

Exploring Historical Anthropology

Jacques Le Goff and Aaron J. Gurevich

Leonore Scholze-Irrlitz

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The different styles of research of two historians – Jacques Le Goff and Aaron J. Gurevich – are analysed and compared. Both understand anthropology as the basis of a new all-encompassing attempt at synthesising historical studies, and produce independent results by taking into consideration literary-hermeneutical, ethnological and structuralistic methods, thus forming two different co-existing “styles of relationship” of medieval mentality. Le Goff and Gurevich contribute to historical anthropology and to a publicly effective renewal of the science of history through explanatory, deterministic and contemporary examination. An interview with A. J. Gurevich on the relationship between social history and the history of mentality is published as an appendix.

Dr. phil. Leonore Scholze-Irrlitz, Eichbergstr. 23, D-12589 Berlin-Wilhelmshagen.

This paper deals with the styles of research and the methods of Jacques Le Goff and Aaron J. Gurevich – two historians from very different scientific traditions. The contribution both of these medieval specialists have made to historical anthropology reveals new dimensions in the science of history.

J. Le Goff and the new historiography in France

The contemporary French science of history was significantly influenced by the journal “*Annales*”, founded 1929 by M. Bloch and L. Febvre and their associates. Starting with a criticism of the working and cognitive practices of positivism and the “history of events”, an interdisciplinary base was established which worked in close cooperation with a new understanding of sources and geared itself to socio-psychological questioning. Le Goff who (like F. Braudel, G. Duby or E. Le Roy Ladurie perhaps) fits into this tradition, does not carry out regional studies, but following M. Lombard’s study of time and space in Islam, deals with the interpretation of the world of consciousness and feelings in terms of real time

and space (Le Goff 1970: 215 and 1977: 25, Le Goff & Chartier 1990: 13). Significant for the “*Annales*” school and also for Le Goff are further the comparative methods of historical interpretation and the concept of “*histoire totale*” (Le Goff 1983: XI, Honegger 1977: 13–14, Burke 1991: 29). The “*Annales*” went through three stages of development, the last of which is characterized by J. Le Goff, E. Le Roy Ladurie and M. Ferro’s takeover of the journal and by a turn to the examination of fundamental human feelings and modes of expression and to the complexes of childhood, death, fear etc., linked to an expansion of the concept of source. Le Goff also influenced the “third stage of development” by assuming Presidency of the “*Sixième section*” of the “*École Pratique des Hautes Etudes*” in 1972, and by the subsequent founding of the “*École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*” in 1975 (Le Goff 1989b: 162).¹

A fundamental element of Le Goff’s working methods is his comprehensive idea of sources, which is in a state of constant development and encompasses everything created by man. Le Goff also uses various methods from other disciplines such as comparative literature and

ethnology in order to decipher his sources. His works reveal that sources have three main characteristics: 1. most sources are fragmented and always require mutual comparison; 2. some sources appear to be disguised reality, which is why questions are often asked about the relationship between concept and reality; 3. for the early Middle Ages the sources are almost invariably indirect and can only be deciphered by iconographical, linguistic and natural scientific methods.

In Le Goff's works the analysis of social place and time is at the centre of his observations of space and time which are the traditional categories of historical cognition, which is in accordance with French tradition cf. M. Halbwachs. This is revealed most concisely in his examination of the difference between the "time of the Church" and the "time of the trader" (Le Goff 1984: 13 and 1990: 87, Halbwachs 1985: 101). Just as in his works on Purgatory – which I will deal with in greater detail below – a great radical change in medieval society is brought into the centre of play i.e. man's changing mastery of the factor of time, a change which could be seen as heralding a new era. Le Goff, whose medieval period stretches from the third to the nineteenth century, examines how, over long periods of time, available collective images and ideas fall into certain space-time dependencies and how society's ideas can be decisively influenced. His analyses show how as part of rationality, calculating thought (and associated behaviour) can free itself from magical thought. Le Goff outlines two different systems of logic which belong to different lifestyles and perspectives, and on which different social organisation is based.

