Kearney, "Puritanism, Capitalism and the Scientific Revolution," 28 (July 1964), 81-101; Christopher Hill, rejoinder to Kearney, 29 (December 1964), 88-97; Keith Thomas, "Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society," 29 (December

1964), 50-62; C. H. George, "Puritanism as History and Historiography," **41** (December 1968), 77-104; Carol Z. Wiener, "The Beleaguered Isle: Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism," **51** (May 1971), 27-62; as well as two important articles by E. P. Thompson discussed below: "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," and "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." See also such recent books in the "*Past and Present* tradition" as Christopher Hill's *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964), Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), and Alan Macfarlane's *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1970).

5. See such articles as Brian Harrison, "Underneath the Victorians," **10**:239-262 (March 1967); John Kent, "The Victorian Resistance," **12**:145-154 (December 1968); D. C. Moore, "Political Morality in Mid-Nineteenth Century England," **13**:5-36 (September 1969); Brian Harrison, "Liberalism and the Temperance Press," **13**:125-158 (December 1969); Richard N. Price, "The Working Men's Club Movement and Victorian Social Reform Ideology," **15**:117-147 (December 1971).

6. Many psychologists have focused their efforts on the study of motivation as more knowable and more clearly related to behavior. See, for instance, D. C. McClelland, J. W. Atkinson, R. A. Clark, and E. L. Lowell, *The Achievement Motive* (New York, 1953). The sociological usefulness of this approach is questioned in John H. Kunkel, "Some Behavioral Aspects of Social Change and Economic Development," in Robert K. Burgess and Don Bushell, Jr., eds., *Behavioral Sociology* (New York, pp. 1969), pp. 321-365.

7. See the classic early statement by Johan Huizinga, "The Task of Cultural History" (1929), in *Men and Ideas* (New York, 1959), pp. 17-76, especially pp. 28 and 57.

8. The literature on modern British economic lag is enormous; for a start, see D. S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus* (Cambridge, 1969); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (London, 1968); A. L. Levine, *Industrial Retardation in Britain 1880-1914* (New York, 1967); and D. H. Aldcroft and P. Fearon, eds., *Economic Growth in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1969).

9. Aor arguments that economic lag owed little or nothing to specific British attitudes or values, see Donald McCloskey, ed., *Essays on a Mature Economy: Britain After 1840* (London, 1971), pp. 239-309.

10. New Haven, 1957. See also Henry May, *The End of American Innocence* (New York, 1959), esp. Chapters IV and V, for a similar approach in American history.

11. Cambridge, Mass., 1968.

12. "American Studies: A Defense of an Unscientific Method," *New Literary History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (October 1969), 77.

13. *American Quarterly*, **17** (1965), 274.

14. "Samuel Smiles and the Victorian Work Ethic: The Rise and Decline of the Ideal of Self-Help, 1830-1890," Yale University Ph.D. Dissertation, 1970.

15. New York, 1967.

16. See Peter Stearns, "Britain and the Spread of the Industrial Revolution," in C. J. Bartlett, ed., *Britain Pre-eminent* (London, 1969), p. 22.

17. "Time" in *Past and Present* **38** (December 1967), 56-97; "Crowd" in **50** (February 1971), pp. 76-136.

18. Thompson makes use of the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, R. K. Merton, Georges Friedmann, Clark Kerr, and many other economists, sociologists, and anthropologists.

19. This point has been argued by Keith Thomas in his article "History and Anthropology" (see note 2), and demonstrated by him in his impressive *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

20. Richard Merritt, "The Emergence of American Nationalism: A Quantitative Approach," *American Quarterly* **17** (1965), 321.

21. Ole R. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Reading, Mass., 1969), p. 14. See Harold Lasswell, et al., *The Comparative Study of Symbols* (Stanford, Calif., 1952), the first important statement of the method; Robert C. North, et al., *Content Analysis*

(Evanston, Ill., 1963); and Melvin Small, ed., *Public Opinion and Historians* (Detroit, 1970). Holsti's work is the best introduction to the subject.

22. *Symbols of American Community, 1735-1775* (New Haven, 1966). For a brief account of his work and conclusions, see Richard Merritt, "The Emergence of American Nationalism: A Quantitative Approach," cited in note 20.

23. See his article, "The Agrarian Image of the Large Corporation, 1879-1920: A Study in Social Accommodation," *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1968), 341-362.

24. See D. C. McClelland, et. al., *The Achievement Motive* (New York, 1953); D. C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (New York, 1961); D. C. McClelland and D. Winter, *Motivating Economic Achievement* (New York, 1969). McClelland has specifically urged historians to make use of his techniques, in an address, "How and Why to Code Historical Documents," to the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Washington, D.C., April 1972.

25. See George G. S. Murphy, "Historical Investigation and Automatic Data Processing Equipment," *Computers and the Humanities*, 3 (1968-69), 11. For other similar problems, see Melvin Small, "Historians Look at Public Opinion," in Small, ed., *Public Opinion and Historians* (Detroit, 1970), especially pp. 28-31.