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Cultural history

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The term **cultural history** (from the German term *Kulturgeschichte*) refers both to an [academic discipline](#) and to its subject matter.

Cultural history, as a discipline, at least in its common definition since the 1970s, often combines the approaches of [anthropology](#) and [history](#) to look at [popular cultural](#) traditions and cultural interpretations of historical experience. It examines the records and [narrative](#) descriptions of past [knowledge](#), [customs](#), and [arts](#) of a group of [people](#). Its subject matter encompasses the continuum of events occurring in succession leading from the past to the present and even into the future pertaining to a [culture](#).

Cultural history records and interprets past events involving human beings through the [social](#), [cultural](#), and [political milieu](#) of or relating to the arts and manners that a group favors. [Jacob Burckhardt](#) helped found cultural history as a discipline. Cultural history studies and interprets the record of [human societies](#) by denoting the various distinctive ways of living built up by a group of people under consideration. Cultural history involves the aggregate of past cultural activity, such as ceremony, class in practices, and the interaction with locales.

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Description

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Cultural history overlaps in its approaches with the French movements of *histoire des mentalités* (Philippe Poirrier, 2004) and the so-called *new history*, and in the U.S. it is closely associated with the field of [American studies](#). As originally conceived and practiced by 19th Century Swiss historian [Jakob Burckhardt](#) with regard to the [Italian Renaissance](#), cultural history was oriented to the study of a particular historical period in its entirety, with regard not only for its painting, sculpture and architecture, but for the economic basis underpinning society, and the social institutions of its daily life as well.^[1]

Most often the focus is on phenomena shared by non-elite groups in a society, such as: [carnival](#), [festival](#), and [public rituals](#); [performance](#) traditions of [tale](#), [epic](#), and other verbal forms; cultural evolutions in human relations (ideas, sciences, arts, techniques); and cultural expressions of social movements such as [nationalism](#). Also examines main historical concepts as [power](#), [ideology](#), [class](#), [culture](#), [cultural identity](#), [attitude](#), [race](#), [perception](#) and new historical methods as narration of body. Many studies consider adaptations of traditional culture to [mass media](#) (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, posters, etc.), from [print to film](#) and, now, to the [Internet](#) (culture of [capitalism](#)). Its modern approaches come from [art history](#), [Annales](#), [Marxist school](#), [microhistory](#) and new cultural history.

Common theoretical [touchstones](#) for recent cultural history have included: [Jürgen Habermas](#)'s formulation of the [public sphere](#) in *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*; [Clifford Geertz](#)'s notion of 'thick description' (expounded in, for example, *The Interpretation of Cultures*); and the idea of [memory](#) as a cultural-historical category, as discussed in [Paul Connerton](#)'s *How Societies Remember*.

A vague delineation

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Historiography and the French Revolution

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An area where new-style cultural history is often pointed to as being almost a [paradigm](#) is the 'revisionist' history of the [French Revolution](#), dated somewhere since [François Furet](#)'s massively influential 1978 essay *Interpreting the French Revolution*. The 'revisionist interpretation' is often characterised as replacing the allegedly dominant, allegedly [Marxist](#), 'social interpretation' which say the causes of the Revolution in class dynamics. The revisionist approach has tended to put more emphasis on 'political culture'. Reading ideas of political culture through Habermas' conception of the public sphere, historians of the Revolution in the past few decades have looked at the role and position of cultural themes such as [gender](#), [ritual](#), and [ideology](#) in the context of pre-revolutionary French political culture.

Historians who might be grouped under this umbrella are [Roger Chartier](#), [Robert Darnton](#), [Patrice Higonnet](#), [Lynn Hunt](#), Keith Baker, Joan Landes, Mona Ozouf and [Sarah Maza](#). Of course, these scholars all pursue fairly diverse interests, and perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on the paradigmatic nature of the new history of the French Revolution. Colin Jones, for example, is no stranger to cultural history, [Habermas](#), or Marxism, and has persistently argued that the Marxist interpretation is not dead, but can be revived; after all, Habermas' logic was heavily indebted to a Marxist understanding. Meanwhile, Rebecca Spang has also recently argued that for all its emphasis on difference and newness, the 'revisionist' approach retains the idea of the French Revolution as a watershed in the history of (so-called) [modernity](#), and that the problematic notion of 'modernity' has itself attracted scant attention.

Cultural studies

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Cultural studies is an academic discipline popular among a diverse group of scholars. It combines [political economy](#), [communication](#), [sociology](#), [social theory](#), [literary theory](#), [media theory](#), [film/video studies](#), [cultural anthropology](#), [philosophy](#), [museum studies](#) and [art history/criticism](#) to study cultural phenomena in various societies. Cultural studies researchers often concentrate on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of [ideology](#), [nationality](#), [ethnicity](#), [social class](#), and/or [gender](#). The term was coined by [Richard Hoggart](#) in 1964 when he founded the Birmingham [Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies](#). It has since become strongly associated with [Stuart Hall](#), who succeeded Hoggart as Director.

Further reading

[\[edit\]](#)

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General information

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- Rebecca Spang, *Paradigms and Paranoia: how modern is the French Revolution* , *American Historical Review*, 108 (2003)

Citations and notes

- ↑ Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* (6th ed.), p 3.

Categories: Cultural history | Cultural studies | Theories of history | Sociocultural evolution | Fields of history



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