In his analyses, Le Goff also uses the methods of structure which, thanks to F. Braudel, have become synonymous with the French structural history, and which began to develop in the works of sociologists, economic historians, ethnologists and anthropologists in the 1920s. Thus influenced, Le Goff was stimulated greatly by G. Dumézil's studies of the structural triad in Indo-Germanic thought, and by C. Lévi-Strauss' myth analysis (Le Goff 1989b: 158, Dumézil 1989). He holds that

structures are the precondition for every causal explanation. Using structuring as a method, he succeeds in linking and ordering the facts of complex material. Two stages of structural analysis can be distinguished in Le Goff's works: first of all – space-time studies and later, structural analyses of medieval literary texts. Key concepts used to structure the material are culture, ideology, imagination, values, popular and learned culture. In Le Goff the idea of structure is used in the methodological sense as "categorical conception". Unlike M. Aymard for example, who describes the function of structure and conjuncture primarily as a means of classification, Le Goff uses structured questioning as a means of explanation. In medieval literature, for example, Le Goff asks if, and to what extent, the images and symbols are a record of historical reality (Le Goff 1990: 392 and 221). Following Lévi-Strauss very closely he tries to analyse the plot of certain novels by looking at the codes for food and clothes. Structural points of view offer new cognitive possibilities for Le Goff also in the framework of methodical considerations, as human thought and worldview are explained as constituent parts of social relationships on different levels in literary texts. This idea of a network of relations appears in hermeneutical and structural interpretations as opposed to a linear determinant of basis and superstructure and also contrary to spectacular-metaphorical interpretations. In some of Le Goff's chosen examples, however, the danger remains of not being able to piece together adequately the individual pieces after a text has been broken down. The completion of a structural analysis through hermeneutical analysis leads to a better understanding of the whole and it is here, as often happens with Le Goff, that his examples provide a stimulus for further research.

In general Le Goff uses the idea of mentality and ties it in to his research. Starting with E. Durkheim, twentieth century usage of the concept of mentality in France began with L. Lévy-Bruhl and M. Mauss who introduced the term "collective ideas" in association with it (Durkheim 1967: 46, Lévy-Bruhl 1921: 5, Mauss 1989, vol. II: 158). In view of the idea of

mentality, which has become synonymous with more recent French historiography and whose blurredness is often criticised in Germany, Le Goff asks if this problematic term should be developed or allowed to disappear (Oexle 1981: 88, Le Goff 1989a: 31). He understands the "history of mentality" as the history of "the collective psychology of societies". To research this, he concentrates on mentalities delimited in space and time, and by group and class. In so doing, he goes beyond P. Ariès and G. Bouthoul, who regarded mentality as a feature that might describe the society of an entire era (Le Goff 1988: 219 and 1989a: 21, 27–29).

With specific examples such as the development of the sociological triad of priests, warriors and peasants, and the "origin of Purgatory", Le Goff examines vocabulary, syntax, figures of speech, concepts of space and time, gestures and symbols. Le Goff opened up new possibilities for historical analysis with his depiction of the origin of Purgatory. Firstly he showed that the development of collective thought in images does not remain nebulous but becomes rooted in space; secondly he showed that there are also stages of development with regard to the images and collective impressions of social groups – this issue of the relationship between images and social reality allowed meaningful opinions to be expressed which left aside the danger of anthropological constants; thirdly, when developing the idea of Purgatory, the opposing influences of reality, images and ideology and particularly the close relationship between the imaginary and the ideological become extraordinarily plastic (Le Goff 1982: 411, 413 and 1984: 185–187, 200, 274–275, 289–291, 399); lastly, to a certain extent Le Goff overcomes the methodical problem of purely selective continuous association of meaning and social processes, when he explains how, on the basis of hitherto barely perceptible social changes in the Middle Ages, "mental revolutions" took place in connection with far-reaching social changes.

The main concepts of A. J. Gurevich

Gurevich began his historical investigations with studies on the social structure of Scandinavia and England from the ninth to the eleventh century whereby he became aware of the significance of socio-psychological questioning. During the Soviet Union's "Thaw" of the second half of the 1950s, the possibility arose of discussing the methodology of the social sciences. Gurevich thus realised that the idea of social formation was an unsuitable means for explaining history and found support among several other historians in the Soviet Union. Gurevich to this day still has much in common with the working methods of linguists and semiotics such as Yu. Lotman who raised the issue of the connection between the modes of literature in history, and determinants of literary work structure. Gurevich also tries to use or develop structural methods of analysis and description when researching social and cultural phenomena (Gurevich 1991b: 438–444).

Gurevich goes on to question the general feudalism model because it does not represent a synthesis of a possible multitude of special cases (Gurevich 1966: 182). Following M. Weber's ideal types he is developing an independent method of theory and model building in history with the help of "categories". He is thus working with a comprehensive anthropological idea of culture in contrast to other Soviet researchers who mostly deal only with spiritual culture. In semiotic models of structure, culture is understood as "meta-language", as a system of differing mental and psychological conditions of human behaviour in a given society at a given time; culture also covers all fields of human life and experience, general attitudes and habitual ways of thinking as well as types of worldviews. Gurevich's idea of culture is thus similar to other Russian and Soviet scientists such as Karsavin, Likhachev, Bakhtin and Kashdan. He divides the categories which represent the basic semantic inventory of a culture into cosmic and social categories. The cosmic categories are those which constitute culture. The respective configurations of the categories build not only different levels of culture within a society, but also dif-

