

**The Polymath in an Age of Specialization. A two-part event presented by the Research Group ‘Two Cultures of Sciences’ and Cultural Historian Peter Burke at the Centre for Cultural Inquiry (ICI) in Berlin on 12 & 13 October 2018**

On 12 October 2018, the research group ‘Two Cultures of Sciences’ hosted a public event featuring a lecture by British cultural historian Peter Burke. In his talk, Burke focused on the figure of the polymath, which is also at the centre of his next book (forthcoming 2020). The members of the research group reunited the next day for an internal workshop with the renowned historian. Both occasions provided opportunities to engage with the topic of interdisciplinarity: Where does interdisciplinary work succeed? Which factors foster this type of work? What are the niches that polymathy depends on? Which are the types of knowledge that one associates the polymath with?

In his lecture “The Polymath in an Age of Specialization” Burke, who is Professor Emeritus for Cultural History at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Emmanuel College, presented results from his as yet unpublished book. The book results from Burke’s study of the biographies of over 500 polymaths, men as well as (significantly fewer) women. The event was hosted by Fabian Krämer, speaker of the research group ‘Two Cultures of Sciences’, who used the opportunity to introduce the work of the research group to the wider public. Christoph Lundgreen, speaker of *Die Junge Akademie*, and Christoph Holzhey, director of the ICI, welcomed the participants in the name of their respective institutions.

Burke outlined the cultural history of the polymath from da Vinci to Umberto Eco, and confirmed that the polymath continues to survive in our current age of specialization. However, his view of the future was less positive. According to Burke, changes to our knowledge regime that have already advanced to a significant degree threaten the survival of the polymath. He argued that libraries, universities and cultural journals are increasingly losing their ability to serve as niches for academics with diverse interests as they face ever greater struggles, which result from the management obligations of librarians, the teaching and administrative obligations of university professors, and the cost pressures of magazines in the age of digitalization.

At first sight, it may seem absurd to assume that the polymath ever managed to survive the development of disciplinary boundaries, which began in the mid-nineteenth century and which manifests in the division of universities into faculties, departments, and institutes. If one adopts Peter Burke's narrow definition of the term polymath, according to which the simultaneous or sequential practice of two academic disciplines suffices to label someone a polymath, then it is indeed possible to claim that the polymath is still around today. But no matter how the term is defined, it is undeniable that polymaths are facing increasingly difficult times.

The large (and largely young) audience used the opportunity to engage in discussion with one of the most renowned cultural historians of our time. Many of the questions revolved around the way in which Burke had outlined the term "polymath"; in this context, Burke himself differentiated between certain forms of polymathy without which it would not be possible to argue that the polymath has indeed survived into the twentieth century: passive polymath, clustered polymath, serial polymath, and cultural critic. These categories all share one main characteristic: they limit the alleged universality of the polymath. The passive polymath, for example, may follow multiple disciplinary discourses, but does not necessarily actively contribute to more than one of them. It was for instance said of Burke's example Aldous Huxley that he had read the entirety of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The serial polymath, on the other hand, contributes to at least two specialist discourses, not simultaneously, but at two different stages of his career. Burke pointed to Michael Polanyi, who first taught chemistry and later philosophy, as an example of this category. At the same time, Burke's definition of a polymath is built on a foundation that consists primarily of academic knowledge.

The following day, the research group 'Two Cultures of Sciences' sat down once more with Peter Burke, this time at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, for an in-depth discussion on one chapter from his book. Burke offered interesting insights into his reasons and motivation for the project, and expressed his thanks for the feedback provided by the research group.

One of the central topics of the discussion was the relationship between specialization and interdisciplinarity. According to Burke, the lack of polymaths in our age is largely due to the increasing specialization of areas of knowledge. And yet, Burke argues, it is specialization that creates the need for polymaths at short notice, because every new research field can initially only be worked on by academics who are not yet specialists in that field, but in other disciplines.