ferent levels in the development of social systems (Gurevich 1991b: 373, Yastrebiskaja 1990: 131–133, Lotman 1981: 26, Gurevich 1978: 13, 15 and 18). In regarding social systems as totalities, Gurevich overcomes the simple dichotomy of basis and superstructure. This methodical approach is particularly clear in his analysis of the Germanic “Institution of Giving” which could be regarded as a specific form of thinking and acting. Giving is also linked with economic functions and demonstrates the origin of a graded social hierarchy with differing forms of dependency. Looking at this complex of closely related political, socio-ethical and economic elements which can be studied in symbolic coherence, Gurevich achieves a more comprehensive explanation than G. Duby, for example, who with similar material only asks about function (Gurevich 1968: 136 and 1970: 304, Duby 1984: 66–68).

Popular culture as a significant constituent of the medieval cultural system

Over the past twenty years Gurevich has devoted a great number of his works to the problem of popular culture. Whilst these issues were attracting interest in west European tradition from Herder and the Romantics, they have their own history in Russian development. The difference between Russia's geo-political size and its economic backwardness in the last century has given rise to more studies of its own history, and concentration on a specific, deeper tradition of popular culture; Bakhtin's and Gurevich's works should therefore be regarded in this light. Gurevich develops the problem of popular culture from his model of the differing layers of culture and religion within the medieval perception of the world. The idea of world view which is geared to ethnological and philosophical techniques, documents a clear awareness of research methodology (Gurevich 1978: 353 and 1991b: 16). It assists the mutual elucidation of isolated historical facts and how they fit together, and offers the possibility of combining specific aspects of an era. Characteristic of Gurevich's approach to popular culture is: firstly the way he concentrates on sources (e.g. visions), whose development is essentially the product

of a “dialogue” (Gurevich 1986: 335 and 1991a: 378–379); secondly, his attempt to approach the system of collective ideas; thirdly, his efforts to take the methodical path along the “Grotesque” model (which it permits really well) in order to develop the specifics of a “popular attitude of mind”; and fourthly, the way he draws up differentiated categories and systems of questioning, which enable him to access both popular culture and learned culture.

The central idea of “dialogue” in Gurevich's creative understanding of history, which for him represents the basis of possible research into popular culture, can also be found in other Russian and Soviet conceptions such as in Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman. Bakhtin developed the theory of dialogue relationship in linguistic texts and the relationship between text and readers.² In discussing and continuing Bakhtin's thesis of the “carnivalistic culture of laughter”, Gurevich uses the ideas of the “Grotesque” and the “Paradox” in medieval culture, and demonstrates a system of collective ideas which does not regard myth and reality, the serious and the light-hearted, experiences and visions of life on earth and of the transcendental world as mutually exclusive, but united in consciousness (Gurevich 1986: 307).

Le Goff and Gurevich on Purgatory

As a comparative synthesis of what I have said above, I would like to examine Le Goff's and Gurevich's different approaches in more depth using Purgatory as an example. While Le Goff is looking for the rational elements in the visions of the Hereafter on the origin of Purgatory, Gurevich concentrates on mythical thoughts. He proceeds in a similar way to the ethnological, folkloristic (in the sense of fairy-tale analysis and interpretation) and philosophical studies on mythical thought when he compares two different visions of roughly the same period: that of “Thurkill” who lived in the English county of Essex, noted in 1206 by the Cistercian monk Ralph of Coggeshall, and that of the Holstein peasant Gottschalk, noted in 1189.³ Although the different spatial ideas lack strict organisation, Gurevich takes the

spatial differences as qualitative differences. He relates them to the consciousness of the people as though they were linked with specific feelings. Unlike Le Goff it is not a case of outward differences in the individual places of the Hereafter, or of clear departments; instead, Gurevich portrays the places of purification, particularly in relation to the idea of the mythical place, thus similar to Cassirer's characteristics of mythical thought (Gurevich 1984: 58 and 62).⁴

Using a differentiated comparative analysis of motives, Gurevich shows that the system of relations between popular and learned culture was not one-sided or schematic even in the Middle Ages. Ideological Christian dogmatic teaching is not influenced by visions of the Hereafter according to a universal model, but from various other sources, here for example from Cistercian monks. That is why it is possible to distinguish variations in the relationship between Christian and popular ideas of space and time.

This above-mentioned network of relations can generally be applied to the Middle Ages, according to Gurevich. The historian of culture must approach his material with a knowledge of structure, so that he may benefit from folklore and its stock of fairy-tale motifs, and use ethnological works on the idiosyncrasies of mythical thought. Over and above this, it is true of medieval mythical thought that new ideas can be made to correspond to long existing ideas and can be believed according to the laws of fairy tales. Everything numerical with regard to time, space and weight etc. remains inexact.⁵

From these premises the source material of the "visions" gains a different value than in Le Goff, who hardly refers to it. The clear research process and the open way of asking questions permit the assumed precondition to be amended when the result of the studies is known. A different prism from in Le Goff or Ph. Ariès arises. While they maintain that Purgatory did not emerge generally as a concept until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they stress that something like Purgatory could have existed much earlier without a linguistic label (Eliade 1986: 15). Le Goff's usage

of other methods leads to independent conclusions when approaching this problem in the same manner. He uses historico-philological and hermeneutical approaches to situate the development of the concept of Purgatory at the close of the twelfth century. As a starting point for his studies he systematically chooses the existence of a physical place and the existence of words such as "purgatorium" or "gestus". Gurevich, however, observes and studies the aesthetic and mythical symbols and elaborates Thurkill's attitudes through "close reading" (P. Burke). He concludes that Purgatory had long been an integral element of belief and popular culture even by the early Middle Ages (Le Goff 1984: 232, 240 and 1983b: 82; Burke 1988: IX).

In the given context, the value of symbols and images is brought into question. Gurevich's conclusions can be compared with G. Dumézil's works on the mechanics of mythical thinking. For Dumézil, mythical thinking lays in between dream and language thinking, "whereby it from dreams gets the character of the pictorial, the dramatic and the generally symbolic, and from speech, the character of the clear, the articulated and the generally coherent". He maintains that no change takes place in language, but that important relationships (causal relations, similarities and opposites) represent the dawning of consciousness in translated form in images and scenes, without ever leading to a "disassociation of the whole" (Dumézil 1959: 234).

Without equating forms of medieval thought with mythical thought (as previously said, Gurevich too stresses the syncretism of pre-Christian and Christian thought), questions arise relating to the theoretical fixing of this "assembled, pictorial and logical nature" (Dumézil). In his portrayal, Gurevich does not surpass a descriptive and illustrative method, and obstacles arise which reveal mechanisms in the psychic sphere. He raises doubts, however, about Le Goff's approach, whereby he, given the economic and political development of town culture, brings together the theological triad of Heaven-Purgatory-Hell and the sociological triad of praedicatores-bellatores-laboratores to explain the origin, and sees these triads as manifestations of a change in the

structures of consciousness with the beginning of the eleventh century (Gurevich 1983b: 87).

In my opinion, the different interpretations, whereby Gurevich does not dispute the emergence of the idea of Purgatory in twelfth and thirteenth century dogmatics, arise because connections are made between the different varieties of social and religious experience. Gurevich and Le Goff describe two different co-existing "styles of relationship" and the question of "how entry to the supernatural can be won, from whom, how and with which questions for man and his relations with his fellow men" (Brown 1986: 26–27). It is therefore shown that it is not a matter of whether the mental structure determines social structure, or vice versa, but that it is a matter of interaction. Here the possibilities of the history of mentality are inestimable as a contemporary concept of bringing to light the totality of different levels of mind.

Concluding remarks

I return to the relationship between anthropology and history, which was very important for the development of history as a science. Starting with the Enlightenment with its naturalisation of the idea of man through which the cultural field (state, morality, family etc.) should have been brought closer to the empirical sciences, the more precise opinion arose at the end of the eighteenth century that anthropology was really a historical discipline or even an empirical science, rather than a pure natural science. Kant brought these interrelations together into a succinct methodical expression and made clear distinctions between purely theoretical sciences, and empirical and applied sciences. Anthropology is the empirically unifying science of man. In the French scientific tradition – Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau etc. – the history of anthropology within the historical sciences of man is, on the one hand, the history of the emancipation of thought through constantly renewed dogmatic schemes, and on the other hand the process of scientific generalisation. Lévi-Strauss, for example, also strove for a new level in the objectivity of scientific understanding, in his

search for different, elementary units of structure in language and relationships etc. In this tradition, Le Goff and Gurevich are again, in the twentieth century, pursuing a renewal of the science of history which has been moulded by ethnology and structuralism.