The group also continued the discussion of how Burke tailored his research enquiry. Among others, they touched on the difficulty of conducting a cultural historical study of polymathy across the centuries and continents without losing sight of the specific aspects of regional and historical variations. For, as tempting as it may be to consider the “poly” within the term polymath as a guarantee for its transhistorical and transcultural comparability, almost all of the constituent elements of the term prove themselves to be unstable: What exactly counts as the “knowledge” that this figure possesses to such an impressive degree?

Which forms of expression in terms of literary genres allow for the articulation of such knowledge? How essential is the terminology used to describe these figures and figurations? Are the French *philosophe* and the German *Universalgelehrte*, based simply on their terminology and the different genres, forms of expression and areas of knowledge they represent, too dissimilar for them to be mentioned in the same breath? Does this also apply to distinctions drawn within one language such as German – as that between *Universalgelehrter* (“polymath”) and *Universalgenie* (“all-around genius”)? The knowledge to be gained from such research requires the perspective of a *longue durée* while remaining forever at odds with the need to pay due attention to the particular in order to prevent a problematic and distortive homogenization of one’s own grand narrative.

In both parts of the event, the question as to where interdisciplinarity is situated in all this played a central role. The issue was discussed on two levels: on the one hand, with regard to areas and forms of knowledge, and on the other hand, with regard to institutions. How would the result of Burke’s study of polymathy change had he drawn the boundaries for the relevant areas of knowledge differently, for instance by opening it up to the arts, applied sciences like design, and to non-academic service providers in the IT sector?

Does the influence which the European early modern period has had on our thinking increase the risk of us overlooking types of knowledge and areas of society that serve as important carriers of and *loci* for interdisciplinarity today - perhaps more important than those disciplines focused on by Burke? In the internal discussion with the research group, Burke conceded that it may be necessary to redefine what knowledge is and to adopt a broader perspective in order to trace polymathic phenomena in our time.

Literature constitutes an interesting case in point, and Burke's observation that many of the polymaths he studied had been active in the field of literature provided welcome food for thought. He went on to suggest that therefore, polymaths appear to possess a particularly pronounced sense of imagination. Another reason behind polymaths' literary tendencies may be the fact that many polymaths moved from one area of knowledge to another. Literature enabled polymaths to combine different and even contradictory ideas and to allow them to collide. Last but not least, it is worth noting that the "essay", which directly translates as "experiment", is a form that enjoys great popularity among polymaths, as Burke confirmed.

The discussion also covered questions related to the institutional conditions necessary to foster for interdisciplinary work and, by extension, polymathy. During the discussion, Burke elaborated on his views of the dynamics of institutions. He drew on his time as a student at the University of Sussex (founded in 1961) as a positive example as the university had for the most part chosen not to establish specialist institutes and instead has organized itself into "schools of study". Institutes for Advanced Study such as IAS at Princeton, the Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin, and NIAS in Amsterdam, provide, according to Burke, perhaps the most promising environment for lived interdisciplinarity. Enabling factors at these institutions, Burke argued, are the fact that the time one spends there is limited and the opportunity to interact with other fellows from entirely different disciplines. In this context, it is worth noting that *Die Junge Akademie* is based on a similar concept, with membership limited to five years. Burke also touched on the concrete organization of institutes and the subsequent effects on fostering or hindering interdisciplinarity. As an example, he noted how crucial the location of the coffee machine can be for enabling encounters among academic staff at a research institute.

Peter Burke's lecture and the subsequent discussions were as provocative as they were productive, and the ICI proved itself an excellent partner for this joint event with *Die Junge Akademie*.

By way of conclusion, the participants identified three larger problem areas that had not been sufficiently covered and could therefore serve as starting points for further discussions within the research group: the issue of the relationship between the notion of the "grand narrative", on the one hand, and spatial and historical specificity, on the other hand; the question of which definition of knowledge should be at the basis of an analysis of polymathy and interdisciplinarity, and how that understanding of the term relates to academic knowledge; and finally, the quest for the conditions that enable interdisciplinarity to flourish.