In my opinion this approach to the science of history which has been inspired by ethnological questions and results, contains three important features: 1. an integral way of looking at things in which geographical conditions, social relationships, forms of production and believing, and bills of rights are studied in relation to each other; 2. specific forms of the understanding of "the alien" are developed; 3. following C. Geertz' "thick description", an extensive transparency of the research process is striven for (Davis 1986: 45; Benedict 1955: 191 and 206; Geertz 1983: 7–43; Ginzburg 1984: 204). Firstly, transparency means that the bases of scientific discourse can be made more effective by asking questions, and through sources. Secondly, the possibility arises of taking history beyond a learned audience and making it accessible to the public, which is the case with Le Goff and Gurevich. Understanding and explaining without being rash with their judgement are common to both their styles. The main emphasis in Le Goff's and Gurevich's idea of an "histoire totale" is, however, different: Le Goff studies dependencies between economic and social changes for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries through religious ideas, impressions and gestures. For him "totality" means progress toward new themes. Gurevich, however, through his categories of culture as constituent parts of the perception of the world, chooses a different approach, which finds expression in the openness of the questions he raises – both are particularly evident with regard to the genesis of Purgatory.

Finally, it should be emphasised that Le Goff and Gurevich defend the methods of a "history of problems" and of a deterministic model of historical explanation, in the face of a turn to a straightforward narrative historiography. The history of mentalities and the imaginary is based upon a richer concept of man which reaches out into the psyche. In this is expressed an admiration of man who is act-

ing according to his wishes, images and ideas, because the producer is always placed over the product.

Interview with A. J. Gurevich*

Scholze-Irrlitz:

When reading about the history of mentality and whilst preparing my dissertation on Berthold von Regensburg (Irrlitz 1988) and searching for questions I could ask my sources, I was astounded by your article "Izuchenie mental'nostei" (The study of mentality) in the journal "Sovetskaya Etnografiya" (Soviet Ethnography). In it you list the questions that you have asked in your own works such as: "trak-tovka prostranstva, vremeni i istorii, ponimanie mesta cheloveka v obshchei strukture mirozdaniya, obraz prirody i sposoby vozdeistviya na nee ot trudovykh do magicheskikh, otnoshenie mira zemnogo i mira transcendentnogo i osobonno sootnoshenie officialnoi i intellektualnoi kul'tury z narodnoi ili fol'klornoi kul'turoi. (The study of space, time and history, understanding man's place in the general structure of the Universe, images of nature and means (from work to magic) of influencing it, the relationship between life on Earth and transcendental life, and especially the interrelationship between official and intellectual culture, and popular or folkloric culture.)

You then say, however, that these questions are not appropriate to the historical material, which I did not fully understand.

Gurevich:

I am of the opinion that a historian's productivity depends on the way he asks questions: the more correct, interesting and adequate the question he can put to his sources, the more answers he will inevitably get from them. Where does the historian get his questions? I believe that they are primarily dictated by his surroundings, that is, we are not able to put questions to the sources about things we do not find interesting. This means that our culture and sense of belonging in the present dictate particular interest to us which are reflected in

the way our questions are put. We then put these questions to the people of the past. These people no longer exist, but there are texts and features which could be used as historical sources.

In this sense, I think that the science of history is a dialogue between us and the people of the past, between our culture and past cultures. I feel that this dialogue is not merely a string of metaphors, but something more serious, as each generation of historians is forever putting new questions to the same sources and cultures, which can in fact answer many, though perhaps not all, of them. So in a way a dialogue develops, which is prompted not only by us, but perhaps also by medieval man. That is, if one reads objectively and thoughtfully those historical features or works which reflect the world view of people of the past, one can find out things one did not ask about, i.e. I put questions to them, and they answer me. It could, however, be that they tell me things I did not ask, and then make me ask new questions. Thus a dialogue develops. That is one way of looking at it.

The question then arises of whether I, as a contemporary person, am putting questions to the sources which are important to me as a man of the late twentieth century, but which were of no importance to men of antiquity? Do you understand the danger? I am asking questions of ancient man's world view which have been dictated by my own world view, which is clearly different. Are my questions not then distorting their world view by bringing problems to the fore which for them were not at all pressing?

I asked a similar question at the beginning of my article on Berthold von Regensburg. Take the concepts of "personality" and "time". They are interesting for the twentieth century man, but did the thirteenth century man, even Berthold, discuss them? It could be proved that I have made it appear so, as he was interested in other things, yet I raised this particular issue and thus distorted his perception of the world. When I read Berthold von Regensburg I asked myself this question. You have studied him, have I understood it correctly?

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Yes.

Gurevich:

Do you remember the parable of the five talents or five pounds? I was amazed by it. I read it without thinking of the questions I had asked in, for example, my book "Categories of Medieval Culture", and I suddenly discovered that in this parable he asked this same question but about the person. So what is a person? It is obviously characterized by features such as position, time, year, etc. Yet I was amazed that a thirteenth century man recognized that time was such an important aspect of person. At that time traditional history writing was of the opinion that the problem of time was not discussed until the fourteenth century. We can see this in Le Goff's article "The time of the Church and time of the trader". He studies the age of the merchants from fourteenth and fifteenth century material, yet Berthold raised this issue in the mid-thirteenth century, naturally through the eyes of a thinker and preacher of the time. This was not the age of the merchant, but the age of salvation of the soul. So at whom was this sermon directed? Primarily at the citizens and town dwellers as in other "sermons". Not only is this the age of salvation of the soul but also the age of craftsmen and merchants. I was surprised, therefore, that the issue I am raising today had already been raised but in a different interpretation.

Does your question have anything to do with this?

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Yes, and I would like to ask what the relationship is between the central categories you researched in, for example, your book "Categories of Medieval Culture", and mentality.

Gurevich:

Mentality is a particular socio-psychological condition which is not always defined. One could ask what is your religion – protestant, atheist? How do you view the world? One could say, materialistically. So these questions cannot be asked – not because they don't deal with

mentality – everyone has mentality, but because mentality is on a plane of our consciousness that we can not define. We speak prose without knowing it. It is something intangible.

When we study the perception of the world, however, I think that this perception (like a selection of particular ideas which exist without being consciously expressed) and mentality show through in particular aspects and categories of this perception of the world. I would say therefore, that to a certain extent mentality and world perception are either two sides of the same coin or perhaps more precisely that world perception is a particular expression of mentality. To a certain extent we can list certain categories of world perception: space, time, the Hereafter, eternity, wealth, freedom, need, right, etc., behind which there hides a kind of magma of human feelings and impressions. They do solidify somewhere, however, and it seems to me that they solidify to form one's perception of the world.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Where do you see the main constituent of the culture historical idea of mentality – in this magma perhaps?

Gurevich:

I think so, because it is inexhaustible and defined for and by itself when we ask questions such as how people perceive the various aspects of their social, religious, political or natural life and how they relate to them.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

What do you consider the most important advantages of approaching culture historical research through mentality? In the 1950s the term "mentality" was not used and was not in use until the 1960s and 1970s. You did not refer to mentality very often in your 1972 work "Categories of Medieval Culture". Its use is widespread today, hence my question about its advantages.

Gurevich:

I must digress a little. Unlike Le Goff, I do not consider myself a historian of culture or a historian of mentality. I was brought up a social

historian, and that I remain. I started to study the agricultural history of Germany and England, i.e. traditional issues of social structure and feudal exploitation, at this University under Professors A. Y. Nyussychin and Kosminsky.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

I have read your works and that I can imagine.

Gurevich:

Fine. I gradually came to the conclusion that I would not be able to solve any further problems of social history if I did not study the spiritual horizon of the people concerned, because we usually had some kind of abstract social structures in front of us. The very concept of social history, then gave rise to enrichment and expansion, and the issues of mentality proved to be inseparable aspects of social history.

Social history is the history of the people, and people are not physical bodies (I say fundamental things because they should be said), but beings who do not allow their activities, behaviour and dealings to be governed purely by material considerations. Look at it this way: peasants are exploited even more and they revolt. It could also happen that they are exploited even more and they remain placid, okay? They give their land to some monastery or other, not because the peasants are being impoverished, but because they must save their souls for another reason. I must also say it is not possible to understand socio-economic processes if we do not understand what is going on in the heads, consciousness and hearts of these people. Mentality and culture are therefore to be understood in the ethnological or cultural and social anthropological sense otherwise I feel that social relations can not be understood. That is why the real definition of social history needs to be expanded.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

So what is the case with works such as Le Roy Ladurie's "Montaillou"? I think he deals with social history as well as mentality.

Gurevich:

That is quite correct. Ladurie also started out as an historian of the peasants and came to realise the necessity of clarifying all these subjective aspects of their behaviour in order to understand what really happened to them. It is the same with Georges Duby.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Do you see any limits to the use of the term mentality, or any difficulties resulting from the basic impossibility of limiting and defining it?

Gurevich:

You know, every historian who refers to mentality or studies its categories always says that it is not clear what mentality is. It is a very difficult concept to define, and Jacques Le Goff, who has written a lot about it, says that mentality is a very ambiguous concept, and I agree entirely. It should not be forgotten, however, that no historical term can be defined as rigidly as terms of natural science. I have just spoken about the concept of social history, and said that I began to understand it first on one level, then on another, although it seemed that everyone knew what social history was. In reality, everyone interprets this concept differently, but it is not that simple. By its very nature and content, mentality is a very difficult concept to define. Difficult, because of its internal structure, vagueness, and lack of structure, but above all because of its all-embracing character, and because it is an ether in which our entire historical essence has been submerged. Where does mentality end? It doesn't. Man's entire world has been submerged in its mental sphere. That does not mean that man's world consists only of mentality – it also consists of philosophy, religion, science, aesthetics and all other possible phenomena of man's spiritual existence. But it is basically where the individual flourish of culture, philosophy, religion etc., the world of perception, the world where one's perception of the world is born. That is why I believe that the impossibility of providing an exact definition of mentality is due to the very nature of this world.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

In which cultural fields does mentality play a part – in art, philosophy, religion for example, or only in traditions?

Gurevich:

No. I believe that mentality can be found not just in philosophy, religion, art and tradition, but anywhere and everywhere. Another thing to ask is how it can be found, what steps must be taken and methods used to find it, and how must a topic be manipulated to find traces of mentality in it? I think, however, that it is always present in some form or other.

Another thing to remember is that there are different levels of consciousness. Let's suppose that you want to analyse Thomas Aquinas' "Summa Theologiae". It is more difficult to find mentality in his works than in Berthold von Regensburg's, whose "sermones" were aimed at the masses and the community. Thomas Aquinas', however, turned to that small group of students and professors of Academia, but nevertheless I believe there is mentality in his works; just as there is in his readers. But this is the background which was rationalized by philosophical thought. Contradictions were left to one side and everything was lined up neatly. This is the case in Thomas Aquinas' works. His own consciousness, however, apparently had a different structure, but how can it be traced? Or even, can it? As far as Thomas is concerned I can't say anything, but with Berthold not only can his philosophical principles be seen but, also other depths and these so-called existential depths I find the most interesting.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Towards the end of your book "Categories of Medieval Culture", you speak of an "invariable" in the historico-cultural process, and my next question is linked to that. Do the categories by which historical precedents are set represent a super-historical structure? Is the process of history to be treated so objectively that different historical periods of time always represent the same categories in individual eras? Are there, for example, set categories

such as time, work or space for the antiquity, and for the more recent history?

Gurevich:

No. I don't think so. I believe that our ideas of space, time, work etc. have been formulated in accordance with our own twentieth century culture and they can appear to us as specific, as you put it, invariables. When we apply them to other eras, however, we must think how they differ from the categories of the time. The terms can be confusing – they are the same terms but they mean different things. "Time" has been a particular abstraction since Galileo. "Time" appeared and could appear as a powerful force, but could be interpreted in a variety of ways, somewhat circularly. Work – no doubt you know how to interpret the concept of work. In medieval German literature there were studies dedicated to work. It emerged that in the Middle Ages work had a different meaning to what it has in modern times. For us, work and leisure are clearly opposites.

So in this sense, the categories are not invariables: we have our concepts which we must convert into the thoughts of people from another era. I believe, therefore, that it is important to stress their variability here. Let's take Immanuel Kant, for him space and time were absolute categories of consciousness, and being a philosopher and not a historian, he did not wonder if the concepts of space and time changed from generation to generation. He believed that each cognitive act had its own specific preconditions, and he was right. That is the preconditions for each cognitive act. But these preconditions are fundamentally different for ancient man, and modern man. That is my opinion.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Your words on the unchanging course of existence at the end of your "Categories of Medieval Culture", and on the invariance of historico-cultural processes remind me of various works by Lévi-Strauss. Did his thoughts and structuralism have any influence on your works?

Gurevich:

Of course they did. I think that a modern historian cannot distance himself from cultural and structural anthropology or any other modern train of thought. In my approach, however, I always kept any ideas of structuralism at a distance.

It is very important to me to stress the individuality of any phenomenon, rather than its invariance. Does history teach generalities, or individual things? I feel that history always teaches something individual and uses general categories in this individuality, as of the aim of history is to demonstrate the corresponding occurrences to the society and people of the time.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Allow me to ask once again about your teachers.

Gurevich:

Teachers who actually taught me and whose lectures I attended include the aforementioned Professors Kosminsky and Nyussychin. The Chair of Medieval History in the History Faculty of Moscow University was the Faculty's best at the end of the 1940s, and beginning of the 1950s. The most important scientists and representatives of old Russian intelligence were to be found here. They taught and educated us.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Did you also hear Mikhail Bakhtin?

Gurevich:

I never met Bakhtin. The first time I saw him was at his own funeral as he was being lowered into the ground, but I have read his works. His 1965 book on François Rabelais' works made a big impression on me, as it did on many others in my country. So in this sense he is obviously one of my teachers although I never had anything to do with him personally.

I must name another scientist, whom I never saw nor could have as he died in 1944, but whose works I regard as my teacher: Marc Bloch. Marc Bloch strikes me as being this century's greatest historian. He very clearly

explained the issue of historical synthesis, whereby man's material and spiritual phenomena are interrelated. He was able to attempt such a synthesis which no one before him and hardly anyone since had dared to. His works made a great impression on me, not least because I know his biography and therefore study them under the influence of his personality. He also influenced you, didn't he? He is a Heaven-sent historian.

Lastly I must say that when I selected my field in the mid-60s Le Goff's book "La civilisation de l'occident médiéval" made a great impression on me. I regard him as the most talented modern French historian. He influenced me enormously.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

What is the background to your choice of sources which, with regard to the Icelandic sagas, is unique?

Gurevich:

My first dissertation was on the early English peasantry, in particular the specifics of land ownership in England. This was an issue I could not solve with the English and Anglo-Saxon material, as there wasn't enough of it. I therefore decided to turn to Norwegian, Icelandic, and even archaic Germanic material. As I started to deal with the Scandinavian material, new sources appeared, in particular the Norwegian peasants of the early Middle Ages, which was perfect, as they not only appeared as the objects of agreements and exploitation in these features but also as subjects. In the sagas, the poetry and even in the laws, they appeared to me as living, feeling beings who had their own view of the world. This Scandinavian material also proved to be a laboratory for studying the issue of mentality.

You said that my sources were unique, which is clearly a paradox. French historians of mentality who wish to expose mentality, have never consulted Scandinavian material. It is meanwhile a unique source.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Who do you regard as the forerunners or main representatives of cultural history writing of

this, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, J. Huizinga for example?

Gurevich:

Huizinga naturally plays an important role, but I find it difficult to agree with his methods. I would say that he is highly impressionable but his insight into the culture and feelings of late Medieval and early modern man is very important. I have read it all, and it has influenced me greatly. I would like to name one other important author about whom too little is known, but whose works I as a Nordist value: Wilhelm Grønbech, an early twentieth century Danish historian. His penetration of the spiritual and social world of early Medieval Scandinavians is extraordinarily successful. It was all based on brilliant intuition, rather than any specific methods. He too has influenced me greatly. On the whole, many people have influenced me.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

I am familiar with your contributions to the "Annales" and your discussion with Le Goff. Your different opinions result from your sources, and from scholastic and oral tradition. Le Goff demonstrates the origin of Purgatory through two points he regards as decisive: 1. the geographical location of Purgatory must be named; 2. the word "purgatorium" must follow. Do you regard this as important, or should the development of ideas be not so dependant on a linguistic analysis of words?

Gurevich:

I have written something about this. It is possible that the substantive "purgatorium" did not appear in any sources until the 1270s and 1280s. Le Goff has shown that this is indeed the case although it did appear in literature. So, let's assume that this is true. What does it mean? I think it means that at the time the substantive "purgatorium" came into being, a precise concept of Purgatory was being developed, as defined by scholars. In early visions of the Afterlife, however, Purgatory existed but was regarded as a specific part of Hell, a part of the Afterlife from which man's soul can still get to Paradise upon completion of some sort of

suffering. The function of this part of Hell was thus a function of Purgatory and not of Hell. I therefore believe that particular – how should I put it – premonitions of this Purgatory were already present in visions from the sixth century to the eighth century. Le Goff does not deny this, but simply shifts the emphasis.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

In the German translation of "Pour un autre moyen âge", Le Goff writes that he finds it impossible to interpret these sources of oral tradition – and can only interpret scholastic sources. Do you feel that there is a difference between your approach and Le Goff's? You have said that Le Goff deals with culture and society, and you with social history – are there any other differences?

Gurevich:

I can not really make any comparisons because I feel that we can not be compared. He really is an outstanding historian and I bow down before him – I feel he has turned to other things. His first works were devoted to Medieval intellectuals, to bankers and traders in the intellectual sense. He has never dealt with agricultural history or with material history in the true sense of the word. So his research methods are different to mine, as are both our approaches.

Scholze-Irrlitz:

Thank you very much.

Notes

*The conversation took place in May 1990 in the Lomonosov-University during my studies in Moscow. For further details, see my recently published book in German: Leonore Scholze-Irrlitz: *Moderne Konturen historischer Anthropologie. Eine vergleichende Studie zu den Arbeiten von Jacques Le Goff und Aaron J. Gurjewitsch*, Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt/M. u.a., 1994.

1. To the history of the "Sixième Section" cf. Mazon (1985).
2. Compare with the dialogue relationships in connection with linguistics and everyday life (Bakhtin 1969: 102ff.).
3. Le Goff doesn't use the visions in his analysis. He only note that of Thurkill (Le Goff 1984: 452–453).

4. Reference is made here to Cassirer (1953: 106–108).
5. References are made to Eliade (1986: 48–49).

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